Postmodern marketing

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remains to be seen whether RM will stand the test of time, but, in keeping
with the first stage of the wheel model, the relationship marketing para-
digm eschews esoterism, is highly focused (on the business sector), is expe-
riencing extraordinarily rapid growth, appears to be relevant to and
popular with the current generation of practising marketing managers and,
not least, the overwhelming optimism of its proponents contrasts starkly
with the pessimism that is evident in so many other areas of marketing
endeavour – strategy, consumer research, retailing and services marketing,
to name but a few. Marketing, in effect, is dead. Long live marketing.

3 What have they got in there, King Kong?

'I want to buy a spider for my godson,' I heard a far voice croak.

'Certainly,' said the assistant. 'We have a wide range of tarantulas,
right up to the big bird-eaters.'

He indicated these in the showcase below. You would not want to be
a bird. These were not spiders you stepped on. These were spiders who
stepped on you. They looked like crabs in toupees.

'He tells me,' I said, squeaking hardly at all, 'that he'd like a Mexican
red-knee.'

'Wouldn't we all?' said the assistant, a touch less accurately than he
knew. 'A lovely spider, the red-knee, but you try getting them. They are
the flavour of the month.'

I felt my mouth purse to a dot. You'll understand.

'What I'd suggest,' he went on, 'is a Chilean rose tarantula, Ideal. Only
£35, quite docile, a very nice spider.' He pointed to a glass box. There
was a ball of hair in it, the size of a fist. Very nice. Then it moved. Even
nicer. Who can say why I stepped back? Doubtless, some silly atavistic
twitch. I may have had a Chilean ancestor who made the stupid mistake
of going out one night without his blunderbuss, . . .

'I'll take it,' I said. He reached below. 'BUT HE'LL COLLECT IT?

Only a few customers looked round. A parrot squawked.

I paid cash. I would have given a cheque, but the bank might have
queried the writing. Unsteady? Of course not! Just a bit spidery.

(Coren 1993, pp.56–7)

The Little Shop of Horrors

Variously described as 'the new perspective on life and the human con-
dition that is sweeping across the globe' (Firat and Venkatesh 1993, p.227),
'ubiquitous, overused and probably meaningless in the global scheme of
things' (Beaumont 1993, p.43), and, not least, 'the most intellectually
demanding challenge facing consumer researchers' (Foxall 1992, p.403),
postmodernism has attracted an enormous amount of academic and lay
4 You can't handle the truth!

These days, who among us can find the time to get to know himself philosophically, when just getting to know himself physically grows more and more difficult with every passing marketing fad? I went into Boots last Saturday at ten o'clock, and when I came out again at half-past, all that I knew about myself was that I now knew less...

I counted 17 sorts of hair, but not only did I not know the categories into which the rest of the family's fell, I did not even know mine. What is dull? What is brittle? How lifeless is lifeless, how unmanageable unmanageable? Is greasy oilier than oily, or vice-versa? Did it need revitilising or merely conditioning? Where did its body lie on the national boudiness scale? I finally grabbed a dozen bottles of something pH balanced with silk protein and enriching moisturisers, which may very well cause bally on my scalp come spring, only because time was pressing and I needed toothpaste.

But did I have sensitive teeth? How could I know? Might my teeth be not merely indifferent, but callous? Brutal even? And how tender does a gum have to be before it requires .05 of an additive bent on sorting it out? How discoloured should discoloured be before special care must be taken when applying something to undiscolour it?

The deodorant shelf needed to know if I had serious perspiration. What is it? Do your boots fill constantly from your upper cataracts? If mine is frivolous perspiration and I spray serious stuff on, will my pores snap shut and my impermeable body slowly swell with incarcerated sweat? As for bath-gel and shaving cream, the choice of both depended on whether the skin was or wasn't delicate. What is mine? If it's crude, will my dirt and bristles refuse to budge? How can I know? What shall I buy? Whom shall I ask?

(Coren 1991, pp.215-17)

Total Recall

Now, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, what on earth is going on?; you're thinking, is this book some kind of joke?; you're thinking, is that it?; you're thinking, are we seriously expected to give up mathematical modelling, split run testing, SERQVAL and the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule for what can only be described as postmodern poppycock? But most of all, you're thinking, how can I go about getting my money back? Even those of you who are chary about complaining, the 'passives' in Singh's (1990) typology of consumer dissatisfaction, are no doubt reflecting on my earlier extravagant promises that the time spent examining postmodernism would not be time wasted, that postmodernism could provide meaningful insights into the nature of modern marketing, that if we suspended judgement until the end of Chapter 3, everything would become clear, sweetness and light would prevail, joy would be unbounded and, although dancing in the streets might be too much to expect, vigorous toe-tapping remained a very strong possibility. Indeed, at this very moment, some of the more cynical among you, especially those with a working knowledge of the Trade Descriptions Act, may be thumbing through the preceding pages in search of the sentence where I gave a personal guarantee that postmodernists had not gone crazy (you're wasting your time, it won't stand up in court). Conversely, those of you with humanitarian inclinations are probably reflecting on my previous comparison between postmodernism and parenthood, wondering if I am really fit to be a father and whether the social services should be informed.

Setting aside, for a moment, your litigious ambitions or your understandable concern for the well-being of my offspring, I fully appreciate that the pertinence of postmodernism may not be immediately apparent. What, you may well be asking, does the history of architecture have to do with marketing?; or the 'wrappings' of Christo?; or Paul Auster's 'parodic metafiction', come to think of it? Since when did marketing have anything to learn from the rise of religious fundamentalism, pit closure protests, tree-hugging, telekinesis and, now that we've breached the subject, what is shamanistic drumming when it's at home? How, for that matter, can Foucault's analyses of madness in the sixteenth century, medicine in the seventeenth or sexual perversions in ancient Greece possibly inform and illuminate the nature of modern marketing inquiry? Who in their right mind could possibly take Lacan's incantatory ramblings and incessant word play to be anything other than psycho-babble at best or complete clap-trap at worst? When Barthes suggests that we can read whatever we like into a text, without fear of contradiction, does he mean that the Declaration of Independence can be legitimately construed as a shopping list, a scientific treatise, a recipe for pecan pie, the rules of American football? Are we really expected to believe, after Derrida, that books don't
mean what they say or say what they mean? that language controls our
every utterance, our sense of ourselves?; that leyerhend's fondness for
high-speed motorbikes somehow legitimises the sheer recklessness of his
methodological anarchism?; that Korty's repudiation of truth should be
taken as truthful?; that philosophy is nothing more than metaphors
masquerading as concepts?; that language games are irredeemably incom-
mensurable?; and that when it comes to scientific inquiry, rhetorical skills
are more important than laboratory skills? After more than four hundred
years of scientific and technological progress, how can anyone seriously
suggest that science is not scientific? Things may well be bad, but if there
is no hope for the future, if atrophy and exhaustion prevail, if, as
Baudrillard would have it, the real world no longer exists, why then do
we bother to get out of bed in the mornings? Why don't we just give up
marketing altogether and devote our time to more rewarding tasks like
golf, gardening, good works or - why not - shamanistic drumming?

Marketers, in short, do not need postmodernism. They have better things
to do than grapple with incomprehensible texts about topics of little or
no relevance to marketing. Fashionable though postmodernism undoubtedly is among disciplines which have lost touch with the real world,
marketing can live without such pseudo-intellectual pretensions.
Postmodernism is downright absurd, contrary to common sense and to
adopt this questionable philosophy would merely invite the ridicule of
marketing's principal constituents students, business people and the polici-
cymaking community at large.

Although a hostile reaction to the precepts of postmodernism is
eminent understandable, and while many of the foregoing questions are
perfectly legitimate, several important points must be taken into account
before judgement is finally passed. The first of these concerns the frequently
criticised obsfuscation, the sheer unintelligibility of many postmodern texts,
especially those emanating from continental Europe. Reading Lacan,
Derrida or Deleuze and Guattari is undeniably difficult. The rebartive
brilliance of Baudrillard's bon mots is accentuated by the often bafflingly
enigmatic nature of the surrounding material. Even Michel Foucault,
whose empirical analyses contrive to make his writings more accessible
than most postmodern thinkers, has had his work described as an
admirer - as something that,

disturbs the expectations of the reader familiar with social history. There
appear to be huge gaps in the narrative, silences that scream at the
reader. Topics are annoyingly placed out of normal order, disrupting
one's sense of logical sequence. Levels of analysis are mixed together in
irritating confusion. . . . The object of investigation is never quite clar-
ified and appears to be neither individuals, nor groups, nor institutions.
. . . Worst of all, the author's attitude toward the topic of study never
emerges clearly. He seems to take perverse pleasure in shifting his stance,
or simply in adopting provocatively an unorthodox attitude toward a

topic.

(Poster 1984, p.72)

The crucial point to bear in mind, however, is that postmodern texts are
impenetrable for very good reasons. Lacan's syntax is designed to exem-
ply rather than explicate the linguistic operations of the unconscious.
Baudrillard writes postmodernistically, in that the style of his works
replicates the superficiality, irreverence, fragmentation, banality and,
occasionally, preposterousness of the postmodern moment. The works of
Foucault, Derrida and Barthes represent a deliberate repudiation of la
clarité, the clarity of expression which, in France, has long been consid-
ered a national virtue, the mark of a properly educated mind. By offending
so egregiously against convention, postmodern intellectuals are demon-
strating that there is more to language than lucidity. Lucidity perpetuates
the illusion that language is under our control, that it can be made to do
our bidding, whereas the reality is that language is difficult to tie down
and enjoys a high degree of autonomy. In Writing Degree Zero, moreover,
Barthes (1970) makes the political point that lucidity is a manifestation
of bourgeois sensibility - the bane of the French intelligentsia - and
that, by enabling readers to make their own contribution to meaning,
ambiguity is more democratic than clarity (incidentally, the Declaration of
Independence, as a 'readerly' text in Barthes terminology, could not
possibly be interpreted as a laundry list, a recipe for mom's apple pie or
what have you, though if you insist . . .).

Postmodern texts may well be impenetrable and problematic, but before
dismissing them out of hand it is necessary to ask why they are presented
in the way that they are. More importantly perhaps, it is necessary to
examine marketing's intellectual history and inquire whether it is com-
posed solely of penetrable and unproblematic papers, books and mono-
grahs. The answer, regrettably, is negative. Notwithstanding the obvious
difficulties that many people have with the idiom of inferential statistics,
simultaneous equations, matrix algebra and the like, it has to be acknow-
ledged that some of marketing's seminal texts, the 'required reading'
of countless undergraduate and postgraduate seminar groups, are just about
as convoluted as they come. Harold Barger's (1955) classic volume,
Distribution's Place in the American Economy, is not exactly a bundle of
laughs as I recall. To describe Shelby Hunt's (1991c) much-cited work,
Modern Marketing Theory as 'arid', 'tedious' or 'stultifying' is to shower
it with extravagant praise (whenever he goes on about the K-K Thesis, I
invariably wish that a group of southern rednecks, complete with burning
crosses, conical headgear and fashionably capacious white outerwear,
would somehow materialise and proceed to put me out of my misery).
And, let's be frank, is there a single marketer anywhere, who has the foggiest idea what Wroe Alderson was trying to say? A giant of marketing scholarship he undoubtedly was, but some of Alderson's writings make wacko-Jacko Derrida read like Jeffrey Archer.

Another, closely related, issue that must be taken into account before judgement is passed on postmodernism, pertains to the patent absurdity, seemingly counter-intuitive nature of certain postmodern positions and their failure to accord with what common-sense or everyday experience might lead us to expect. Examined from a matter-of-fact perspective, many postmodern precepts do indeed appear to be irrational, but then again some of the concepts that once enjoyed widespread support within marketing now also look decidedly suspect. The 1950s fetish for motivation research can hardly be considered marketing's finest hour, and are the premises of subliminal, subaudible or 'embedded' advertising any less preposterous than telekinesis or wicca? Aspinwall's (1958) classification of 'red', 'green' and 'orange' goods is premised on an interesting and original metaphor (the spectrum of light) but conceptually it is complete moonshine, as is the venerable and much-vaulted four utilities framework (see Shaw 1991). Surely, moreover, I can't be the only person who finds Kotler's 'Generic concept of marketing', with its paradoxical combination of 'can do', counterculture and conspiracy theory (such as the references to brainwashing, levels of consciousness and the like), as much a manifestation of the late 1960s American Zeitgeist as a meaningful guide for today's marketing practitioners. And, to be brutally honest, many of the confident predictions in Levitt's seminal 'Marketing myopia' - rocket-powered cars, ultrasonics, fuel cells, the end of the oil industry by 1985 etc. - turned out to be utterly erroneous. Whatever the article's other merits, its predictions represent a hubristic testimony to Levitt's lack of foresight, to his own marketing myopia. They are, in effect, the buggy-whip manufacturers, the railroad companies, the Hollywood studios of marketing discourse.

Although Levitt's (1960) outlandish predicitions make the speculations of Jean Baudrillard seem like a model of circumspection and common sense, it is also worth emphasising that common sense, if not quite 'the collection of prejudices acquired by age eighteen', that Albert Einstein once suggested, is arguably an overvalued attribute. Even allowing for the irredeemably social and political nature of scientific activity and, irrespective of the fact that marketing has traditionally suffered from a severe case of 'physics envy', most of the greatest theoretical and methodological achievements in the natural sciences are completely counter-intuitive and contrary to common sense. According to Wolpert (1992), a prominent apologist for science and the scientific world view, the single most characteristic feature of natural science is its 'unnatural nature'. Whether it be the structure of DNA, the cooling of ice cubes in a soft drink, the Big Bang theory, the burning of a match, the nature of white light, the mathematics of probability, the physics of planetary motion or our taken-for-granted belief that grass is green, rocks are hard and snow is cold, Wolpert's overwhelming conclusion is that the world is predicated on counter-intuitive premises. 'The laws of nature just cannot be inferred from normal day-to-day experience . . . the way in which nature has been put together and the laws that govern its behaviour bear no apparent relation to everyday life' (Wolpert 1992, p.6). In fact, he (1992, p.11) even goes so far as to suggest that, 'if something fits in with commonsense, it almost certainly isn't science'. Granted, Wolpert's definitions of 'science' and 'non-science' are debatable, his stated philosophical position as a 'commonsense realist' (p.106) is somewhat undermined by his evident suspicion of commonsense thinking and he is clearly utilising the tools of rhetoric in an attempt to undermine the charge that science is predominantly rhetorical (e.g. Gross 1990). Be that as it may, Wolpert's convincing demonstration of the counter-intuitive nature of science and Outhwaite's (1985) analogous critique of commonsense reasoning in the social sciences, leads one to question the enormous store that many people place on plausibility, credulity and reasonableness.

In point of fact, some of the best-established findings in marketing's conceptual canon are manifestly counter-intuitive. To cite but a single, albeit very clear-cut, example: the manifold studies of 'pre-purchase information seeking' reveal that the typical consumer gathers very little information before making a purchase, even for fashionable, expensive, high-involvement and infrequently acquired items like furniture, houses and motor cars (Brown 1992). Although completely contrary to what you might expect - after all, it seems eminently sensible to shop around before making a costly or ego-intensive purchase - this finding holds good for each and every potential source of product-related information (e.g. advertising, salespersons, talking to friends and relatives, store visits, prior experience) and across most socio-economic, demographic, geographic and psychographic categories of consumers. True, the methodologies employed in many of these exercises are questionable, particularly in terms of their inordinate reliance on consumers' notoriously unreliable powers of recall and their tendency to treat each item in isolation rather than as part of a multipurpose shopping expedition. What is more, the cognitive paradigm may not be the most appropriate conceptual framework for this extensive body of consumer research. Nevertheless, the results of literally hundreds of studies are virtually unanimous - consumers gather very little information before purchases are made - and, as such, run completely counter to what you might reasonably expect and intuitively anticipate.

Prior, therefore, to casting out the mote of postmodernism, perhaps we should consider marketing's beam of syntactic contortions, conceptual absurdities and arguably undue emphasis on commonsense. Perhaps we
should also be prepared to acknowledge that postmodernism may be highly
to marketing, despite its seeming irrelevance. Postmodernism
deals with all manner of ostensibly arcane issues like artistic movements,
human sexuality and the history of medical science, but as marketing
devolves itself relevant to almost everything under the sun, it follows that
such issues must have some bearing on marketing. In fact, it has often
been claimed that the marketing concept is applicable to art and ideology,
self-image and sexuality, and, as we shall discuss in more detail in Chapter
5, it has even been suggested that science is marketing (Hirschman 1983,
1987; Peter and Olson 1983). More to the point, it is arguable that exposure
to outside ideas, especially those from fields far distant from
marketing, can only serve to raise the all-round standards of marketing
scholarship. Academic creativity, as Holbrook (1984) and Belk (1984)
amply demonstrate, comes from reading widely, from a dialectic process
involving structure, departure and reconciliation and from the juxtaposition
of paradoxical or competing hypotheses. Most of us, admittedly,
may disagree with Belk (1984, p.58) when he asserts that ‘there is little
worth reading in marketing’, but it is only by looking around us,
by seeing how other people see, interpret and conceptualise the world
that we can transcend our current way of thinking about marketing and
envision alternative scenarios.

The Postmodernist Always Rings Twice

Postmodernism, of course, comprises more than a congeries of counterfactual concepts, presented in an appropriately unintelligible idiom for
autodidactically inclined marketing academics. At the risk of (a) oversimplifying a complex and incoherent phenomenon which, as we have seen,
means different things in different fields, (b) applying essentially ‘modern’
—and therefore inappropriate—criteria to concepts that are resolutely
anti-modern and (c) seeking to categorise instantiations that are deeply
interwoven and well-nigh inseparable, it can be contended that postmodernism
is characterised by seven key features: fragmentation, de-differentiation, hyperreality, chronology, pastiche, anti-foundationality and pluralism.

- **Fragmentation** refers to the seemingly inexorable disintegration and
demise of political stability, social organisation, mass market economics,
the unified self, the nature and grounds of knowledge, and, inevitably,
the all-pervasive, disconnected array of vivid images generated by the
increasingly hydra-headed media.
- **De-differentiation** involves the erosion, effacement and elision of
established hierarchies — high and low culture, education and training,
politics and showbusiness — and the blurring of what were formerly
clear-cut entities (philosophy and literature, author and reader, science
and religion etc.).
- **Hyperreality**, as exemplified by the fantasy worlds of theme parks,
virtual reality and computer games, involves the loss of a sense of authenticity
and the becoming ‘real’ of what was originally a simulation.
- **Chronology** comprises the archetypal postmodern concern for the past
(or representations of the past) and the abandonment, in an era when
time and space are being increasingly compressed, of the progressive,
forward-looking orientation of modernism for an essentially retrospective,
backward-looking perspective.
- **Pastiche** consists of a playful, tongue-in-cheek collage or medley of
available styles, an ironic, self-referential mixing of existing codes, be
they architectural, artistic, cinematic, literary, musical or whatever.
- **Anti-foundationality** is postmodernism’s characteristically deconstructive
urge, its antipathy towards orthodoxy, complacency, the establishment
and, not least, systematic generalisations, most notably the
totalising metanarratives of science, socialism, humanism, etc., which
form part of the modern movement’s discredited search for universal
truths and objective knowledge.
- **Pluralism**, strictly speaking, is not a separate category as such, but a
reminder that, in practice, the six preceding ‘features’ collide, combine
and collapse into a paradoxical postmodern mélange of incongruous
phenomena. It reflects the symptomatic postmodern assumption that
anything goes, everything is acceptable and nothing is excluded. There
is no right or wrong, the more meanings the merrier, too many cooks
won’t spoil the broth and, above all, that the four postmodern Ps of
paradox, profusion, plurivalue and polysemy prevail.

As marketing, in many respects, reflects developments in the social,
economic and cultural spheres generally, it is only to be expected that the
characteristic features of postmodernism are apparent — and deeply
inscribed — in today’s marketing environment. Indeed, if it were not such
a blatantly modernist approach to the subject, it would be possible to
imagine a matrix with (say) the distinguishing features of postmodernism
along one axis and the elements of the marketing mix along the other.
Illustrated in Figure 4.1 (purely for pedagogic purposes, you understand),
the outcome is an array of neat pigeonholes ready and waiting to be filled
in by any passing modernist keen to pin down the infuriatingly elusive
nature of postmodern marketing. Such an exercise, of course, is doomed
to inevitable failure, not simply because it is totally contrary to the cavalier
and insouciant spirit of postmodernism but because it seems much too
much like hard work! If, however, we are prepared to suspend temporarily
our innate postmodern antipathy to empirical research and prise ourselves
momentarily from our admittedly comfortable positions as armchair theorists (in the grand continental manner), it is undeniable that all of the distinguishing features of postmodernism are discernible on the current marketing scene and discernible, moreover, across every facet of marketing from pricing to promotions.

As we noted in Chapter 2, for example, the **fragmentation** of markets into smaller and smaller segments, each with its complement of carefully positioned products, is everywhere apparent. Whether it be the market for computers, coffee, cola, cameras, cigarettes, breakfast cereals, ice-cream, financial services, sports shoes, package holidays, pet foods, disposable nappies, washing powder, recorded music, mineral water, traction batteries, machine tools or, as Alan Coren discovered during his discommodating visit to Boots the Chemists, the gamut of health and beauty aids, a bewildering array of product and service offers typically obtained (Magrath 1990). Ten years ago, there were seven brands of toothpaste on sale in the UK. Today, there are more than thirty, many of which provide a number of distinct product variations (tartar control, pump action dispensers and so on). In the United States, there are now 240 Weight Watchers products spread across 78 different categories; the number of lagers on sale in Britain has increased by 66 per cent in the last six years; and, such is the prevailing range of credit cards and payment systems that the bygone days of hard cash, personal cheques or, in extremis, Access/Barclaycard, seem like a dim and distant memory. Indeed, in the new car market it appears that you can now have any colour, engine size, bodywork variant, trim level, sound system, safety features, optional extras and license plate you like, as long as you’re in the black.

Paralleling the proliferation of products – and, in fact, reinforcing the inexorable trend toward micro-segmentation – recent years have witnessed the multiplication of distribution channels and advertising media. The 1980s in particular was an era of niche retailing, characterised by the emergence of highly targeted retail outlets selling a very narrow range but in-depth assortment of specific product categories – Tie Rack, Sock Shop, Knickerbox, Benetton, The Body Shop – and the rapid exploitation of retail offers that proved popular with the consuming public (e.g. Next, Next Tino, Next for Men, Next to Nothing, Next Interiors). Set against this, average store size increased dramatically, as did the number of products they carried (twenty years ago the average supermarket stocked 2,500 lines, today it is approximately ten times that). Likewise, the number of locational options exploded as the traditional high street shopping experience was supplemented with out-of-town regional centres, retail warehouse parks, festival malls, forecourt retailing, ancillary facilities (in hotels, hospitals, airports and railway stations) and, increasingly, armchair or in-home shopping from a plethora of specialists and dedicated television channels (Parker 1992).

Advertising options have also burgeoned as a result of the proliferation of everything from local free-sheets and company-specific titles (Marks and Spencer Magazine, McMag), to glossy ‘lifestyle’ magazines targeted at specialist audiences. These are further enhanced by the publishers’ ability to produce national, regional and, increasingly, local editions of the titles thus enabling advertisers to deliver highly focused messages to specific groups of people. The satellite and cable television revolution, coupled with the deregulation of radio, has contributed to the demise of broadcasting, the rise of narrowcasting, an exponential increase in the availability of advertising space and the emergence of interesting locational or place-specific communications options such as in-store radio stations, satellite television programming for airports, hospitals, health studios and so on (Schlossberg 1991). When combined, moreover, with the much-dreaded three-minute culture of cocooned channel surfers, and the growing preference among advertisers for shorter commercials (albeit with very high production values), Jameson’s (1985) prediction of a ‘perpetual present’, a world of fleeting, fragmented images of hallucinogenic intensity, seems remarkably prescient.

The collapse of mass marketing is perhaps best illustrated by the recent changes in Coca-Cola Classic’s advertising strategy (Edwards 1993). The ‘Always’ campaign, which comprises twenty-six contrasting ads – for the same product – each targeted at different market segments, is a world away from 1983’s unequivocal assertion that Coke is ‘it’ or the company’s earlier McLuhanesque attempts to teach the world to sing in perfect
harmony. However, if current predictions are to be believed, the twenty-six alternatives of the ‘Always’ campaign will seem crude and unsophisticated in the not too distant future. The emergence of ‘category management’, for instance, enables multiple retail organisations to adapt the range, assortment, stockholding levels and, ultimately, marketing strategy of each individual store in the chain to the unique requirements of its catchment area (Schlossberg 1993). Sales promotion activities, such as money-off coupons, free offers, trial purchase vouchers and loyalty or ‘reminder’ incentives, can be targeted to individual consumers and dispensed automatically at the checkout. Such is the size and sophistication of existing consumer databases, with all the possibilities they offer for highly focused marketing campaigns, that marketers routinely talk about hyper-targeting, segments of one, the mass customisation of individual products and personalised promotional strategies, delivery systems and pricing policies (Honomichl 1992). The Time Warner database, for example, contains information on 53 million Americans, RJR Nabisco’s is not much smaller and, according to Rapp and Collins (1990, 1994), some of the world’s most successful mass-marketing organisations – Nestlé, Heinz, Bristol-Myers, Seagram, Ford – have enthusiastically embraced the micro-marketing revolution.

Once Upon A Time in America

This seemingly inexorable process of fragmentation is counterpointed to some extent by a clearly discernible trend towards de-differentiation, the blurring of what were once clear-cut marketing boundaries. Marketing, in fact, figures prominently in what is generally considered to be the paradigmatic instance of de-differentiation, the much-debated effacement of the distinction between high and low culture. As Huysssen (1984) points out, the first generation of American postmodern artists and architects drew inspiration from the output of Madison Avenue (Warhol’s soup cans) or the billboards, casino culture and commercial kitsch of the Las Vegas strip (Robert Venturi). More recently, displays of advertising ‘art’ have become a commonplace (the Tate Gallery’s exhibits of Bovril labels and shopping bags); some museums have added posters and advertisements to their collections (the Victoria and Albert Museum owns several of the celebrated Benson and Hedges posters and British Airways’ ‘Manhattan’ is displayed in the New York Museum of Modern Art); the British Academy (BAFTA) awards now include a category for artistic achievement in advertising; and, the Guggenheim, no less, is endeavouring to exploit its brand name through a vigorous, and much-criticised, programme of international franchising (Ollins 1992; Bell 1993a).

Counterbalancing this ‘debasement’ of high culture – a world where the theme tune from Cadbury’s Flake has been played at the Proms and where

Figure 4.2 De-differentiation in advertising: Harvey Nichols inspired by Rothko

Hovis, Hamlet and Old Spice have done more to popularise Dvořák, Bach and Orff respectively than any number of performances in the Albert Hall – the exponents of degraded cultural forms have elevated themselves in turn by appropriating the motifs and institutional settings of modern art (Figure 4.2). The award-winning Benson and Hedges poster campaign, which ran from 1975 to 1993, was inspired by Magritte (Woodward 1993); Mondrian has been inadvertently responsible for innumerable package designs (e.g. the L’Oréal hair styling programme); the attempt to ‘brand’ Spain as a holiday destination utilises a logo based on Miro’s Sun; several major international brands, such as Coca-Cola, Nike, Dunhill and Guinness, have ‘museums’ devoted to their history and development; ‘exhibitions’ of fake products have been mounted by Gucci, Rolex and Louis Vuitton among others; and, like the works of art that
they undoubtedly are, many advertisements are now blessed with a title and the author-ity of the responsible creative genius is acknowledged (Hugh Hudson's 'Face' for British Airways, Tony Kaye's 'Relax' for British Rail, etc.).

Apart from marketing’s active participation in the melding of high and low culture, all manner of other boundaries within or adjacent to marketing are – as the terminology employed often indicates – in the throes of erosion. The borderline between advertising and television, for example, has been dissolved by the recent, rapid advent of ‘infomercials’, extended length commercials (thirty minutes usually) for individual products presented in talk show or news programme format (Zagor and Mead 1992). The ‘advertorial’, an amalgam of advertisement and editorial, performs a similarly dual function in magazines and newspapers. ‘Edutainment’ is a marketing neologism coined by the manufacturers of computer games in an attempt to mollify parents fearful of the addictive power of their products (Miller 1993). And, if the predictions of the so-called ‘telemedia’ industry are correct, the barriers between company and customer will soon be completely effaced by the widespread availability of interactive television, interactive shopping, interactive banking and interactive entertainment (Kehoe 1993; Cassidy 1993).

This ethos of dissolution is no less evident in the rise of ‘scrambled merchandising’, retailers’ tendency to extend the ranges of merchandise they sell beyond ‘traditional’ trade boundaries (e.g. Marks and Spencer’s successful foray into financial services, Asda’s abortive attempt to distribute motor cars); the growth of vertical marketing systems, where the entire channel of distribution is carefully co-ordinated, operated as a unit and, increasingly, linked by a fully integrated EDI network; and the emergence of innovative retailing hybrids such as shopping centres-cum-theme parks, retail warehouses, combined bookshops and restaurants, factory outlets, warehouse clubs, integrated launderettes and nightclubs or, indeed, restaurants like TGIF’s or the Chicago Pizza Factory where the serving staff burst ‘spontaneously’ into song-and-dance routines. Virgin Airway’s plans to operate a casino on its transcontinental flights to Hong Kong is yet another instance of this de-differentiation tendency (Betts 1993), as are, to cite several contrasting examples:

- the routine appropriation of high street fashion by haute couture houses and vice versa (Hirshey 1993);
- Sainsbury’s extremely successful advertising campaign predicated on ‘recipes’ endorsed by high-profile celebrities;
- cigarette advertising which has become so abstract that the compulsory health warning, as the only discernible signifier of ‘cigarette’, has effectively been absorbed into the copy and its purpose hence defeated (Bracewell 1994);
- the Barcode Battler, a computer game where points are scored by reading the barcodes on various products (such is the Battler’s popularity in Japan that it has caused shortages on certain high-scoring product lines and marketers are already working on its wider promotional possibilities); and,
- supermarket own-label products, the packaging of which is all but identical to manufacturer’s brands; so much so, that certain manufacturers have instituted, or threatened to institute, legal proceedings against the supermarket chains – e.g. Coca-Cola and Sainsbury (Mitchell 1994a).

Undoubtedly the clearest examples of de-differentiation in marketing are found at the interface of advertising and television. As the postmodernist guru Gilbert Adair (1992) adroitly notes, advertising has its own soap operas (the Gold Blend coffee ‘couple’), situation comedies (the ‘Beattie’ series for BT), real-life dramas (the Audi owner’s race to the maternity ward), documentaries (public service ads for AIDS etc.), shock-horror specials (the charity ‘nasties’), game shows (will the housewife swap two packets of her ordinary washing powder for one packet of Daz?) and makes widespread use of ‘in character’ actors (Robert Hardy of All Creatures Great and Small endorsing agricultural products, for example). However, it is arguable that, from a marketing management perspective, the most important instances of de-differentiation emanate from the recent and much-vaunted rise of strategic alliances, joint ventures, collaborative networks and boundaryless corporations (Lorenz 1993; de Jonquieres 1993). As the partnerships between (say) Nestlé and Coca-Cola, PepsiCo and Unilever, Sears and McDonalds, Time Warner and West Inc, and Pearson and the BBC amply illustrate, the traditional barriers between marketing organisations are in the process of elision. There are, admittedly, some concerns about the extent to which such alliances will fulfill the ambitions of the participating companies and, as you might expect, there is no shortage of consultants ready and willing to advise on the management and maintenance of these often delicate relationships, for a suitably modest retainer. Nevertheless, the advent of strategic alliances represents one of the most significant developments in the contemporary business scene with enormous implications for the organisation and practice of marketing (Mitchell 1993, 1994b).

Alongside the blurring of ‘horizontal’ boundaries between contiguous organisations, recent years have been characterised by the effacement of ‘vertical’ organisational forms. Complete tiers of middle management have been swept away by post-Fordist companies bent on ‘re-engineering’ or ‘de-layering’, and flat or matrix structures have increasingly replaced the traditional hierarchical arrangements. This has led some commentators, most notably Gumnessson (1991), to predict the end of marketing as a separate department, though he emphasises that the marketing function
will still be practised, albeit in a diffuse fashion across the entire organisation. The inevitable result of this combination of vertical and horizontal restructuring is what has sometimes been described as a ‘hollow’ or ‘virtual’ company, the non-existent organisation organisation. In effect, Baudrillard’s world of hyperreality made manifest in business.

Hyperreality, however, is not confined to the discovery of the black holes of organisation theory, it is apparent across the entire marketing spectrum. It totally pervades the ‘dream worlds’ of advertising and promotion, where the traditional function of information provision (‘this product is good, buy it’) has long since been superseded by judicious manipulation of consumer desires, tastes, images and motivations. Meanings have become increasingly detached from their referents and all manner of alternative signifiers or connotations are routinely attached to ostensibly mundane products like toothpaste, soap and deodorant. Sex, for example, has been pressed into signifying service for products as diverse as chocolate (Cadbury’s Flake), personal pensions (Scottish Widows), ice cream (Håagen Dazs), household detergents (Ajax), throat drops (Hall’s Mentholypus), gardening requisites (Walker’s sprayers), and those hardy annuals, clothes, cosmetics, motor cars and alcoholic beverages (not to mention, if the trade press is any indication, virtually every promotion directed at grocery or DIY retailers). Harvey (1989), in fact, goes so far as to suggest that if advertising were stripped of allusions to sex, money or power, there would be very little left (though I’m not sure if he means that there would be very little advertising left, or if there is very little else for advertising to appropriate).

Hyperreality is equally evident in the fantasy worlds created by theme parks, hotels, restaurants, pubs, airlines and, increasingly, shopping centres. The designers of festival malls regularly exploit the historical resonances of old buildings and, where necessary, these are embellished and exaggerated to create a sanitised simulation of the past. Thus, the Jackson Brewery in New Orleans and the Cannery in Monterey retain their original brewing and canning equipment respectively, but only for show. The South Street Seaport development in New York, which comes complete with ‘traditional’ wooden wharf, ‘authentic’ warehouses, moored sailing ships and suchlike, is almost entirely fake, as are the restorations of ‘historic’ Williamsburg, Charleston and the Vieux Carre in New Orleans. Indeed, just as these historic shopping developments peddle simulacra of the past, so too mega-scale shopping centres peddle simulacra of the present. The West Edmonton Mall boasts a recreation of a Parisian Boulevard, a Park Lane upmarket shopping area, a section comprising restaurants from around the world and a Bourbon Street entertainment district. Metrocentre, meanwhile, has its Mediterranean Village, Roman Forum and so-called Town Square. The crucial point, of course, is that the recreation of Bourbon Street in West Edmonton is a more pleasant environment for many than the decidedly tawdry ‘original’. Likewise, lager louts, sunstroke, food poisoning, unsatisfactory accommodation and recalcitrant air-traffic controllers are unlikely to spoil a visit to the Metrocentre’s Mediterranean Village, though the unavailability of duty-free goods and suitably ersatz souvenirs may well act as a disincentive for some.

Although the manifestations of hyperreality are most clearly discernible in advertising campaigns and retailing milieux, there is no shortage of simulacra among the other elements of the marketing mix. Reflect for a moment on the ‘pretence’ of the typical service encounter, where the salesperson’s adherence to a pre-ordained script, rote responses to anticipated enquiries and heroic endeavours to fake sincerity, can give the whole experience a not unpleasant but none the less unreal, illusory, slightly phantasmatorical quality – on some occasions. On other occasions, of course, the mouthing of meaningless banalities – ‘have a nice day’, ‘enjoy’, ‘missing you already’ – or the inept personalisation of direct mailshots not only renders worthless the effort expended, but reduces the simulacrum of service to an object of ridicule. Consider, moreover, the emergence of what can legitimately be regarded as hyperreal products. These include the timeless creations of Cellular Phone, for individuals who wish to give the impression that they are constantly on call; the bespoke elegance of the Dummy Book Company, which produces fake libraries to order (leather bound, gold lettering, artificially aged and priced, naturally, by the metre); and the rapidly developing worlds of virtual reality and computer games, the most recent generations of which have been described as ‘just like reality only better’ (Guirland 1992, p.33). How, moreover, can we forget those supreme monuments to the new product development process – fat-free fat, beefless beef, decaffeinated coffee, alcohol-less alcohol, sugar-free sugar and, as the appropriately hyperreal brand name, I Can’t Believe It’s Not Butter!, constantly reminds us, butterless butter?

Pricing strategies and sales promotions may also exhibit hyperreal tendencies. It has been argued that the UK grocery retailing industry is in the throes of a hyperreal price war, one that is not taking place, according to the principal protagonists (Brown and Quinn 1993). Likewise, the already infamous Hoover ‘free-flights’ promotion, where airline tickets to American and European destinations were made available for the price of a £100 vacuum cleaner, led to a bizarre situation in which the Hoover factory was working round the clock to satisfy the demand, newspapers were swamped with small ads placed by people eager to dispose of unused, second-hand vacuums, carpet retailers were giving away free Hoovers with every purchase, travel agents were accepting vacuum cleaners as a deposit for summer holiday bookings, and, in the middle of a deep recession, some commentators were predicting a complete economic recovery predicated on Hoover’s ill-fated sales promotion!
It Happened One Night

Incredible though it was, the Hoover 'free-flights' farrago is by no means the most extreme example of hyperreality on the contemporary marketing scene. Others include Reebok's decision to buy advertising space on the buildings in a virtual reality arcade game, the Northern Police Authority's attempt to communicate a 'no speeding' message to drivers by placing cardboard cut-outs of patrol cars in motorway lay-bys, and Rattler's celebrated £3.49 cut-glass sherry decanter, silver tray and six crystal glasses, the sales of which increased after it was described by the (then) chairman of the company as 'total crap'. Interestingly, however, and as anticipated by Baudrillard, the very ubiquity of hyperreality appears to have stimulated a countervailing desire for authenticity and heightened concern with chronology. Thus, we see periodic campaigns for 'real' beer, bread, eggs, meat, fruit, furniture, holidays, cosmetics and wrought iron railings; renewed interest in 'authentic' music, films, books and cooking (played on original instruments, director's cuts, 'restored' first editions and 'traditional' Greek, French, Italian and Chinese cuisine); and, not least, an increased emphasis on 'real' advertising. Apart from the increasing use of reality-based bylines (e.g. Kodak's 'it's so real it's unreal', Miller's 'as real as it gets'), and periodic eulogies to the 'good old days' when advertisers actually indulged in the hard sell, instead of seducing audiences with subtle allusion (Table 4.1), there is a growing trend towards the use of 'real' people as opposed to actors or celebrities (Fielding 1994). These range from the utilisation of home videos (Scottish Amicable, Radion washing powder) and foregrounding the participation of the actual employees of the company concerned (cf. Kenwood Electronics, Nationwide Building Society, Covent Garden Soup Company), to subtitled, albeit less than reassuring, assurances that the featured dentist/scientist/housewife/nurse is a genuine dentist/scientist/housewife/nurse (why, I sometimes wonder, is the 'actress' in the beauty soap commercial invariably someone you have never heard of?; no doubt it's an actress acting an actress).

This emphasis on authenticity in advertising is paralleled, to some extent, in the branding arena, where longevity is considered to be all-important, especially at a time when the new product development rate is seemingly exceeded only by the new product failure rate. As the enormous premiums paid for recognised brand names by acquiring companies amply testifies (e.g. Philip Morris's $12.9 billion takeover of Kraft, at four times book value), and the opportunities for judicious brand extension clearly shows (Mars ice-cream, Persil washing-up liquid, etc.), long-established brand names are extremely precious commodities. It would appear that in an increasingly uncertain, fragmented, disorientating and fast-changing world, they provide consumers with a point - an oasis - of marketing stability. They are imbued with an evocative patina of the past and redolent of simpler, better, less stressful times when choice was limited but satisfaction guaranteed. In these circumstances, it is little wonder that many major brands, like Kellogg's corn flakes, Heinz beans, Levi's jeans and Golden Wonder crisps, place great promotional emphasis on their illustrious lineage and, indeed, that many products, whose life cycles have long since run their course, have been successfully raised from the dead. Prominent British examples include Spangles, Vinuto, Brylcream, Action Man, Pacamac, Parker Duo-fold pen, Gossard Wonderbra, Worthington's White Shield Ale, Russell Hobbs coffee percolators (1952 vintage) and, not least, the tie-in products from re-runs of old television series such as

Table 4.1 On the ads that drive us mad

Was there ever a time when advertisements were about selling us things? I dimly remember a period when women got over-excited about detergent, when Nanette Newman would cery persuade whole gangs of little boys to wash up for her, when a Mars bar could enable you to 'Work, rest, and play'. It's not like that any more though, is it? Now we get Rugter Hauer being gratuitously weird for Guinness, bionic menstruating women in head-to-toe Lycka being pulled along on skateboards by dogs, increasingly bewildering lager ads, and erotic epics that are designed solely to sell us shampoo.

Advertising no longer seems to be about the things it sells. It is not even about things at all. No, it is about ideas, concepts and most of all other ads. Caught in an increasingly self-referential loop, advertising is mostly about advertising. Never mind the stupid soft drink, feel the art direction. 'Look at me, I'm a really interesting ad,' screams the poster which could be for IKEA, a kitchen appliance or a charity. You never can tell. . .

The 'creatives' behind so many of these obscure campaigns say it's all about brand loyalty, niche marketing and living in a media-saturated culture. If this is the case, then they are failing miserably. A lot of the time one is at a loss as to what the product is, never mind the brand name. Surely I'm not the only one who, instead of thinking, 'I'll rush out and buy that', wonders what she has just seen has to do with oven, dog food or a half of bitter. You can laugh at the Gold Blend saga, but apart from the fact that these yuppies are drinking instant coffee, it is at least comprehensible. What's more, it has sold lots of coffee, which I believe is what the game is about.

Apart from neglecting to sell us things, all this in-jokes has a side-effect: good old-fashioned sexism can creep back in. Women lie on cars, caress everything from cats to ice creams and it's all frightfully ironic. Maybe I shouldn't take all this so seriously, but the point is that advertisers take themselves so seriously. They labour under the illusion that we so want to be part of the joke, that we care enough about their hyperactive doodlings to be lured into this insane fantasy. So while they are busy graffiti-proofing their posters and simultaneously pretending that what they're doing is somehow not advertising anyway, there's only one way to get your own back. Laugh at their jokes if you like (they are free, after all); just don't buy any of them.

Thunderbirds, Stingray, Batman, Captain Scarlet and Joe 90. A similar trend is evident in the United States where, among others, Morton salt, Jell-O, Ovaltine, Kool Aid, Bazooka bubble gum, Skippy peanut butter, Birkenstocks shoes, PF Flyers sneakers and Raggedy Ann/Raggedy Andy dolls have been re-launched with some success (Miller 1990, 1992).

If, of course, established, original and long-dead products are not available for exhumation, nothing could be easier than the creation or appropriation of an entirely imaginary past. As the recent, rapid rise of the 'retro' product convincingly demonstrates, a combination of the latest technological advances with appropriately nostalgic styling can prove enormously popular. The current marketing scene is awash with art deco Walkmans and ghetto-blasters, 1950s-style freezers, Bux Brownie look-alikes (with motor wind and auto-focus, naturally) and motor cars like the Nissan Figaro and Mazda Miata, which to quote the promotional blurb, 'not only gives you a glimpse of the 90s... it takes you back, as well'. Retro radios, televisions, hi-fis, coffee makers, motorcycles, airlines, restaurants, rock bands, soft drinks, bar snacks, magazines, sports shoes, perfume, jewellery and underwear are now available; retro communities are being constructed (Poundbury in Dorset); retro radio stations (Capital Gold) and television channels (UK Gold) are attracting substantial audiences; retro packaging is regularly utilised (Ovaltine, Best Health Seltzers); retro sales brochures are not unknown (Oakdale batteries); retro promotions and promotional icons are back in fashion (Green Shield stamps, the Bisto Kids); retro pricing policies are occasionally employed as, admittedly substantial, loss-leaders (my local pub recently celebrated its 25th anniversary with a '1969 prices' promotion); retro locations are being occupied by retail organisations (Tesco Metro, Sainsbury Central) and in-store environments created (Cullens, Co-op Pioneer); and, not least, retro advertisements, in grainy black and white or featuring long-dead celebrities (Humphrey Bogart, James Dean, Marilyn Monroe), have become a commonplace (Tedre 1993). After unsuccessful attempts at diversification, moreover, many companies appear to be resorting to retro marketing strategies. Habitat's back-to-basics retailing strategy, aptly described by the chief executive as 'our future lies in recapturing the past' (Hollinger 1993, p.20), is an excellent case in point, as are Laura Ashley's extraordinary endeavours to recreate its original bucolic image of softness, femininity and quintessential Englishness. However, as the latter organisation traded on nostalgia to begin with, its current strategy could quite legitimately be described as retro-retro (or neo-retro) retailing (Mulvagh 1993).

Marketers growing preparedness to plunder the past, to substitute 'new and improved' with 'as good as always', is partly a reflection of the widespread, fin de siecle belief that 'marketing creativity is impossible, that there can only be the exhuming and recycling of the old' (Barsoux 1993, p.12). It is also, as Harvey (1989) and Jameson (1991) emphasise, a predictable reaction against the rapidity of change in the contemporary business environment. We live in a world where time and space are being increasingly compressed, where product life cycles are becoming ever shorter, where speed to market, or 'concurrent engineering', is the sine qua non of new product development, where 'order fulfilment' (the turnaround time in servicing customer requests) is increasingly seen as the key to success in undifferentiated markets, where stockholding is reduced to a minimum but out-of-stock situations deemed intolerable, where deliveries must be made within a fifteen-minute window, where fast-selling lines of fashionable clothing are replenished several times per season, where literally hundreds of thousands of prices can be changed by a single keystroke, where revenue is increasingly measured in dollars or pounds per minute and where everything from supermarkets to stockmarkets is open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week (Fisher 1993). It is a world where just-in-time is just too late and organisations are being exhorted to 'shape time' (Lynch 1992), 'compete against time' (Stalk and Hout 1990) and adjust to the 'nanosecond nineties' (Peters 1992). It is a world where even the past is speeding up. As the special 'revivals' supplement of The Modern Review (1993, p.3) sardonically notes,

since the mid-Eighties, we have seen a Fifties revival, a Sixties revival, a Seventies revival and even glimmerings of an Eighties revival... The pessimistic belief is that we are heading for some kind of apocalyptic implosion, when the accelerating revival cycle will catch up with the present. This will produce a situation in which we revive periods almost as they happen, and eventually go mad as civilised culture collapses.

Such a scenario, where the revival cycle is effectively eating its young, is somewhat unlikely, as there is nothing to prevent another fifties, sixties or seventies revival. It also remains to be seen, whether revivals can be successfully revived (remember the eighties revival of 1994, those were the days!), given the incorrigible postmodern penchant for pastiche, this possibility should not be discounted completely. Indeed, it is arguable that, despite the undeniable importance of de-differentiation, hyperreality and the others, pastiche is the defining feature of postmodernism. Call it what you will – irony, parody, imitation, medley, quotation, self-referentiality, double coding, in-jokes, the knowing wink, tongue planted permanently in cheek, a refusal to take things seriously, not even taking things seriously – but all of these are characteristic of the pasticheur and nowhere is the pasticheur more prevalent than in marketing.

British advertising, for example, is replete with parody adverts and wry self-referentiality. As the instances in Table 4.2 illustrate, these range from fairly straightforward lampoons to the ironic appropriation or adaptation
Table 4.2 Parody and self-referentiality in UK television advertising: some examples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Direct   | One advertisement parodies another | PARODY
Carling Black Label (lager) spoof of Levi's (jeans) celebrated 'laundrette' sequence
Irn Bru (Scottish soft drink) musical take-off of archetypal (Coca-Cola) soda advertisement
Hotpoint (washing machines) parody of British Airways' 'face' (Britain's favourite washing line) |
| Indirect | Advert 'appropriates' byline/icon etc. of another | Lemon Fairy (washing-up liquid) exploits AMEX's 'that will do nicely' for pennurious couple facing prospect of washing up in expensive restaurant
Hamlet (cigars) use of Andrex (toilet tissue) Labrador puppy in tale of woe concerning last of toilet roll
Do It All (DIY superstores) advertised 'the united colors of Do It All' (Benetton) |

SELF-REFERENTIALITY

| Direct | Adverts about advertising (set in advertising agency; adverts for forthcoming ads, etc.) | Vauxhall 'every car you'll ever need' campaign features Tom Conti and Nigel Hawthorne as inept advertising executives
Next 'installment' of advertising soap operas (Renault 21 family; Gold blend couple, etc.) advertised beforehand
Nationwide Building Society ad about making advertisement designed by and starring employees of the organisation |
| Indirect | Retransmission of old adverts that have acquired new meanings in the interim, or stylistic evocation of old ads | Repeat showings of 'I'm going well, I'm going Shell' series featuring Bing Crosby etc. Once innovative, now quaint
Hovis 'as good today as it's ever been' sells nostalgia through an ad which is itself nostalgic (the golden age of UK advertising; early work of famous film director Ridley Scott)
Update of 'everyone's a fruit and nut case' for Cadbury's |

Figure 4.3 Advertising pastiche for Panasonic shavers

of well-known advertising copylines. They also range from the brilliantly brazen, such as Panasonic’s reference to the time-worn slogan for Whiskas catfood (Figure 4.3), to the decidedly subtle (Figure 4.4). The Lexus advertisement is a fine example of double coding, as few people outside the advertising industry are likely to recognise the allusion to David Ogilvy’s celebrated 1950s campaign for Rolls-Royce ('At sixty miles an hour the loudest noise in the new Rolls-Royce comes from the electric clock'). The palette of advertising allusions is not confined to other advertisements, however. Whether it be films, television series, books, architecture, politics, current affairs or, come to think of it, the market research and new product development process, almost every item on the
The loudest sound you will hear inside the Lexus is yourself thinking.

Yield expect not luxury to be quiet. But no one that the Lexus LS400 is even quieter than the competition, most minds, especially those of the usual breed, may be rather surprising. Until the moment that you take it out for test drives and find yourself sitting alone in the driver’s seat, enjoying the serenity of the engine’s whispering. Meanwhile, the interior is a symphony of sound-muffled, plush seats, and plush carpets, all contributing to a peaceful ambiance.

As a consequence, not only does the LS400 have the lowest drag coefficient of any luxury car, but it becomes a preferred choice for many car enthusiasts. While the interior is designed for comfort and luxury, the exterior is sleek and aerodynamic, ensuring a smooth ride.

LEXUS
THE LUXURY DIVISION OF TOYOTA

Figure 4.4 ‘Double-coding’ in advertising: Lexus out of Rolls Royce

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Popular culture, in turn, is not reluctant to mine the rich and fecund seam of storytelling. Many advertising campaigns have been inspired by works of fiction, from cinematic pastiches like *Citizen Kane* (Hanson Trust), *Thelma and Louise* (Peugeot 106), *The Fugitive* (Yorkie), *Apocalypse Now* (Dunlop Tyres), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Terry’s Chocolate Orange) and *The Hudsucker Proxy* (Volkswagen Polo) – nor should we forget the inclusion of actual movie footage for the Carlsberg (Ice Cold in Alex) and Holsten Pils (Dead Men Don’t Wear Plaid-esque compilations of film noir classics) campaigns.

The flotation of the third tranche of British Telecom shares was achieved with the aid of Inspector Morse, a bumbling equivalent of the cerebral television detective, and Aero chocolate bar has adopted the byline ‘lovely bubbly’, an allusion to one of the catchphrases of the popular comedy series, *Only Fools and Horses*.

*Time’s Arrow* by Martin Amis, a novel about the Holocaust where the narrative unfolds in reverse (and which led one cynic, Gilbert Adair, to comment ‘I haven’t read the book but I peeked at the first page to see how it turns out!’), inspired several subsequent advertising campaigns premised on the notion of time running backwards (Ariston, Tennent’s Pilsiner).

The launch of the Rover Stirling, a top-of-the-range executive vehicle designed to compete with BMW, Mercedes and Audi, included an advertisement set in Germany and featuring Stuttgart’s Neue Staatsgalerie by postmodern ‘British Architekt’, James Stirling.

When Halley’s Comet reappeared in the late 1980s, to considerable media brouhaha, the long-running campaign for the Financial Times (‘no FT, no comment’) was adapted accordingly (‘no FT, no comet’) and the Threshergate affair, an unseemly episode centring on the (then) Chancellor of the Exchequer’s alleged credit card transactions in an insalubriously situated off-licence, formed the basis of an advertisement for a rival credit card (featuring another ex-Chancellor extolling the virtues of the card – outside an off-licence).

Guinness, furthermore, recently advertised for ‘new product testers’ to help with the ‘development’ of their canned draught bitter, outlining the stages of the NPD process and the type of creative ‘input’ required at each stage (i.e. a free samples promotion), and, as the ‘apology’ in Table 4.3 demonstrates, the market research/product recall procedure can also provide ripe pickings for advertising’s postmodern pasticheurs.

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You can’t handle the truth!
AN APOLOGY

Some months ago, an advertisement appeared in this publication announcing the release by the band Prefab Sprout of their Best-Of compilation 'A Life of Surprises'. The ad was placed due to the assumption that we would be in some way reaching an audience of Prefab Sprout fans. This assumption was based on a strong but simple gut reaction which subsequently proved unreliable.

Since release of the album, rather more sophisticated research techniques have shown us some what surprisingly that our target audience is in fact Mr. Smokey Smith of 22, Red Chestnut Road, Penrith, a 17 year old thrash metal fanatic.

When contacted, Mr. Smith confirmed that he had been, and indeed still is, a life-long fan of the band from their debut album 'Savoir' through the seminal 'Steve McQueen' to the present compilation. Smokey had bought 'A Life of Surprises' which he agreed was a perfect compilation of the first ten years of the band and with 16-tracks, was certainly value for money. However, Smokey had heard of the album release by chance and had not seen any ads. The only publications Smokey regularly reads are 'Metal Muthaf... er' and 'Mud Wrestling Mommies' neither of which carried the album advertising.

With these surprising results, we are now fully aware that the ad placed in this publication was indeed misplaced.

We are now in close contact with Smokey who will be updating us as to his reading habits and changes thereof. Further ads for Prefab Sprout will only again be placed here if Smokey informs us he has become a regular reader.

We apologise to 'Q' readers if we have inconvenienced you in any way at all.

Not!

Thank you for your time.

Source: Q Magazine

James, Chris. (1993). Consumer-oriented rock bands, most notably U2, have been prepared to contribute their two-pennyworth on the morality of advertising by incorporating time-worn slogans into their stage shows and albums (ironically, of course), and few contemporary comedy routines appear to be complete without a quip or two at advertising's expense. (In fairness, since Ben Elton's wonderful parodies of the bobbing heads in shampoo commercials and the poses struck by models in mail order catalogues, it has been impossible to take the originals at face value.)

As we have seen, furthermore, films are chock-a-block with direct and indirect allusions to advertising and many daily newspapers allocate considerable space to the latest campaigns or have columns devoted to the comings, goings and general trivia of the advertising industry. A fine example of the former is found in Sylvester Stallone's Demolition Man, which is set in a far-distant future where the retro radio station plays nothing but the advertising jingles of the late twentieth century. The latter is exemplified by the front page, banner headlines that greeted the Gold Blend coffee 'couple's' final declaration of undying love in October 1992. The sort of treatment, in short, tabloid newspapers normally reserve for royal weddings, sex scandals and sightings of Elvis Presley.

Interestingly, the Gold Blend couple figured in yet another self-referential twist when a book based on the advertising campaign was published in 1993. Although Love Over Gold proved extremely successful -- not least because of a heavy promotional spend by the publishers -- its reign at the top of the best-sellers list paled by comparison with Fly Fishing by J.R. Hartley. This non-existent volume first appeared in a Yellow Pages television advert, the storyline of which comprised an aged author's fruitless search, from dusty bookshop to dusty bookshop, for the lost, remaindered copy of his (presumably) life's work and which he eventually tracked down by telephone thanks to 'good old yellow pages'. Such was the popularity of the ad, that a ghost-written book, containing fishing hints, anecdotes and pseudo-personal reminiscences, was published in 1991 to enormous popular acclaim (as you might expect, the advertisement upon which it was based was re-broadcast at the time of publication and a second, companion volume appeared the following year).

Besides the 'book of the ad' and, indeed, 'the book of the advertising campaign' (such as You Got an Ology?, the complete scripts of the 'Beatle' series for BT -- including one that was never broadcast!), a veritable industry of advertising spin-offs now seems to exist in Great Britain.

These range from T-shirts or car stickers (Texas Tam) and video anthologies of long-running campaigns (Hamlet, PG Tips), to compilation CDs of advertising theme tunes (both classical and rock). Few, however, have captured the public's imagination to the extent of Levi's celebrated 1986 'laundrette' commercial. Not only did sales of the jeans increase by 800 per cent, and the backing track, 'I heard it through the grapevine', reach number one in the popular music charts, but, as a consequence of the actor's 'revelation' that he wore boxer shorts under his 501s, the prevailing fashions in men's underwear were totally transformed, virtually overnight.

Close Encounters of the Third Kind

Another instance of postmodern marketing's self-referential vortex illustrates the very short step from pastiche to anti-foundationism. When the Vauxhall Corsa was launched in early 1993, the campaign featured several of the world's most famous supermodels -- Linda Evangelista, Naomi Campbell, Christy Turlington, Tatjana Patitz -- in what was billed as a parodic reversal of the archetypal motor car advertising schema. Instead of glamorous bimbos draped alluringly over the vehicle, the provocatively dressed supermodels were portrayed as dominating or out-smarting token/supine/besotted male stereotypes, only to find themselves
spurned in favour of another supermodel, the Vauxhall Corsa. The campaign, however, was condemned out of hand by various women’s groups, which argued that female sexuality was still being exploited to sell cars, despite the promotion’s parodic intentions. So vehement were the complaints and so copious was the publicity generated by the controversy, several commentators concluded – in a sort of double, double bluff scenario – that the controversy itself, and the enormous free publicity that came with it, was the original and sole purpose of the entire promotional campaign (Brinkworth 1993).

Appealing though they are, the problem with such conspiracy theories is that there is nothing to stop them being wheeled out to justify all manner of marketing mistakes from the New Coke débâcle and Perrier’s unfortunate brush with benzene, to the Hoover ‘free-flights’ fiasco (in due course, no doubt). Indeed, the ‘it’s all publicity seeking’ explanation has actually been advanced to account for cigarette manufacturer Philip Morris’s seismic decision, of 2 April 1993, to slash the price of Marlboro, its premier product and the world’s biggest-selling brand. Variously described as ‘marketing apocalypse’ and ‘a mistimed April Fools’ joke’, the aftershocks of Marlboro’s 20 per cent price cut have since reverberated throughout the global marketing landscape as the brand leaders in a host of markets – computers, sports shoes, credit cards, champagne, condoms, electrical goods, newspapers, nappies, air travel and more – have followed Philip Morris’s lead (Smith and Lynn 1993). Granted, this price-cutting ethos has taken hold more quickly in some markets than others, as Superdrug and several other would-be discounters have discovered to their cost in the perfume and cosmetics business (Bell 1992), but leading manufacturers’ willingness to risk their carefully nurtured and expensively acquired brand equities is the complete antithesis of the conventional wisdom of marketing (Lorenz and Alexander 1994).

Philip Morris’s eschewal of the received wisdom of branding and the unconventional launch of the Vauxhall Corsa are by no means the only examples of anti-foundationalism on the current marketing scene. As you might expect, this anti-establishment ethos is especially apparent in the world of advertising, where anarchistic and subversive campaigns are becoming increasingly common. Willful attempts to disorientate or induce misunderstanding are much in evidence, as are ‘spot the product’ puzzles, adverts that have nothing whatsoever to do with the products they sell, and, not least, an apparent preparedness to outrage consumers outside the target market segment (Kellaway 1994). Thus, the anarchistic ‘you know when you’ve been Tango’d’ campaign, which involved guerrilla raids by a bright orange anti-superhero, who rained blows upon unsuspecting bystanders, proved enormously popular with schoolchildren – the principal consumers of soft drinks – but enraged parents and teachers concerned by their children’s imitative tendencies. An equally subversive intention underpinned the ‘zoo advertising’ approach adopted by Sega, the computer games company, for the launch of its Megadrive. This commenced with advertisements for fake products, such as Ecco washing powder and A la Kat gourmet cat food (the ads for the latter featured a glamorous female model, dressed for a formal dinner party, consuming forklifts of the product direct from the can), which were subsequently ‘hi-jacked’ by advertising ‘pirates’ – with skull and crossbones much to the fore – themselves a front for Sega (Bell 1993b).

Anti-foundationalism is also evident in the new product arena. Recent years, for example, have seen the appearance of numerous anti-product products such as Jolt Cola, which boasts the immortal byline ‘all the caffeine and twice the sugar of ordinary colas’; ‘TNT Cider, with its distinctive ‘stick of dynamite’ packaging; Death brand cigarettes, which come complete with (you’ll never guess) a skull and crossbones on the flip-top and categorical assurances – from the manufacturer – that smoking kills; and, incredibly, the burgeoning number of unhealthy lifestyle magazines (e.g. Cigar, devoted to the pleasures of smoking and The Idler, orientated towards the slothful in society). Likewise, the clothing industry has witnessed the rise of anti-fashion fashions, to which the generic term ‘deconstruction’ has been applied. These involve the rearrangement and juxtaposition of incompatible garments, materials, styles and shapes (such as a dress over jeans or ribbons and flounces combined with industrial footwear); deliberate foregrounding of the manufacturing process to give an ‘inside out’ look; and, an overall aesthetic of disproportion, untidiness and impoverishment rather than the traditional emphasis on harmony, neatness and allure.

By far the most important manifestation of this anti-foundationalism, however, is evident in the emergence of the ‘green’ movement. With its anti-consumption, anti-waste, anti-exploitation outlook, the green movement represents the antithesis of all that marketing stands for, or, rather, is presumed to stand for by the community at large. As Peattie (1992, p.83) rightly points out, ‘since green thinking involves reducing the very consumption which marketing aims to stimulate . . . this makes the concept of “green marketing” appear to be a contradiction in terms’. Some marketing organisations, admittedly, have responded to the (re-)appearance of green issues on the consumer agenda by emphasising the environmentally friendly nature of their products, their conservation mindedness and the veracity of their credentials generally. Others, such as The Body Shop and The Nature Company, which did much to raise consumer consciousness in the first place, are indissolubly associated with environmental protection in the public mind and have benefited accordingly. For more than twenty years, moreover, marketing academics have stressed the importance of human and environmental issues – in the shape of the societal marketing concept and the macro-marketing school
inevitably invites charges of imposing a reductive modernist framework on the unconstrained, genre-busting exuberance of postmodern promiscuity. Indeed, as I know you're just itching for this chapter to end, three brief concluding combinations will have to suffice. First, after banning a series of Embassy Regal cigarette adverts, featuring 'Reg', a disembodied head dispensing irreverent opinions on current affairs and the meaning of life (which research showed were proving very popular with teenagers), the Advertising Standards Authority responded to the protests of the pro-smoking lobby by advertising itself in a Reg-style campaign. This comprised the disembodied heads of 'real' ASA employees with the singularly appropriate strapline, 'ASA, keeping tabs on ads' (Summers 1993). When, moreover, the hyperreal vegetable fat spread I Can't Believe It's Not Butter! was banned from advertising on television in October 1991 (as a result of protests from the food lobby concerning the illegal use of the word 'butter'), its newspaper-based campaign centred on the existence and nature of the advertising ban. More importantly, indeed, not only did the newspapers concerned publicise the ban and the company's response, but the success of the product was subsequently employed by newspapers to advertise the power of newspaper advertising. The ban was eventually lifted in August 1992 and, as you might expect, this too was publicised and newspaper ads were taken out by Van den Berg to celebrate the ending of its advertising apartheid and to advertise the forthcoming television ads. Indeed, so successful has the product been that it has since spawned several own-label look-alikes (e.g. Tesco's Unbelievable!)

If our first examples comprised a combination of pastiche, anti-foundationalism and hyperreality, the second represents a sublime fusion of hyperreality, de-differentiation, pastiche and chronology. Disneyland's Main Street USA is not only an integral part of the theme park experience and an extremely successful retailing environment (for Disney spin-off merchandise) in its own right, but it brings together, in an astonishing self-referential arabesque, almost everything that the Disney organisation stands for. And all in a retro setting. As Kowinski (1985, pp.66–7) rightly notes, 'Walt Disney based Main Street USA on the main street of Marceline, Missouri, as it was when he was a boy growing up there. . . But there were no sleazy bars, dingy luncheonettes, scedy pool halls or dirty jail cells . . . there were only pleasant, clean, colorful and nostalgic small town stores which seemed to shimmer with remembered magic'. In these circumstances, it is little wonder that many prominent commentators, Eco, Baudrillard and Harvey among them, consider Disneyland to be the absolute epitome of postmodernism.

Disneyland may be the mother-ship of postmodern marketing for an earlier generation of cultural commentators, but the closest contemporary encounter is unquestionably the much-debated Benetton controversy (e.g. Mead 1993; Schonstrom 1992). The world-wide attention, condemnation
and outright prohibition that has accompanied the company’s eschewal of conventional product/corporate advertising in favour of a fleeting parade of deeply disturbing images – multi-coloured condoms, dying AIDS victim, newborn child, oil-covered bird, terrorist bombing incident, nun kissing priest, nude company chairman, etc. – has led to accusations that, in its attempts to stimulate the consumption of casual wear through images of human immiseration, the organisation is morally bankrupt. It has also been accused of a profoundly cynical desire to generate controversy – on a minuscule advertising budget – in order simply to reap the benefits of the massive accompanying free publicity. In reply, the company maintains that it is endeavouring to raise, in a purely philanthropic fashion, consumer awareness of serious social issues and counters with the suggestion that conventional advertising is at fault for selling fake images and unattainable illusions, for portraying a perfect world which does not exist and never will exist.

Regardless of the rights and wrongs of the Benetton campaign, it represents a deeply affecting postmodern fusion of fragmentation, anti-foundationalism, hyperreality, pastiche and, indeed, de-differentiation. After all, is it not the case that, in its shocking and uncomfortable series of adverts, Benetton has effectively assumed the mantle of modern art, the license to disturb and unsettle bourgeois sensibility that the process of canonisation and institutionalisation has effectively emasculated and which the postmodern artistic community has abandoned in favour of marketability and popular appeal? As one commentator pointed out (in Bell 1993a, p.29), ‘58 sets of genitalia are perfectly at home in the Tate Gallery, but when they appear on an advertising hoarding for casual wear, some people are going to get very upset about it’ (what was that I said in Chapter 1 about the risk of descent into indecorum and priapism?).

5 Is that an epistemology in your pocket, or . . . ?

Yesterday I bought a new car. It was Wittgenstein’s 100th birthday. I did not, of course – lest logicians among you begin rooting around for distributed middles – buy the car for Wittgenstein, who hasn’t needed a car these 38 years past. I bought it for me.

When I ordered the car in February, I requested a radio; yesterday, there it was.

‘One Pioneer KE 3060B,’ said the dealer, ticking his dispatch sheet.

‘Detachable?’

‘What?’ I said.

‘It comes out,’ said the dealer. ‘It is an anti-theft measure. Also stops the bastards smashing the window. Park the car, take the radio out. Bastard looks in, all he sees is the gap where the radio was.’

‘I don’t want to carry a radio about,’ I said.

‘You don’t have to,’ said the dealer. ‘You lock it in the boot.’

I thought for a moment. A bit longer, perhaps, than Wittgenstein would have needed to, but not much.

‘Hang on,’ I said, ‘When the, er, bastard sees the gap where the radio was, won’t he force open the boot where the radio is?’

‘He won’t know you’re not carrying it about,’ said the dealer.

‘He can find out whether I am or not by forcing open the boot,’ I said.

‘You could always leave it where it was and chance him not knowing it’s detachable,’ said the dealer.

‘Then wouldn’t I be better off with a non-detachable one he’d have trouble getting out?’

The dealer looked at me, and he looked at the radio, and he coughed. Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent (Wittgenstein).

(Coren 1989, pp.153-4)
Invasion of the Body Snatchers

We saw in the previous chapter how the postmodern condition has infiltrated all manner of contemporary marketing practices from customer care to sales promotions. It is, of course, possible to explain such occurrences in traditional, perfectly 'rational' terms. The infamous Marlboro price cut can be interpreted as an extremely robust but singularly appropriate response to the growing threat of own-label cigarettes; the British penchant for wry, self-referential advertising campaigns as a reflection of the reputed national disdain for commercial life in general and the hard sell in particular; and Heinz's promotional shift from mass to micro-marketing as an inevitable outcome of the availability of low-cost computing power, appropriate database-handling software, the proliferation of advertising media and the increasing unpredictability of consumer behaviour. Similarly plausible explanations can doubtless be found for the rise of hyperreal or retro products, the unconventional Vauxhall Corsa or Coca-Cola 'Always' campaigns, the Benetton or Hoover controversies, and the popularity of Barcode Battler or Fly Fishing by J.R. Hartley. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that many occurrences on the current marketing scene appear to match the postmodern mood, accord with postmodern sentiment, resonate on the postmodern wavelength.

There is more to postmodern marketing, however, than attempts to discern parallels between the day-to-day detritus of extant marketing practices and the distinguishing features of postmodernism. A substantial academic literature pertaining to marketing and postmodernism now exists. Broadly speaking, this body of literature can be divided into four contrasting, but by no means mutually exclusive, categories (Figure 5.1). The first consists of discussions of marketing phenomena by non-marketing scholars (and cultural commentators), many of whom are closely associated with, or have expressed opinions on, the postmodern movement. The second category involves academic marketers' analyses of issues which form part of the postmodern project, though the authors concerned choose not to emphasise or may not be fully aware of the connection. The third category of contributions, by contrast, makes frequent use of 'postmodern' terminology and idiom, but actually rests on epistemological foundations which are closer to modernism than postmodernism. However, the fourth, final and, from the perspective of this monograph, arguably the most important category consists of 'genuine' (for want of a better term) attempts to grapple with postmodernism and identify its ramifications for marketing theory and research.

(To begin our discussion of the various permutations, it is necessary to digress once again and point out that the four categories of postmodern marketing scholarship do not always coincide with the textual breaks – the film titles – in this particular chapter. I appreciate, and my

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Figure 5.1 Academic approaches to marketing and postmodernism

test marketing informs me, that this can be a little bit disconcerting for the uninitiated, but I'm afraid I've just about run out of patience. Having survived the fires of post-structuralism, you should be able to cope quite easily with such inconsequential acts of textual terrorism. Granted, you may not be able to grasp, first time round, some of the concepts we'll be dealing with in this chapter – I'm not sure that I understand them myself – but wilful textual subversion shouldn't really be a problem for you by this stage!

With regard to the first category, perhaps the most striking aspect of the extra-marketing marketing literature, so to speak, is the sheer variety of academic specialisms involved. Contributions come from both long-established disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, geography and linguistics, and comparative newcomers to the ivory tower (e.g. media studies, cultural studies, communications theory, organisation studies), not to mention a host of quasi-academic columnists and commentators (Judith Williamson, Gilbert Adair, Stephen Bayley, etc.). Clearly, it is impossible to do justice to this extensive body of literature in an essay such as this, but an indication of the nature of these insights can none the less be provided.

- Adair (1993), for example, discusses the cultural significance of sweets, confectionary and chocolate, a seemingly mundane market but one that
is worth billions and forms part of the daily lives of literally millions of people. In a wonderfully evocative, skilful and original article, he outlines the various metaphors inscribed in the construction of these products, describes the oral gratification they provide and notes their nostalgic evocation of times past, innocent childhood and a much-loved but long-departed Great Britain of red telephone boxes, friendly policemen and stiff upper lips, a place where everyone knew their place, everything stopped for tea and birdsong was guaranteed at eventide (Table 5.1).

- Williamson (1986) has commented elegantly on the relationship between art and advertising, arguing that the traditional high art/low art categorisation is paralleled by the social stratification classification schemes of advertisers. High art, she argues, is thus particularly prone to appropriation by advertisers because of its ability – as in the celebrated press and poster advertising campaign for Benson and Hedges cigarettes – to imbue mass market products, and by extension their consumers, with an indelible aura of taste, refinement and exclusivity.

- Shields’ (1989) postmodern reading of the West Edmonton Mall emphasises its fragmentation of geographical space and historical time, achieved through a bizarre juxtaposition of hyperreal places and settings (Paris, New Orleans, the Pyramids, Spanish Galleon, etc.). For its patrons, this incongruous, de-centred ensemble induces a ‘spatiotemporal haze’, prompts the loss of geographical and chronological bearings, and encourages the behavioural enactment of a collective fantasy. The mall is a climate-controlled play space, far removed from the quotidian concerns of daily life and the meterological realities of the Canadian prairies.

- Fiske (1989a), furthermore, has explored the cultural meanings of jeans (informal, egalitarian, individualistic, mythical connections with the American west and so on); examined, through a series of binary oppositions, how jean manufacturers introduce subcultural inflections into their promotional campaigns (male/female, east/west, culture/nature); and contended that the wearing of torn, distressed or otherwise disfigured jeans represents a form of ‘semiotic guerrilla warfare’, a means of resisting the commodification process. Notwithstanding capital’s ability to appropriate these oppositional tendencies through the production of pre-torn, pre-faded or pre-washed variants of the product, subordinate social groups continue to evade, expropriate and subvert the hegemony of the capitalist system.

- Kellner’s (1992) critical discussion of the function of cigarette advertisements in postmodern society notes how they contribute to identity formation through subject positions, ideological coding and the meanings and values they seek to communicate. Specifically, he deconstructs a sequence of advertisements for Marlboro and shows how the

Table 5.1 Sweet dreams

I suppose the great goal of any newspaper columnist is to discover some subject on which none of his rivals has as yet alighted, a subject of small but real significance in the texture of our lives but which ideally has never been written about - in short, a scoop. Well, I fancy I’ve found just such a subject, one whose most intriguing feature is precisely the conspiracy of columnist silence that surrounds it. The subject I refer to is sweets.

Why does nobody ever write about sweets? I mean sweets, humble confectionery, as stocked in any ordinary newsagents: Rolos and Polo’s, Picnic and Yorkie bars, fruit pastilles and liquorice allsorts, coconut ice and marzipan, the sort of sweets that all but monopolised our childhood reveries (remember?), that still constitute an occasional indulgence in most of our adulthoods and that, so it’s claimed, are retailed in far greater quantities (if not necessarily qualities) in Britain than in any other country in the world. If chocolate – or rather, that excessive craving for it which is called ‘chocholism’ – has received fairly extensive journalistic coverage, sweets as a general category (instead of as a threat to dental hygiene) have prompted almost no copy at all.

It’s the near inexhaustible variety of sweets that makes one wonder why their metaphorical potential has been so seldom tapped. Scientifically speaking, they variously suggest the molecular (Malteasers, Aero bars), the geological (those chocolate bars with their successive strata of fudge, nougat, caramel, peanut brittle), the topological (Polo mints, willy liquorice strips), the agricultural (Fruit Gums, jelly beans) and the geographical (the sharp Alpine serration of Toblerone). In a cultural context, they hint at Cubism (Basset’s little Liquorice Allsorts man is almost a blurring of Fernand Léger’s copyright), primitivism (dolly mixtures, jelly babies), pop art (lollipops, passtren, op art (old-fashioned candy-striped humbugs) and pure abstraction (what could be more like Carl Andre’s notorious installation of bricks in the Tate Gallery than a bar of Cadbury’s Dairy Milk?).

Sweets are interesting for several other reasons, too. They have an infallibly Prussian potency for calling up the spirits of one’s childhood. They have a tendency to date one (or me, at least) in the generational sense: on the rare occasions when I buy sweets for myself, I invariably remain faithful to those of my own childhood that are still extant, and I’ll have no truck with Lion or Dime Bars or any of that new-fangled rubbish. As Adam Thorpe (in his novel Ulverton) understood, sweets operate as a vivid signifier of a long-vanished Britain – a Britain of village shops with shiny copper weights and small white paper packets which you opened by blowing into and enormous glass jar which had to be fetched down from the topmost shelf with a step-ladder and whose Bakelite lids were devilish hard to unscrew. And, of course, they function as a premature glimmer of the pleasures of oral gratification when indulged in, like certain types of unreproductive sex, for its own sake alone. Sweets are consumed for themselves. They are gratuitous, futile and not too healthy. But they are also little aspirins of contentment – ephemeral contentment, to be sure, but not much more so than any more elevated manifestation of that elusive state.

Source: Adair (1993), p.8
increasingly abstract images continue to signify the brand's traditional connotations of ruggedness, independence, power and masculinity, while requiring consumers to decipher the text and actively construct its meaning or meanings. The pleasurable feeling that this feat of interpretation induces is transferred to the product, he argues, thereby reinforcing Marlboro's association with freedom and creativity.

- Willis (1991), likewise, in a virtuoso analysis of marketing phenomena, ranging from the iconography of plastic, see-through packaging and the craze for Cabbage Patch dolls, to the metamorphosis of various company logos, contends that the neighbourhood supermarket is in fact a theme park manqué, nothing less than a 'postmodern museum of the third world' (p.17). The displays of exotic fruit include museum-like descriptions; simulacra of work, service and management are undertaken (coffee grinding, orange juicing, photographs of rarely-scen management decorating customer service counters); and tableaux of in-store bakeries, delicatessens, florists and gourmet food sections are staffed by store personnel whose uniforms are more dramaturgical than practical. For Willis, indeed, the entire operation of the store is an exercise in theme park theatricality.


When this corpus of extra-marketing marketing literature is examined from a marketing perspective, several important points emerge. The first of these is that the analyses are almost totally devoid of empirical evidence and, therefore, the extent to which consumers actually experience the 'decentered hyperspace' of the Bonaventure Hotel, described by Jameson (1984), the 'spatio-temporal haze' that Shields (1989) identified in West Edmonton Mall, or the 'mythology of domesticity' Davidson identifies from a four-sheet poster for Persil washing powder, is somewhat uncertain, to say the least. As Featherstone (1991, p.5) makes clear, 'while learned references to the characteristic experiences of modernity are important we need to work from more systematic data and should not rely on the readings of intellectuals'. Second, the studies are characterised by an incomplete view of marketing in that they concentrate on its most visible manifestations - advertising, retail stores and shopping malls, consumer behaviour and, to a lesser extent, specific products - rather than the entire spectrum of marketing functions, tools and techniques. Extra-marketing investigations of marketing planning, physical distribution and pricing policies, to cite but three examples, are conspicuous by their absence. Third, they are inclined to view marketing phenomena from the outside in, as it were, instead of the company-centred, inside out perspective that prevails among marketing academics, though there is some evidence to suggest that this orientation is changing. Lash and Urry (1994), for instance, have recently explored the organisation, methods and world view of the advertising industry, as has Davidson (1992), and a broadly similar approach to market research organisations has been adopted by Mort (1989). Fourth, it is fair to say that the bulk of these studies concentrate on the activities of marketing practitioners (the trade press and interviews with key informants seem to be the principal sources employed) in preference to the contributions of marketing scholars. Indeed, on the few occasions when the latter are utilised, condemnation is not slow in coming. Thus, Tomlinson (1990, p.24) describes Baker's well-known model of consumer behaviour as a 'triumph of the trite . . . [with] . . . no sense of the centrality of the processes of signification in the marketing process' and Willmott (1993, p.217) dismisses marketing theory and academic research in toto as 'uncritically subordinated to the service of corporate values and priorities'.

Finally, and from a mainstream marketing standpoint, perhaps the most problematic aspect of this body of literature, is its oppositional ethos. Marketing in general and advertising in particular are invariably portrayed as the manipulative handmaidens of multinational capital, extremely powerful instruments for stimulating unnecessary wants, raising unfulfillable expectations and seducing gullible, undiscerning individuals onto the treadmill of insatiable consumption from which they will never be released no matter how hard they peddle. This postmodern Sisyphean labour is a direct consequence of marketing's pernicious ability to create imaginary worlds of perfect appearances, perfect personal relationships, perfect families, perfect personalities, perfect careers, perfect holidays, perfect presents, perfect pizzas, perfectly pulled pints and perfect imperfections, to which we are all induced to aspire and invariably seek to identify ourselves. Whereas the 'modern' individual's sense of identity derived from his or
her work role—miner, schoolteacher, farmer, etc.—and remained comparatively stable as a consequence, the identities of ‘postmodern’ individuals are inextricably linked with their patterns of consumption, their possessions, their fashion-consciousness, their conspicuous display of branded goods (cars, clothing, perfume, etc.). Albeit hollow, de-centred and characterised by secular rather than spiritual fulfilment, postmodern identities are extremely fluid, infinitely adaptable and easily changed through the acquisition of new repertoires of products with the requisite marketing-implanted images (Bocock 1993).

In fairness to the present generation of cultural commentators, their stance on marketing and advertising is much more sophisticated than the hostile condescension that characterised their predecessors such as Raymond Williams (1980), Adorno and Horkheimer (1973) or, as we saw in Chapter 1, F.R. Leavis. Consumers are no longer portrayed as malleable, simple-minded dupes held in marketing’s mendacious thrall, but as astute, discerning, self-aware individuals who enjoy shopping and identity transformation, are fluent in the language of advertising and revel in the whole consumption experience, yet at the same time remain capable of ironic detachment, doughy resistance and subverting rather than succumbing to the machinations of marketing and multinational capital (Fiske 1989a, b; Wernick 1991; Nava 1992). It is no exaggeration to state, however, that this school of thought is implacably opposed to the ideology of the marketplace and, although ready to acknowledge and—prepare to be shocked—partake of its attractions (under protest, you understand), continues to seek a secure moral and political platform from which to oppose capital’s maleficent but ineluctable commodification process.

Red River

Postmodernism, as Davidson (1992) suggests, may have rendered marketing academically respectable for those on the left of the political spectrum. But for most mainstream marketing practitioners and academics, the left’s basic world-view, either in its original hard-line or more recent, less dogmatic variants, is utterly alien and all but incomprehensible. Marketing, like any profession, has its fair share of unethical practices, unprincipled charlatans and barking mad right-wingers. But the left’s grand conspiracy theory of rapacious capitalists stoking the flames of consumer desire for their own hegemonic and ideological ends, is a gross distortion at best and arrant nonsense at worst. Most marketing spokespeople, be they practitioners or academics, genuinely believe that they are responding to the needs and wants of consumers; maintain that, all things considered, marketing is a force for the good; and subscribe to the view that, despite its undoubted failings, marketing is socially responsible, ideologically untainted and politically neutral.

Now, you don’t need me to tell you that marketing is not socially and ideologically unaligned, nor is it value-free and apolitical. It is absurd to suggest that marketing does not induce excessive consumption or that it is necessarily ‘a good thing’ (see Pollay 1986, 1987; Holbrook 1987a). And many of marketing’s more enthusiastic supporters no doubt rightly stand accused of naïve realism, false consciousness, failing to distinguish between appearances and essences, and a host of other politically incorrect practices. Nevertheless, as they themselves are the first to acknowledge, it is the left that got it wrong; it is the left that has had to come to terms with the carnivalesque and liminality of the marketplace; it is the left that has been forced to modify its long-time stance of supercilious superiority and lofty disdain; it is the left that has been emasculated, recuperated and commodified by the running dogs of capital. Indeed, the latter-day capitulation of the left is such that only the most cynical, twisted, mean-spirited misanthrope would take advantage of the opportunity presented by its intellectual surrender to point out that none other than Roland Barthes, the scoundrel of the bourgeoisie, once worked for an advertising agency. As you should know by now, I’m not that sort of person.

The left’s loss of intellectual authority, comparatively speaking, might tempt many academic marketers to dismiss such extra-disciplinary intrusions and continue on their merry epistemological way as if nothing untoward had occurred. After all, the left’s view of marketing is ill-informed, partial, passé, lacks empirical support and is predicated on an outmoded, morally questionable and historically bankrupt political philosophy. Although this attitude is eminently understandable, and has some basis in fact, it is important to appreciate that many of the extra-marketing marketing analyses are just as informative—arguably much more informative—as their equivalents in the marketing literature. For example, you only have to compare Wernick’s (1991) astonishing deconstruction of a Marlboro advertisement with that recently proffered by Stern (1993); or Solomon’s (1986) symbolic interactionism study of jeans wearers with Fiske’s (1989a) above-mentioned tour de force; or the contrasting insights into the marketing of places provided by Sack (1992) and Kotler et al. (1993) respectively, to appreciate that academic marketing has much to learn from oppositionally inclined researchers. Their ideological agenda, supercilious self-righteousness and traditional disdain for our discipline and practice may be misinformed, unsettling and all too readily dismissed as the death rattle of the loony left, but their standards of scholarship are unsurpassed by anything academic marketing has to offer.

Academic marketers, to be fair, have not ignored the advent of postmodernism. On the contrary, the movement has attracted a great deal of attention, though in many cases the researchers concerned do not explicitly place their individual studies within a postmodernist framework. In truth, all of the characteristic features of postmodern pluralism, which
were outlined in the previous chapter, have been subject to investigation by marketing academics, some more often than others:

- **Fragmentation** clearly underpins academic reflections on the disintegration of mass markets, lies at the heart of the current enthusiasm for 'micro-marketing', 'database marketing', 'one-on-one marketing', etc., and inhere in attempts to comprehend contemporary consumer behaviour, developments in Eastern Europe, information technology and the world economy (Mueller-Heumann 1992; Thomas 1993; Dussart 1994; Lansley 1994);

- **De-differentiation** is evident not only in copious academic studies of strategic alliances, joint ventures, infomercials, vertical marketing systems and the all-pervasive rhetoric of 'relationships', but it is also implicated in the application of marketing technology - a degraded cultural form - to elite domains such as museums, the arts, religion and so on (Barnes and Stafford 1993; Jennings and Saunders 1993; Hunt 1994);

- **Hyperreality**, if you are inclined to indulge in postmodern proprietorship, subsumes almost every study of store, corporate or brand image, price perceptions, advertising effects and store atmospheres, though some of the most interesting work at present involves the scripts, schemata and dramaturgical roles played by participants in the service encounter (Grove and Fisk 1991; Stern 1992; Guiry 1992);

- **Chronology** is apparent in academic investigations of time perception, just-in-time distribution, the advertising implications of television channel hopping, voiceover compression, fifteen second advertising 'spots', etc., and, not least, consumer researchers' new found interest in nostalgia and 'the good old days' (Kaufman et al. 1991; Stafford et al. 1993; Holbrook 1993);

- **Pastiche**, interestingly, is a category in which comparatively few mainstream academic analyses can be placed, possibly because of its paradigmatic nature - in other words, most research that broaches the topic (e.g. Grafton Small and Linstead's (1985) work on architectural bricolage; Belk's (1987) tongue-in-cheek suggestions concerning the discipline of consumer research; or Holbrook and colleagues' (1989) 'positivistic' analysis of a short story) tends to do so within a broad 'postmodern marketing' framework;

- **Anti-foundationalism** is part and parcel of the philosophical convulsions that have rocked marketing scholarship in the past decade or so, and the host of questions currently being asked about the continuing utility of the marketing concept, but its most obvious manifestation is in the enormous academic interest being shown in 'green marketing' issues, sustainable development and suchlike (Alwitt and Berger 1993; Troy 1993; Foxall 1994; Simintiras et al. 1994).

Apart from such 'adventent' postmodern analyses, as it were, a number of more specific instantiations can be identified. By this I mean academic research that deals directly with postmodernism, as discussed in Chapter 3, albeit bereft of the accompanying 'postmodern' lexicon. Dawson (1979, 1982), for example, has described the rapidly changing nature of the retail industry in terms of Bell's post-industrial hypothesis, arguing that we are in the throes of a 'retailing revolution' comparable to the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century. Developments in macro-marketing in general and marketing organisation in particular have been accorded broadly similar treatment (e.g. Nason 1985; Rosenberg 1985). Post-Fordism, furthermore, provides the conceptual framework for Freathy and Sparks' (1992) recent research into contemporary patterns of retail change. Not only do they highlight Henry Ford's contributions to modern retailing, in the form of the first supermarket, but they argue that retail organisations, much more so than the manufacturers normally cited by academic researchers, exemplify the distinguishing features of post-Fordism - information technology driven, flexible specialisation, polarised employment patterns, etc. The post-structuralist's preoccupation with metaphorical reasoning is paralleled by manifold published reflections on marketing metaphors (Zikmund 1982; Arndt 1985; van den Bulte 1994) and postmodern science also has its marketing disciples. True, we are eagerly awaiting the first academic marketing treatise on shamanistic drumming, though Gould's (1991) encomium to idiot dancing comes pretty close, but Sheldrake's 'formative causation' (Kohli and Novak 1984), Kapra's Tao of Physics (Firat 1989; Olson 1991; Belk et al. 1989), Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis (Fisk 1994) and, not least, the implications of chaos theory (McQuitty 1992; Diamond 1993) have all been addressed or referred to in the academic marketing literature.

However, by far the most influential aspect of postmodernism thus far derives from Kuhn and Feyrerabend's respective insights into the history and philosophy of science. As with many academic disciplines, Kuhn's 'paradigmatic' terminology and his model of scientific revolutions have attracted a great deal of attention from - and achieved very little consensus among - researchers who have sought to apply them to the development of marketing thought (see Dholakia and Arndt 1985). For some, the model has much to commend it, especially at a time of disciplinary infighting where it holds out the prospect of eventual reconciliation (Roberts 1984; Rassuli 1991). For others, marketing science is still at the pre-paradigmatic stage and hence application of the framework is premature (Usitalo and Usitalo 1985). And for yet others, the Kuhnian model is seriously flawed and alternative formulations, such as Lakatos's 'methodology of scientific research programmes' or Laudan's 'reticulated model of scientific rationality' have been explored (Leong 1985; Anderson 1986). Feyrerabend's epistemological anarchism also has its marketing adherents,
though many academics are understandably chary of associating themselves unequivocally with a philosophy that, if the onslaught of its opponents is to be believed, places them on a par with satanists, child molesters, neo-Nazis, lawyers, estate agents and, how can I put this?, marketing practitioners. Noteworthy exceptions include Peter (1983), Arndt (1985) and Foxall (1990). Indeed, as one of the few marketing scholars who appear to have taken the trouble to read Feyerabend with an open mind, Foxall argues persuasively for the active interplay—the deliberate confrontation—of tenaciously held competing paradigms and demonstrates the utility of this approach in terms of the behaviourist and cognitive interpretations of consumer research.

More far-reaching perhaps than direct references to Kuhn and Feyerabend, the relativism inherent in their positions prompted what has proved to be the most profound, prolonged and polemical debate in the history of marketing thought. Although in certain respects a continuation of the long-running 'art or science' controversy, the confrontation commenced in 1983 when Paul Anderson challenged the fundamental philosophical premises of marketing scholarship. The received view, variously if imprecisely described as 'positivist', 'positivistic' or 'logical empiricist', rests on the assumption that a single, external world exists, that this social reality can be empirically measured by independent observers using objective methods, and that it can be explained and predicted through the identification of universal laws or law-like generalisations. Anderson, by contrast, sought to demonstrate the shortcomings of this conventional wisdom: principally, its dependence on the flawed 'verification theory of meaning'; the inadequacies of its falsificationist procedure; and the difficulties presented by the inherent theory-ladenness of observation. The verification theory of meaning holds that only empirically verified propositions can be considered meaningful, but, as a consequence of the problem of induction (the fact that no matter how many tests a theory passes it can never be considered proven, because the next test might fail), verification is ultimately unattainable. What is more, Popper's attempt to circumvent this difficulty through falsification, which attempts to refute rather than confirm deductively derived theoretical conjectures, also fails as it is impossible, in practice, to refute a theory (any number of 'explanations' for an aberrant empirical test can be constructed). The notion of a secure observational base is equally fallacious due to the fact that data are theory-laden; in other words, empirical data only become meaningful within the context of an existing theory. They are not antecedent to theory, they are determined by it.

In these circumstances, Anderson (1983, 1986, 1989) concluded that marketing is ill-served by the positivist perspective and that a relativist approach, subsequently termed 'critical relativism', has much more to offer. This maintains that, although an external world may well exist 'out there', it is impossible to access this world independently of human sensations, perceptions and interpretations. Hence, 'reality' is not objective and external to the observer but socially constructed and given meaning by human actors. What counts as knowledge about this world is relative to different times, contexts and research communities. Relativism holds that there are no universal standards for judging knowledge claims, that different research communities construct different world views, which are effectively immune from outside criticism, and that science is a social process where consensus prevails about the status of knowledge claims, scientific standards and the like, though these are not immutable. Science is so social, in fact, that Peter and Olson (1983), in their ringing endorsement of the relativist position, concluded that science is a special case of marketing, that successful scientific theories are those which have performed well in the marketplace of ideas thanks to the marketing skills of their proponents.

It almost goes without saying that the relativists' eschewal of the orthodox idea of marketing science— as objectively proven knowledge—and its replacement with the notion of science as societal consensus, provoked a ferocious reaction. The foremost defender of the faith, Shelby Hunt (1984, 1990, 1992), was particularly scathing about relativism, arguing that it leads inexorably to nihilism, irrationalism, incoherence and irrelevance. 'The discipline of marketing', he thundered, 'is hardly advanced by adopting a philosophy that sees no difference between astronomy and medical science on the one hand and astrology and palmistry on the other' (Hunt 1984, p.34). Battle was thus joined and over the next decade or so, marketing's philosophical heavyweights struggled it out on terrain as diverse as demarcation criteria, 'truth', 'reification', 'incommensurability', and quantitative versus qualitative research methodology. The precise assumptions of logical positivists, logical empiricists and falsificationists were clarified; the oft-repeated assertion that marketing is dominated by positivism was challenged; 'scientific realism', which holds that the world external to human cognition is a real world comprising hard, tangible, measurable and ultimately knowable structures, was advanced as a candidate for marketing's philosophical redemption and its differences from positivism and relativism explained. The manifold variants of relativism and realism were also explicated, professional philosophers were called in as putative referees, and, when the combatants eventually battered each other to a standstill, an uneasy truce descended on the battlefield (see Kavanagh 1994).

The smoke, however, has since dispersed, the dead and wounded attended to, and the ultimate, appropriately ironic, outcome of the conflict is now apparent. Shelby Hunt, the indefatigable champion of realism, has done more to advance the cause of relativism than any of its advocates! In his self-appointed role as marketing's philosophical gun-slinger— the
fastest epistemologist in the west – Hunt’s intertempere invective, vituperative rejoinders and, it has to be said, disingenuous dogmatism merely served to focus attention on, and thereby helped legitimise, the relativist position. It is quite probable that mainstream marketing research would have continued in its hypothetico-deductive way, all but oblivious to the relativist option, if it were not for the rootin-’tootin’ activities of trigger-happy marketing philosophers. Granted, the vast bulk of marketing academics still work within a broadly realist/empiricist/instrumentalist/positivistic framework, but very few, I suspect, are unaware of the alternative epistemological options that are now available (O’Shaughnessy 1992b).

Weird Science

Regardless of the long-term outcome of the ‘realism versus relativism’ debate, it opened the door for a host of unconventional approaches to marketing scholarship in general and consumer research in particular. Disillusioned by the traditionalists’ mechanistic, hypothetico-deductive search for law-like generalisations concerning consumer decision taking and information processing, a group of avant-garde marketing researchers have sought to comprehend, through a variety of interpretive approaches, the deeply-felt beliefs, emotions and meanings that underlie in the rituals, myths and symbols of consumption behaviour (Hudson and Ozanne 1988). These approaches have been accorded a number of descriptors (e.g. post-positivist, naturalistic, hermeneutic, constructionist, humanistic and, the one I plan to employ, interpretive), none of which does full justice to the multiplicity of contrasting perspectives that form part of this anti-positivist alliance. Indeed, the diversity is such that several commentators have taken to using the term ‘postmodern’, with all its polysemic and ecumenical overtones, to describe the movement. For example, in his introduction to the June 1989 issue of the Journal of Consumer Research, which contains the apotheosis of interpretive consumer research, Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry’s majestic exposition of the Consumer Odyssey project, the editor of the journal, Richard J. Lutz, describes their work as ‘postmodern’. Hirschman and Holbrook’s (1992) recent, exemplary monograph on interpretive consumer research places humanistic, hermeneutic, semiotic, phenomenological, existential and several other approaches under the ‘postmodern’ umbrella. And, Sherry’s (1991) seminal summary of the ‘postmodern alternatives’ available to interpretive consumer researchers situates critical theory, literary theory and historical perspectives within postmodernism’s capacious domain. Even critics of the interpretive turn, most notably Shelby Hunt (1994), have taken to using ‘postmodern’ in a catch-all sense.

Although, as we noted at the start of Chapter 3, the appropriation of the term ‘postmodern’, with all its cutting-edge connotations, is a fairly common practice among academic disciplines engaged in internecine warfare, the epistemological positions espoused by many ‘postmodern’ marketing and consumer researchers do not accord with our version of postmodernism. If, admittedly, we imagine a conceptual continuum with (say) logical empiricism at one end and Baudrillard’s apocalyptic postmodernism at the other, then it is undeniable that the bulk of interpretive marketing research lies toward the latter end of the spectrum. Nevertheless, most of the positions championed by ‘postmodern’ marketing scholars have been specifically rejected by the leading lights of the postmodern moment – Derrida, Lyotard, Foucault, Baudrillard and the rest. Indeed, in some cases, such as humanism and critical theory, their stances are almost diametrically opposed.

For example, the humanistic perspective, according to its principal adherent in marketing and consumer research, involves an ‘orienting strategy’ (a basic set of beliefs which cannot be validated as true or false and is rarely, if ever, replaced) made up of the following assumptions: that human beings construct multiple realities; that the researcher and the phenomenon under study are mutually interactive; that research inquiry is directed towards the development of idiographic knowledge; that causes and effects cannot be separated; that research is inherently value-laden; and that the outcome of research – i.e. knowledge – is socially constructed, not discovered. Clearly, this is a world away from the controlled experiments and mathematical models of the traditional marketing metaphysics, which holds that there is a single tangible reality, the researcher and the researched are independent, generalisable truth statements are identifiable, causes and effects can be distinguished, and objective, value-free knowledge can be discovered (Hirschman 1986).

Be that as it may, Hirschman’s humanism is not, and cannot be construed as, postmodernism, because it presupposes an autonomous human subject, the free-thinking, self-conscious individual that post-structuralists, such as Derrida and Foucault, categorically repudiate and considered to be essentially an epiphenomenon of language. In fact, this ‘death of the subject’ thesis is captured in one of the most frequently cited passages in the entire postmodern canon, Foucault’s (1972, p.387) famous ‘wager’ that in the forthcoming (postmodern) era, ‘man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea’. As Roseau (1992, p.47) emphatically points out, albeit not without exaggeration, postmodernists consider humanism to be a,

logocentric meta-narrative, seeking to provide answers based only on its own unquestioned, internally validated, fixed frame of reference. It propels the human subject to the centre and implies ‘man as master of the universe, dominating, controlling, deciding’ . . . While claiming to better the human condition . . . humanism has misled humankind
into Marxism, National Socialism and Stalinism... has been
used to justify Western superiority and cultural imperialism.

The Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School is also often cited as an
element of postmodernism in marketing and consumer research (Hetrick
1989; Sherry 1991). A number of prominent marketing scholars have
evoked the virtuous of critical theory (Rogers 1987; Firtat 1989; Iyer 1991)
and at least one well-known authority on the subject, Mark Poster, has
addressed an audience of marketing academics (Poster and Venkatesh
1987). However, perhaps the fullest expression of this perspective is found
in a paper by Murray and Ozanne (1991), who, in a somewhat emancipatory
exposition (presumably the more radical denunciations of consumer
society made by critical theorists, were deemed too inflammatory for
mainstream consumer researchers), presented a brief history of the Institute
for Social Research and outlined critical theory's principal principles.
These include the belief that research should comprise a critique of society;
that this criticism should be interdisciplinary; that theory and practice
are inseparable; that orthodox Marxism should be rejected and the
proletariat abandoned as an agent of change; that facts and values are
interdependent; and that genuine knowledge is a potential instrument of
emancipation. Whereas, in other words, the positivistically inclined
hold that reality is objective, singular and divisible, and interpretivists
consider the to be socially constructed, multiple and holistic, critical theor-
ists see reality in its dynamic, historical totality, as a 'force field' between
subject and object. Where positivism is predicated on nomothetic, context-
dependent, value-free and ahistorical knowledge, and interpretivism
assumes idiographic, context-dependent, value-laden and time-bound
knowledge structures, critical theory is forward-looking, practical, imagina-
tive and committed to unmasking false consciousness, hidden epistem-
ological assumptions and the forms of domination that lurk behind
supposedly 'scientific', 'rational', 'objective' and 'value-free' knowledge
claims. And where, finally, positivists seek explanation and interpretivists
understanding, critical theorists pursue the holy grail of human emancip-
ation (Murray and Ozanne 1991).

While marketing has much to learn from critical theory, not least the
opportunity it provides to unpack 'the myth of market freedom and with it
the myth of marketing itself' (Morgan 1992, p.136), it is quite incor-
correct to conclude that postmodernism and critical theory are one and the
same. On the contrary, the foremost contemporary figure in the Frankfurt
School tradition, Jürgen Habermas, is far and away postmodernism's most
Lyotard, firmly believes in the continuing importance of the Enlightenment
project, though he acknowledges that its record is far from unsullied and
that knowledge has undoubtedly become computerised, compartmen-
talised, commodified and fragmented. He argues, nevertheless, that to
abandon the emancipatory aspirations of modernity, to give it up as a lost
cause, or to deny the genuine progress that has been made since the pre-
modern period, is merely to acquiesce to anti-modernists like Lyotard,
Foucault and Derrida, which can only result in disillusion, entropy and
neo-conservatism. Most importantly perhaps, Habermas maintains that his
own theory of communicative action (in which an ideal speech situation
of egalitarianism, rationality and free, undistorted communication between
individuals and social groups obtains, and where the views of minorities,
the oppressed and marginalised are recognised, and treated in a just, demo-
cratic fashion) provides a way of circumventing the situation, described
by Lyotard, of knowledge fragmentation into an infinite number of hetero-
genous and incompatible language games (see White 1988; Burrell
1994). Yet, despite Habermas's doughty attempts to hold back the tides
of irrationality - and the irrationalists' tart rejoinders (see Rorty 1983;
Foucault 1991) - it is generally accepted that the credibility of critical
theory has been severely dented by the advent of the postmodern project
and attempts to rethink the movement are underway (e.g. Bannet 1993).
As Ray (1993, p.x) acknowledges, 'the notion of historically grounded
reason, which offers both the legitimisation for Critical Theory and the
impetus behind the resistance of oppression, has become unfashionable in
an intellectual milieu informed by relativism and postmodernism.'

Closely aligned with critical theory, in so far as Habermasian insights
are dependent on a modification of the procedure, is the so-called 'linguistic
turn' in consumer and marketing research (O'Shaughnessy and Holbrook
1988). Frequently portrayed as an essential part of the postmodern
marketing moment, this comprises hermeneutics, semiotics and several
analogous positions (see Mick 1986), all of which are premised on what
Hirschman and Holbrook (1992) term, a 'linguistic construction of reality'.
Originally a method for recovering the meaning of ancient texts, and
regarded by Dilthey as the key to the human sciences' ultimate aim of
understanding', hermeneutics was extended by Gadamer and Ricoeur to
the interpretation of the entire gamut of human activities (see Silverman
1991). In effect, every human action or artefact can be 'read' as if it is a
'text' and an understanding of its meaning derived by recourse to the
appropriate methodology, namely the 'hermeneutic circle'. For Gadamer,
this is a self-correcting cycle of interpretive interplay between the whole
of the text and its parts, whereby understanding derives from the fusion of
the researcher's preconceptions and the context-dependent meanings of
the text under consideration (Outhwaite 1985).

This interpretation of meanings is equally central to semiotics, the study
or science of signs. Derived, on the one hand, from Ferdinand de Saussure's
subdivision of the linguistic sign into 'signifier' and 'signified' (see Chapter
3) and indebted, on the other hand, to US philosopher C.S. Pierce's triadic
it must be emphasised, is this simply a matter of allowing multiple meanings – Ricoeur recognised this possibility, after all. Derrida’s deconstruction demonstrates that meaning is indeterminate, that texts are saturated with irresolvable ambiguities, with innumerable, conflicting meanings that operate simultaneously and are disseminated across the iridescent surface of the text. In fact, Jackson and McLeish (1993) go so far as to suggest that deconstruction is the complete opposite of hermeneutics and Holub (1994, p.382) concludes, ‘hermeneutics and post-structuralism can be reconciled only by limiting the infinite play of signification while at the same time maintaining the impossibility of determinacy’.

Besides the ‘linguistic construction of reality’ championed by hermeneuticians and semioticians, a number of marketing exponents of ‘individual construction of reality’, in the shape of existentialism and phenomenology, are also evident (Hirschman and Holbrook 1992). Existentialism, as formulated by Kierkegaard in the nineteenth century, elaborated by Heidegger in the 1930s and popularised by Jean-Paul Sartre in the early post-war period, is a philosophical movement which holds that humans are self-creating beings, creatures who are not initially endowed with characters and goals, but who can choose them and what they want to be by an act of pure decision. Whereas everything else in existence merely exists, humans are uniquely aware of their existence and consequently have the potential to understand and (possibly) control it. Knowledge resides in the Gestalt, the totality of human existence, and the key to knowledge is an on-going process of self-understanding, which is continually evolving, inherently unstable and never completed (Warnock 1970; Silverman 1988).

If, to paraphrase Jean-Paul Sartre, existence precedes understanding, phenomenology provides a means of comprehending the peculiarities of the human condition. According to its founding father, Edmund Husserl, phenomenology is nothing less than the ‘science of the subjective’. It assumes that even though we cannot be certain about the independent existence of objects in the external world, we can be certain about how they appear to us in consciousness. Objects, therefore, are not regarded as things in themselves but as things posited, or intended, by consciousness and hence the act of thinking and the object of the thought are interdependent. For phenomenologists, the external world is reduced to the contents of consciousness alone and it is the exploration of individual human consciousness, either through introspection or third-person accounts of others’ experiences, that enables genuine, meaningful knowledge to be attained (Kearney 1986; Macann 1993).

As Eagleton (1983, p.61) caustically notes, however, Husserl’s ‘transcendent’ phenomenology is highly abstract – ‘a question of intuiting the universal essence of what it is to be an onion’. In practice, it was Heidegger’s ‘hermeneutical’ phenomenology, coupled with Sartre’s mordant prognostications on the meaning of life and Schutz’s (1967) studies of the
social world that did much to provide phenomenology with an existential grounding. Irrespective of its intellectual forebears, the existential/phenomenological perspective has quite a few contemporary adherents in the academic marketing community. Holbrook (1985, 1986, 1987b, 1988) has written several introspective accounts of his diverse consumption activities; Brown (1989) has penned a broadly similar overview of the international marketing research experience; Thompson et al. (1990) assembled third person reports on the shopping practices of married women; Mick and Buhl (1992) have focused on the advertising experiences and contrasting life worlds of three Danish brothers; Hirschman (1990, 1991, 1992) has offered a number of distressing accounts of her personal problems; and, in what will no doubt go down as a monument to male mid-life libidinal angst, Gould (1991) has penned an astonishing introspective essay on his perceived vital energy and its relationship to product use (see also Fennell 1985; Thompson et al. 1989; Mick and DeMoss 1990).

Like the hermeneutic/semiotic standpoint, the existentialist/phenomenological position is not short of shortcomings. These include its emphasis on human agency rather than the limitations imposed by socio-economic structures, its aprioristic tendencies (the notion that the mind is endowed with innate ideas or concepts which it has not derived from experience) and its propensity for description, uncontrolled hypotheses and emergent research designs over the explanatory orientation beloved by devotees of positivism (O'Shaughnessy 1992b; Wallendorf and Brooks 1993). From our current perspective, however, the most serious difficulty is that it is not postmodernism. More than almost any other philosophical position, existentialism/phenomenology is predicated on the ‘transcendental ego’, on free-thinking, autonomous human subjects. In Eagleton’s (1983, p.58) words, it ‘restored the transcendental subject to its rightful throne. The subject was to be seen as the source and origin of all meaning. . . The world is what I posit or “intend”: it is to be grasped in relation to me, as a correlate of my consciousness’. In fact, it was the outmoded existentialism of Sartre and Camus that French structuralist and post-structuralist thinkers, with their emphasis on the constitutive effects of language and their attempts to de-centre the human subject, were reacting to and stood four-square against (Hawkes 1977; Sturrock 1975a). To conclude, therefore, that existentialism/phenomenology is a postmodern position, as Thompson et al. (1989, 1990) have done, is to stretch the concept some way beyond its elastic limit, ductile though it undoubtedly is.

Another approach that is often subsumed under the umbrella of ‘postmodern’ marketing research is literary criticism (Sherry 1991; Hirschman and Holbrook 1992). The most prominent exponent of this perspective is Barbara B. Stern, a consumer researcher who was trained in literary theory (Hirschman 1989b). In a detailed, and highly illuminating, explication of magazine and television advertisements, which treats them, in effect, as works of literature, Stern (1989a) has demonstrated the importance of prosody (rhythm, metre, rhyme, euphony and cacophony) in effective advertising communication. On another occasion she subjected a single advertisement, a 1929 magazine ad for Ivory Soap Flakes, to a variety of contrasting readings from the manifold schools of literary theory – psychoanalytical, reader-response, Marxist and so on (Stern 1989b). Interestingly, however, although she described the ‘deconstructive’ approach to literary criticism (post-structuralism, remember, is often termed ‘deconstruction’ in American literary circles), the Ivory Flakes advertisement was not subject to a deconstructive reading. Granted, one of Stern’s (1993) subsequent papers has proffered a postmodern feminist deconstruction of various cigarette advertisements, but to suggest that her body of work, or literary criticism generally, is an instantiation of postmodern marketing is clearly an overgeneralisation. Not only does she range across several schools of literary theory, only one of which can legitimately be described as postmodern, but Stern’s preferred approach – New Criticism – is about as far from post-structuralist literary theory as it is possible to be. American New Criticism, as espoused by Ransom, Wimsatt, Brooks and the lit-crit establishment of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, treated the literary text as an autonomous object, isolated from its historical and social context, or indeed authorial intention and reader response (Robey 1986; Selden and Widdowson 1993). The text, in other words, meant what it meant and an array of objective, rigorous, ‘scientific’ techniques were developed for the process of its critical interrogation. As Eagleton (1983, p.49) points out, New Criticism’s ‘battery of critical instruments was a way of competing with the hard sciences on their own terms, in a society where such science was the dominant criterion of knowledge’. It is indeed ironic that this essentially modernist (or realist, in so far as the literary work was treated as an object in itself) approach to literary criticism should be cited as an example of postmodern marketing (see Scarle 1994). Not only was American New Criticism the very citadel of literary orthodoxy that fell to Jacques Derrida in his famous 1966 presentation at Yale, ‘Structure, sign and play in the discourse of the human sciences’, but post-structuralism once went under the epithet, New, New Criticism (Hawkes 1977).

If literary theory has attracted the attention of comparatively few marketing and consumer researchers thus far, the same cannot be said for historical analysis. As a result of the pioneering endeavours of Stanley Hollander and his colleagues at Michigan State University, which has led to the establishment of a dedicated, biennial conference and a quarterly newsletter, Retrospectives in Marketing, marketing history comprises perhaps the single largest sub-field of ‘postmodern’ marketing scholarship.
Postmodern marketing

(see, for example, Hollander and Rassuli 1993). Sherry (1991) goes so far as to suggest that historical perspectives, with their inherently interpretive world view, provide the key to comprehending postmodern developments in contemporary consumer research. Nevett (1991), moreover, maintains that as there are many similarities between the problems that face practicing marketing managers and those typically encountered in the study of history, an historical orientation provides a useful antidote to the sterility of the positivist standpoint which continues to pervade academic marketing. And, according to Lavin and Archdeacon (1989), marketing's latter-day intellectual shift in the direction of relativism/interpretivism has been facilitated by -- and has facilitated in turn -- the growth of an historical consciousness.

Like literary theory, however, historical perspectives are many and varied. Although most (but by no means all) of these are idiographic in orientation, emphasize the importance of unique events and specific contexts, and are as one in their desire to respect the integrity of the 'facts', there are numerous schools of historical thought -- positivist, Marxist, hermeneutic, psychoanalytic, structuralist, idealist, narrative and so on (Jones 1991). While the majority of these contrast sharply with mainstream marketing scholarship, to intimate that historical approaches per se count as 'postmodern marketing' is a gross exaggeration. Postmodernism, if anything, endorses the 'end of history' thesis, cultivates a posthistorie attitude or, like Foucault, champions an historical world-view consisting of radical discontinuities and iconoclastic revisionism (Rosenau 1992; Niethammer 1992; Goldstein 1994). There is, admittedly, a postmodern movement within historical scholarship -- several papers on the implications of postmodernism for history have been published and the 'new historicism' paradigm of contemporary literary theory is broadly postmodernist in ethos (e.g. Ankersmit 1989; Zagorin 1990; Veeser 1989) -- but, as far as I am aware, none of this material has materialised in the marketing and consumer research literature. In fact, the one and only reference (to Hayden White's (1989) assessment of the New Historicism movement) specifically dismisses this particular line of thought (Smith and Lux 1993).

Star Trek 2: The Wrath of Kant

The foregoing discussion, it must be stressed, should not be construed as a criticism of marketing's interpretive research community. After all, if it were not for their pioneering endeavours and determination to break the iron grip of the received view, a monograph such as this would never have been possible (yes folks, they have a lot to answer for!). Nor is the above an attempt to denigrate or undermine the marketing insights that have been attained through the adoption of humanism, critical theory, semiology, phenomenology, literary theory or whatever. On the contrary, marketing is a much richer discipline thanks to the perseverance of the interpretivists. The Consumer Odyssey, to name but one of their achievements, will undoubtedly be remembered as a seminal moment of post-war marketing scholarship. What is more, if the deeply hostile tenor of its literature can be tolerated, it is undeniable that marketing has much to gain from critical theory -- from a more fully informed, self-reflexive stance than has been apparent hitherto.

Nor, for that matter, do the two previous sections mean to imply that interpretive marketing academics are unaware or somehow ignorant of the extant literature on postmodernism. Nothing could be further from the case. As a glance at the recent publications of (say) Belk, Hirschman, Holbrook, Sherry or Stern amply testify, the holy trinity of Derrida, Foucault and Baudrillard are routinely referred to, albeit usually in passing, and few would deny that Roland Barthes is presently enjoying a whole new lease of life in the marketing literature, the (literal) death of the author notwithstanding. Indeed, the ultimate irony is that any postmodernistically informed attempt to denigrate the interpretivists, the very act of expressing a purist, 'holier than thou' evaluation of this self-styled body of 'postmodern' marketing research, founders on the very rock of postmodernism with its emphasis on the inherent and irreducible undecidability of meaning. If some marketing scholars choose to employ the term 'postmodern' for perspectives -- such as McCracken's (1988, 1990) anthropology -- which would be considered essentially 'modern' in the original discipline (cf. Tyler 1987; Sangren 1988), or which bear little or no relation to postmodernism as we have come to understand it, then so be it. It is a perfectly postmodern thing to do, and for a postmodernist to deny them this freedom is to repudiate the very position he or she purportedly espouses. Silence, as Baudrillard rightly reminds us, is the only appropriate postmodern reaction.

Calling as the interpretivists' appropriation of postmodern terminology seems to be for some card-carrying postmodernists (see for example Costa 1993; Grafton Small 1993a), and confusing as the vacillations of Venkatesh and Sherry undoubtedly are for the uninitiated, such studies are at least redeemed by their very high standards of scholarship. Interpretive research may not be what it claims to be -- it's postmodern, Jim, but not as we know it -- but it is undeniably insightful. The same, regrettably, cannot be said for another group of marketing researchers who appear to be wielding 'postmodern' terminology somewhat indiscriminately at present. At worst, this involves its use for research which has little or no discernible relationship to postmodernism. Examples include Kropp's (1993) Delphi study of changing consumer values, G. Johnson's (1993) quantitative analysis of managerial cognitions and Nyeck's (1992) investigation into consumer attitudes and orientations. At best, it comprises the use of 'postmodern'
in an epochal sense, as a fashionable synonym for 'changed', 'complex' or 'new', often with respect to the dramatic political and economic upheavals of recent years – events in Eastern Europe, the rise of protectionism, environmentalism, religious fundamentalism, etc. Soderlund (1990), for instance, argues that as a result of the new world order, most marketing intelligence systems are incapable of meeting the demands they now face in our postmodern world of chaos, disorder and doubt. Rothman (1992) maintains that a postmodern array of research methods is now required, though the tried-and-tested techniques he advocates – personal interviews, self-completion questionnaires, direct observation and so on – intimates that at most he has a form of retro-marketing research in mind. McDonald (1994), moreover, subscribes to the view that a renewed commitment to the original marketing concept is the key to success in the postmodern business environment of the late twentieth century. Although these epochal and vernacular uses of the term contribute to the confusion over postmodernism's domain, described earlier, this tendency is by no means confined to marketing. The term has been employed in this loose sense by the 'fashion victims of thought' (Beaumont 1993, p.43) in many other disciplines and, indeed, this interpretation is also evident in the best-selling books by management gurus and futurologists like Peters (1992), Drucker (1993), Toffler (1990) and Popcorn (1992).

Besides the heroic endeavours of the interpretivists and the abominations of postmodern poseurs – Brown (1993c) in particular – another group of academics (one would be tempted to call them 'authentic' postmodern marketers if it were not for the sheer inauthenticity of the subject matter) has commented extensively on postmodernism in a marketing context. While the group is comparatively few in number and hails largely from the consumer research end of the marketing spectrum, it is growing very rapidly. Its contributions, moreover, are many and varied, but for the purposes of our present discussion these can be divided, yet again, into four rough categories: general overviews of postmodernism and its implications for marketing practice; analyses of specific aspects of the postmodern condition in relation to marketing practice or practices; general discussions of the theoretical ramifications of postmodern marketing; and investigations of the meaning of postmodernism for specific marketing theories and concepts (Figure 5.2).

With regard to the first category, it is interesting to note that the term 'postmodern' has a surprisingly long history in the management and marketing literature. According to Best and Kellner (1991), it was first used by our old friend Peter Drucker in a 1957 volume entitled Landmarks of Tomorrow. Another early exponent was Weldon J. Taylor (1965) who, in a contribution to the perennial 'art versus science' debate, described the nature of marketing science in a postmodern world. Significant though they were, however, these usages comprised little more than adaptations of Toynbee's celebrated temporal schema, which we referred to in Chapter 1 (though Ostergaard (1993) considers Taylor to be a forerunner of Lyotard). Contemporary versions of postmodernism, so to speak, date from the late 1980s–early 1990s, when several important marketing-orientated introductions to the postmodern appeared. By far the best and quite the most accessible of these was written by James Ogilvy (1990), a philosopher and practising market researcher. After dismissing the notion that postmodernism is a passing fad with little to say to the business community, he contended that the modern/postmodern divide revolved around contrasting interpretations of five key issues: the modern idea of progress versus the postmodern rejection of western-style historicism; modernity's faith in science versus postmodernity's utter disillusion; mass manufacturing versus flexible specialisation; bureaucratic hierarchies versus de-layered hiearchies; and the all-encompassing nation state versus the individually orientated private sector. This led Ogilvy to conclude that, in practical marketing terms, postmodernism implies that segmentation strategies should take precedence over global marketing, the dominance of established brands will increase, a greater emphasis on environment-friendly messages is likely to prove necessary and consumer behaviour could become increasingly eclectic and unpredictable in years to come.
Standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Ogilvy's seminal overview is the definitive academic analysis of postmodern marketing practicalities by Firat and Venkatesh (1993). A refinement of several earlier statements by the authors (e.g. Firat 1989; Venkatesh 1989; Firat and Venkatesh 1991), this contribution contends that, with its emphasis on the creation, manipulation and reproduction of images, marketing has taken centre-stage in today's postmodern world of hyperreality, fragmentation, reversed consumption and production, de-centred subjects and paradoxical juxtapositions of opposites. Modern marketing is already a postmodern institution and the ultimate social practice of postmodernity. Indeed, in their enthusiasm for the potential insights provided by postmodern marketing perspectives, Firat and Venkatesh (1993, p.246) actually suggest that marketing represents a new meta-narrative for postmodernism and, hence, 'the new metaphor for life!'. While this may or may not turn out to be the case, the practical implications of marketing's position at the heart of contemporary culture and society are none the less profound. According to Firat and Venkatesh, these range from the dissolution of formerly sacrosanct boundaries (high and low culture etc.) and marketing's ultimate responsibility for the plight of the state education system, to a need for much greater sensitivity to customer heterogeneity. For far too long, they argue, marketing has been content to portray images of the normal, the mainstream, the stereotypical, the beautiful, the perfect. Greater awareness of consumer diversity, difference, heterogeneity and the 'other' is thus urgently required.

Apart from their broad insights into the implications of the postmodern moment, Firat and Venkatesh have sought to explore, in their separate writings, the practical marketing ramifications of certain specific aspects of postmodernism. Drawing upon Deleuze and Baudrillard, Venkatesh (1992) stresses the significance of 'spectacle', 'pastiche', 'liminality', 'affect', 'carnivalesque' and the overall emphasis on the visual in contemporary consumption experiences (e.g. vivid adverts, rock concerts). Firat (1992a), furthermore, examines the nature of 'fragmentation' in the postmodern, arguing that it is everywhere apparent - short television ads, disconnected images on billboards, the separation of products from their contexts, consumer life experiences, gender roles, body parts and the fragmentation of the de-centred self. So much so, that he considers fragmentation to be the universal - the new meta-narrative, no less - of postmodernism. Firat (1992b) has also explored the prevalence of hyperreality on the postmodern marketing scene, as have several other commentators. In fact, it is fair to say that Baudrillard's ruminations on the hyperreal have attracted more comment among academic researchers than almost any other aspect of the postmodern marketing condition. Wright (1989), for instance, discerns evidence of hyperreality in several theme restaurants; Belk (1991) reports on fake representations of the past in consumer sites like Heritage Village USA and Colonial Williamsburg, which despite their staged inauthenticity and carefully sanitised versions of history, are actually preferred to the real thing; and, in an entertaining parody of Baudrillard's convoluted syntax ('The ecstatic celebration of the synthetic' etc.), Mounir (1989) identifies the hyperreality that inheres in representations of Californian wine with their paradoxical fusion of incompatible elements, most notably science/technology and history/ethnics.

Above and beyond analyses of the component parts of postmodernism, a number of postmodern analyses of specific marketing practices can be identified. One of the earliest of these was Grafton Small and Linstead's (1985) identification and deconstruction of the western metaphysics of progress inscribed in a British food manufacturer's promotional literature. This pioneering study has since been followed by a series of elegantly written, elegiac essays on characteristically postmodern marketing themes - gift giving, ethics, nostalgia, personal loss and organisational structures (Grafton Small and Linstead 1989; Linstead and Grafton Small 1990, 1992; Grafton Small 1993b, c). The representation and blurring of gender stereotypes, especially the so-called 'new man', in television advertisements for household cleaning products have also been examined (Elliott et al. 1993), as has the relationship between compulsive consumption and the empty postmodern self (Elliott 1994), young people's playful subversion of television advertising (O'Dohonoe 1994), the creation of cult status in innovative consumer products by means of postmodern marketing management techniques like artistic entrepreneurship and enlightened paternalism (Cova and Svansfeldt 1993), the place of fashion, design and perpetual change in postmodern society (Hetzel 1994) and, not least, investigations of the characteristic features of postmodern consumption - spectacle, surfaces, carnivalesque, fragmentation, schizophrenia and the nature of the self - as portrayed in cinematic representations (Belk and Bryce 1993). Perhaps the single most important contribution to our understanding of postmodernism in a specific marketing setting, however, is Linda Scott's (1992) post-structuralist reading of several US magazine advertisements. In an expositional tour de force, she effectively moved beyond the structuralist and semiotic approaches which dominate interpretive investigations of the 'postmodern' marketing condition, and revealed the intricate, inchoate and irreducible interplay of intertextual meanings that inhere in even the most literal advertisements.

Hear My Song

The parallels between contemporary marketing practices and the precepts of postmodernism are comparatively clear cut. As a consequence, they have been explored in some detail and with not a little enthusiasm. Commentators on the relationship between marketing theory and post-
modernism are much less ebullient, however. Although relatively few in number, almost all of those who have examined this issue have come to the conclusion that the implications of the postmodern moment for existing marketing theories and models are extremely serious if not fatal. Granted, some of these comments are 'off the cuff', as it were, and others appear to be predicated on a particularly Baudrillardian brand of nihilistic postmodernism. Nevertheless, the effective abandonment of decades of mainstream scholarship and academic endeavour appears to be the price of entry into the ephemeral, idiographic, ambiguous, provisional, schizophrenic world of postmodern marketing. It can, of course, be argued that postmodernism merely reinforces what is already widely acknowledged - that the principles of marketing are far from established. But, it is important to emphasise that whereas most modern marketers maintain that, with a modicum of additional research, superior versions of marketing principles are attainable, postmodernists consider such endeavours to be both unnecessary and futile.

Elliott (1993) typifies this standpoint, in so far as he contends that in a postmodern world characterised by the consumption of symbolic meaning and construction of multiple realities, many of our traditional marketing concepts concerning consumer behaviour, consumption activities and marketing research are in need of fundamental reassessment. Meaning is not determined by marketers but negotiated by consumers. Highly individual, and often inconsistent, interpretations are the norm. In these circumstances, established marketing techniques are inappropriate, customary rules of logic, cause and effect, or sense and sensibility, do not necessarily apply, and language may not be the most appropriate medium for attaining understanding of consumer cognitions. While 'scientific' marketing can continue to be pressed into epistemological service, the outcomes of these endeavours are likely to be superficial and uninsightful. Postmodern marketing scholarship, as Elliott sees it, must learn to tolerate incompatible alternatives, cope with paradox, accept that there is more than one perspective and encourage the contradictory juxtaposition of opposites.

Broadly similar evaluations of the place of marketing theory in postmodernity have been expressed by Hetrick and Lozada (1993) and Brown (1993c). The former authors, in a paean to marketing's need for greater self-consciousness and critical awareness, contend that the discipline is all but incapable of developing postmodern marketing theories. With its traditional emphasis on the 'normal', the 'same', the 'conventional', the 'homogeneous', the 'mainstream' (male/white/heterosexual/professional/affluent, etc.), marketing is likely to have trouble conceptualising or accommodating postmodernism's preoccupation with the 'other', the 'marginalised', the 'disqualified', the 'disenfranchised', the 'deviant', the 'silenced' (female/coloured/homosexual/unqualified/unwaged and so on). The latter commentator simply provides an inventory of marketing models and principles predicated on the modernist assumptions of analysis, planning and control - the 4Ps, SWOT analysis, hierarchy of advertising effects, classification of goods typologies, the strategic matrices of Ansoff, Porter or the BCG, etc. - and deems them unsuitable in a postmodern marketing milieu of intuition, spontaneity and disorganisation. What is more, whereas contemporary marketing practices are manifestly postmodern in ethos, marketing theory remains mired in a futile modernist search for laws, regularities and predictability. According to Brown (1993c, p.25), postmodernism highlights the inherent limitations of many extant marketing models and theories. It asks not only whether exposure to the Boston matrix causes 'cows' to be milked and 'dogs' put to sleep unnecessarily, or whether the inordinate failure rate of new products is due, not to the inadequacies of the products themselves, but to companies' adherence to marketing's misconceptualisation of the NPD process. It also asks the all-important question of whether companies/products/campaigns, etc. succumb because they stray from the path of marketing righteousness, as marketers are wont to assume, or because the path itself is heading in the wrong direction.

Clearly, this is an extreme interpretation of the situation, with few crumbs of comfort for the disorientated survivors of postmodernism's conceptual holocaust. This view, however, seems to be shared by most commentators on the implications of postmodernism for specific marketing models, frameworks, principles and generalisations. Thus, the marketing concept itself has been subject to several postmodern readings, which have variously concluded that it is a 'classic meta-narrative' (Brown 1994c, p.87), 'failing' (Tornroos and Ranta 1993, p.166), and needs to be 're-examined, recast or even abandoned' (Firat et al. 1995, p.54). In a similar vein, the stages model of internationalisation, the production-sales-marketing eras typology and the manifold 'growth of the firm' frameworks (Figure 3.3) have been dismissed as a marketing manifestation of the discredited western metaphysic of inexorable human progress (Brown 1993c). Retail location theory, fashion theory, market segmentation, the new product development process, consumer behaviour theory, image studies, strategic marketing theory and the search for a general theory of marketing have also received short shrift from postmodernistically inclined academics (Firat 1991; Cova 1993; Brown 1993d; Desmond 1993; Tornroos and Ranta 1993; Firat et al. 1993). Even the celebrated realism versus relativism debate - the very nature of scientific truth in marketing - has been explored from a broadly postmodernist perspective and the dubious assumptions and rhetorical strategies of the defenders of the marketing faith thereby exposed (Thompson 1993).
Disconcerting as the above assessments probably are for mainstream marketing researchers, it must be emphasised that not every model or theory has been swept aside by the tidal wave of postmodernism. Concepts predicated on a cyclical, rise and decline metaphor may be exempt according to some — but by no means all — authorities on the postmodern condition (e.g. Jencks 1989; Burrell 1993; Debord 1994). In this respect, a detailed study of the wheel of retailing theory illustrates postmodernism’s ambivalence towards cyclical models of change (Brown 1993c). On the one hand, the wheel theory is universalist, in so far as it assumes the same low-cost, trading-up pattern applies to every retailing institution in every socio-economic setting; it is subject-centred, in that it is predicated on the actions of conscious, free-thinking, self-determining, individual human beings; and it presupposes that history has a pattern or shape. All of these assumptions are anathema to the adepts of postmodernism. On the other hand, the wheel is a prime example of the metaphorical thinking that postmodernists frequently espouse. As one of the most frequently cited concepts in marketing thought, its ‘performativity’ (to employ Lyotard’s key criterion) in the marketplace of academic ideas is unimpeachable. Most importantly perhaps, it is premised on the notion of cyclical time (time’s cycle), as opposed to the linear interpretation of time that underpins the western world-view (time’s arrow). While postmodernists may be opposed to the idea that history has a pattern or shape, the shape they particularly revile is time’s arrow — the idea of progress, the ascent of man, the triumphal, ever-upward trajectory of human achievement, which underpins both Marxian and liberal democratic consciousness alike. Even Michel Foucault, widely regarded as the historian of discontinuity, does not dismiss the notion of cyclical time completely. On the contrary, in *The Order of Things* he emphasises that the radical breaks discernible in the history of thought (epistemes in his terminology) actually exhibit elements of recurrence. Foucault (1972) argues, in short, that when one *episteme* replaces another, certain patterns repeat themselves — changing only in the arrangement of the elements — and do so again during succeeding epistemological transmutations. The parallels with the wheel theory are thus clear: albeit premised on a cyclical analogy, the wheel does not contend that (say) department stores and supermarkets are locked in a continual low-cost, high-cost cycle. The wheel stresses radical discontinuity, the periodic emergence of new, dynamic retail formats that challenge moribund incumbent institutions, but which go through broadly similar patterns of development and decline.

Not everyone, it must be emphasised, would accept Brown’s assessment of the place of the wheel theory (or analogous cyclical metaphors) in a postmodern marketing world. In fact, it is fair to say that his reading of the wheel theory represents a desperate attempt to wrest a dubious concept — the one upon which he has built an insubstantial academic career — from the all-consuming flames of postmodernism. It is a sad day for marketing scholarship when such blatant acts of self-interest and academic distortion take the place of reasoned, rational, rigorous, disinterested and (naturally) entirely objective research endeavour.
6 I’ll be back!

Perrier has been doing time. It has been banged up. Caught with its hand in the benzene, it has been paying its debt to society. Furthermore, in consequence of that debt, it has been itself sorted out. Behind the crenellated walls, the caring society has been at it. It has been doctored. It now wears a little bottle-badge which reads ‘New production’, though it is largely trying to bear the stigma with pride. In full-page press ads and television commercials, it is wistfully murmuring ‘Hellequin again’. It is, in short, asking for the forgiveness it has done anything in its power to justify. It is trying to persuade me to give it another chance.

But shall I grant it? I ask because I have just returned from the off-licence, where, sprung only this morning from chokey, Le Perrier Nouveau was sitting expectantly on the shelf, yet what I have come back with is Highland Spring. Not because I hold any brief for Highland Spring, nor for Badoit, nor yet for Malvern, Evian, Volvic, or anything else I have been knocking about while Perrier was doing its bird, but simply because absence makes the heart grow fickle, and promiscuity breeds indiscrimination. If it bubbles, these days, it’ll do.

I lie, even to myself; it is a characteristic of the unfaithful. If I think about it honestly, I am forced to recognise that for some time before the tragedy at Vergeze I had been looking for an excuse to part the ways with Perrier. I know the signs now. I have been there before, and more than once. Call them mineral watersheds . . .

‘Eau revoir,’ I cried loyally, in the wake of the departing paddy-wagon. But in my heart I knew it was really cheziraeau.

(Coren 1990, pp.202–3)

Apocalypse Now

Few would deny that marketing is an enormously important activity. Apart from the millions of people who are directly employed in what may loosely be described as the marketing industry – brand managers, advertising copywriters, design consultants, market researchers, storekeepers, salesmen, truck drivers, shelf stackers, bill posters, shop assistants, university lecturers and so on – the marketing system impinges upon and affects the everyday lives of literally billions more. It is something that we all encounter on a daily basis, whether it be purchasing a paper from the local newsagent, cursing the trucks and delivery vehicles as they impede our journeys to work, mulling over the messages on the roadside advertising hoardings as they recede rapidly into the distance, binning the junk mail with which we are all ceaselessly inundated, queuing in the express checkout line for the service encounter and our few precious ‘moments of truth’, associating the inept performance of our favourite football team with its hapless but optimistic sponsors, slumping in front of the television set, surfing through the channels in search of the latest installment of our favourite advertising soap opera, or scanning the titles of the latest literary blockbusters which offer a one-word solution to our current managerial problems – ‘excellence’, ‘quality’, ‘re-engineering’ and, er, ‘post-modernism’. The marketing system, moreover, has been held responsible for such diverse occurrences as the modern conception of Christmas, global warming and the collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe. Even the space shuttle has carried advertising on its ample exterior (ironically, for Schwarzenegger’s box-office disaster Last Action Hero).

It is impossible, in short, to exaggerate the importance of marketing. In fact, it is fair to say that the sheer extent of marketing’s influence and pervasiveness is limited only by the imaginations of those who write about the extent of marketing’s influence and pervasiveness. As we saw in Chapter 2, vivid imaginations are not exactly in short supply among marketing fundamentalists and zealots. If the claims in introductory textbooks are taken at face value, marketing is not only the secret of business success and personal accomplishment, but it holds the key to socio-economic development, world peace and human understanding. However, in order to attain this utopian vision of plenitude, in order to enter this land of marketing milk and honey, you must become a true believer, you must refuse to stray from the logical empiricist straight and narrow, you must resist the epistemological temptations that are placed in your path. Only then will the celestial city open its gates and permit you to enter. The eschaton of marketing orientation can be yours but only if you subscribe to the teachings of the prophets and the four commandments of analysis, planning, implementation and control.

At first glance, the apostles of marketing seem to have discovered the ark of the management covenant. The holy writ of marketing has been accepted by captains of industry and government ministers alike. Successful organisations attribute their achievements to their superior marketing wisdom and knowhow. The receipt of venture capital or start-up finance is invariably dependent upon the existence of a comprehensive and workable marketing plan. Every management consultant worth their (pillar of)
salt - or should that be 4Ps of silver? - emphasises the importance of market orientation. A multitude of training courses is now available; centres of marketing socalicism have been established; undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes are offered in every self-respecting tower of academic Babel, marketing professors are genuflected to by students and practitioners alike (or so they think); and the flood of marketing publications is becoming almost uncontrollable. After crying in the wilderness for many years, marketing seems to have become acceptable to academics in adjacent disciplines - economics, psychology, geography, sociology, etc. Even those heretics on the left of the political spectrum, intellectual unbelievers who once treated marketing with suspicion, derision and disdain, now regard it with grudging admiration and accord it the respect it undoubtedly deserves. It would appear that marketers have inherited the earth. Indeed, it is said that when businessmen go to management heaven, they often remark on the apparent lack of marketing people. St Peter then tells them that the marketers are kept in a separate compartment, because 'they think they're the only ones here'.

If, to switch from a theological to dramaturgical analogy, the public face of marketing is one of fixed grins, boundless optimism and an irrepressible ethos of 'can do', the private face - the face behind the mask - is deeply troubled, decidedly uncertain and in danger of complete collapse. According to numerous academic authorities and leading practitioners, marketing is in, or teetering on the brink of, a very serious crisis of representation. It is characterised by an all-pervasive air of doubt, directionlessness and despair. The vigorous, thrusting project - the marketing revolution - of forty years ago which knew no bounds, took no prisoners and swept all before it has, depending upon which metaphor you prefer, come to a halt, stalled, lost its way, seen better days, fallen from grace, run aground/out of steam/into the sand. Described in detail in Chapter 2, doubts are increasingly being cast on the continuing veracity of the marketing concept. Marketing principles no longer appear relevant to the real world and, if anything, seem to do more harm than good. Leading figures in our field are marketing's most outspoken critics rather than the propagators of the marketing message. Facile conceptual frameworks, which are little more than diluted or rehashed versions of the original marketing concept, are paraded as the answer to marketing's current malaise. Reports on the plight of marketing scholarship are periodically produced and their recommendations routinely ignored. Original research which seeks to extend existing conceptual frameworks is greeted with a resounding 'so what?' or dismissed as 'me-too' or 'minor twist'. The sense of academic cohesion, solidarity and commitment to the marketing cause that once prevailed has been torn asunder by a series of bitter philosophical disputes and declarations of epistemological independence. In these depressing circumstances, it is little wonder that the enthusiasm of marketing's early proponents - or contemporary textbook writers - now strikes us as supremely naive; that the seminal contributions of our discipline's foremost thinkers are treated with irreverence, cynicism and derision (heaven forfend, they'll be disparaging Wroe Alderson or Ted Levitt next); and that many believe the marketing concept is an anachronism, an aberration, a throwback to a bygone age of mass markets and mass marketing. Not everyone, admittedly, would concur with this disconcerting diagnosis of marketing's current state of health (e.g. Bass 1993; Little et al. 1994), but the vast majority of contemporary commentators maintain that marketing is in the throes of a 'mid-life crisis', a fundamental crisis of representation (e.g. Freeing 1994; Anderson 1994; McDonald 1994).

The Verdict

It is the contention of this book that marketing's crisis of representation - the widespread belief that something is seriously amiss, that its once solid foundations are by no means secure - is paralleled by postmodernism, which in many respects comprises a crisis of representation in cultural, social and intellectual life generally. Notwithstanding the lack of consensus on the nature of the postmodern moment, most authorities agree that it represents some kind of reaction to or departure from modernism and modernity. As we noted in Chapter 3, the project of modernity dates from the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century and the debate between the ancients and the moderns. Broadly speaking, this comprised an extensive effort to develop rational science, universal laws, absolute truths and, through the accumulation of objective knowledge, overthrow the irrationality of myth and religion (Turner 1990; Hall et al. 1992). Although the modern movement was far from monolithic, its archetypal exemplars - the architecture of Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, the novels of Lawrence and Joyce, the poetry of Eliot and Pound, the economics of Marshall and Keynes, the philosophy of Russell and Popper, the management principles of Taylor and Ford etc. - were all characterised by objectivity, rationality and universality. Modernism, in essence, embraced the idea of progress, rejoiced in the power of reason, lauded scientific discovery and technological innovation, espoused the ascent of man, anticipated freedom from oppression and held that, once its fundamental laws and mechanisms were understood, the physical and social world as we know it could be analysed, planned and controlled (Smart 1992).

Postmodernists, by contrast, reject attempts to impose order and coherence on the chaos and fragmentation of 'reality'. Instead, they argue, we should accept that knowledge is bounded, that our capacity to establish meaningful generalisations is limited and, rather than seeking the impossibility of universal truths, we should rejoice in the ephemerality, contingency and diversity of the physical and human worlds as we
experience them, be comfortable in the absence of certainty, learn to live without definitive explanations and recognise that the objectives of the Enlightenment project are utopian and unattainable (Rosenau 1992). Whereas, in other words, modernism stands for the so-called ‘scientific’ virtues of objectivity, rigour, detachment, precision, logic and rationality, postmodernism champions the ostensibly ‘artistic’ attributes of intuition, creativity, spontaneity, speculation, emotion and involvement. Indeed, in its assertion that everything – be it a haircut, holiday, personal crisis or political upheaval – is a ‘text’, to be interrogated, interpreted and deconstructed as the reader, not the author, sees fit, postmodernism in many respects represents a repudiation of the natural science model of academic attainment and an espousal of the philosophical principles of the humanities in general and post-structuralist literary theory and linguistics in particular (Rosenau 1992). It positions itself, in Rorty’s (1989, p.8) resonant phrase, ‘as auxiliary to the poet rather than the physicist’.

Above all else, then, postmodernism is a way of looking at the world. It is a way of looking askance at the world. Postmodernists offer ambiguity where modernists offered certainty, they seek complexity where their predecessors sought simplification, they find disorder where their forebears found order, they see a glass that is half-empty instead of half-full and they challenge convention by refusing to accept the accepted. Postmodernists espouse individuality as opposed to universality, advocate plurality instead of consensus, place heterogeneity above homogeneity, emphasise dissent rather than conformity, and champion difference where modernists stressed similarity. In short, they replace the traditional modernist emphasis on reason, objectivity and control, with unreason, subjectivity and emancipation, with paradox, uncertainty and instability, with a rationale that rejects rationality.

While the postmodern project is not above criticism (see below), its preoccupation with ambiguity, undecidability and chaos cannot fail to strike a chord with observers of the contemporary business and marketing arena. Its juxtaposition of centre and periphery, propinquity of sacred and profane, melding of truth and fiction, conjunction of time and space, interpenetration of old and new, amalgam of natural and human, synthesis of superficial and profound, fusion of male and female, blend of east and west, mixture of ecstasy and tedium, combination of protean and sublime, and union of quotidian and eternal, is very much in tune with today’s contradictory business environment where organisations are variously urged to be both global and local, centralised and decentralised, large and small, and planned yet flexible; where workers are expected to be autonomous team players and managers deemed capable of delegating authority while remaining in complete charge; and where efficiency and effectiveness prevail, consistency and flexibility obtain, low cost and differentiation strategies combine, product variety and standardisation co-exist, and both mass and niche markets are served (Handy 1994; Naisbitt 1994; Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars 1994).

Indeed, as Chapter 4 sought to demonstrate, many of the distinguishing features of postmodern pluralism – fragmentation, de-differentiation, hyperreality, chronology, pastiche and anti-foundationalism – are clearly discernible on the current marketing scene. Postmodernism thus provides a perspective on, and means of conceptualising, the dramatic changes that are taking place in the marketing arena, whether it be the fragmentation and turbulence of markets and competition, the emergence of strategic alliances and boundaryless corporations, the rise of the retro product and parodic advertising, the latter-day preoccupation with authenticity, reality and the nature of time, and, not least, the advent of anarchistic, iconoclastic, anti-marketing marketing practices ranging from shock-horror advertising campaigns to the green marketing ‘revolution’. Most importantly perhaps, it is arguable that the basic world view, the ethos, the standpoint, the orientation, the, yes, Weltanschauung of postmodernism is very much in tune with contemporary marketing sentiment, with its all pervasive miasma of doubt, uncertainty, disillusion, ennui and scepticism. Postmodernism possesses many incompatible attributes and is composed of numerous tightly interwoven strands, but it is characterised above all by its air of exhaustion, its decadent ‘anything goes’ cynicism, its sense of dissipation, languor, impotence, evisceration, etiolation, enfeeblement – call it what you will. As Gilbert Adair (1992, p.15) rightly points out, postmodernism represents ‘the last gasp of the past’. Bruno Latour (1993, p.9), likewise, describes a situation where postmodernists ‘remain suspended between belief and doubt, waiting for the end of the millennium’.

Just as postmodernism’s characteristic air of resignation, equivocation and despair parallels the growing disillusion with marketing’s seeming lack of meaningful accomplishments, so too some of the most prominent precepts of postmodernism are readily translatable into marketing terms.

- Foucault’s concept of power/knowledge is clearly relevant to channel relationships, especially at a time when retailers’ scanning systems enable them to provide or withhold precious product performance information from their suppliers. His emphasis on the positive – as opposed to the coercive – effects of power is in tune with the present marketing emphasis on relationships, networks and alliances. Indeed, his late flirtation with individuality-cum-subjectivity, in the shape of ‘technologies of the self’, is not far removed from today’s preoccupation with micro-marketing, one-on-one marketing, database marketing and the like.

- Baudrillard’s suggestion that image is all, that illusion is more important than reality, that fact and fiction are indistinguishable, that image is reality, may well have been a revolution in Marxian thinking, but it
is unlikely to disconcert too many marketing academics and practitioners. It is a commonplace, arguably the most basic commonplace, of the contemporary marketing world view, where products are routinely developed to match existing images — cf. Calvin Klein, Ralph Lauren — rather than the other way around.

- Lacan’s emphasis on the inexorable slippage of the signifier under the signified is highly relevant to the brand building process and, in an expositional triumph, Desmond (1993) has demonstrated the parallels between the mirror stage and market orientation, arguing that the latter is a misrecognition, a profound myopia, a fundamental misunderstanding of how the world is believed to be.

- Lyotard, likewise, may regard ‘performativity’ as a sign of the intellectual slackening that typifies the postmodern condition, but, as Little et al. (1994) have recently shown, the success of marketing science is premised on, and measured by, this very attribute (see also Scott 1993). Lyotard’s emphasis on the Kantian sublime is also pertinent to analyses of hedonic consumption, which, we are reliably informed (e.g. Holbrook and Hirschman 1982), is often described in terms of the indescribable — ‘you had to be there’, ‘I can’t put it into words’, etc.

- The Derridean notion that meaning derives from differences internal to the sign system, that meanings are inherently unstable and, indeed, that signs contain ‘traces’ of the other signs in a chain of signs, is virtually a blueprint of positioning theory. Products, after all, derive their meanings in terms of their similarities and differences from other competitive products. Meanings are continually changing as a result of promotional activity, modifications and so on. The entire system is interdependent, in that alterations to one product affect the meanings of every other element in the product field, and because consumers inevitably evaluate a product against its perceived competitors and bring their own idiosyncratic interpretations to bear, it follows that each product carries imperceptible ‘traces’ of the others and that meanings are ultimately unknowable or indeterminate.

In a similar vein, Gummesson’s (1991) recent prediction of the end of marketing as a separate function, and its replacement by a de-centred form of marketing practice, which is, in effect, disseminated across the entire organisational archipelago, could just as easily have been made by Michel Foucault or Jacques Derrida. Marketing, moreover, is incorrigibly intertextual, depending as it does on conceptual quotations and borrowings from adjacent disciplines — though the debt is increasingly being repaid, with interest — and is not the marketing message inherently linguistic? Was it not Koeler and Levy (1969, p.12), after all, who stated that ‘everything about an organisation talks’?

Even Barthes’ ‘death of the author’ thesis, which may seem quite shocking in terms of our conventional (untutored) views of literature and criticism, turns out to be anything but. In elevating the interpretations of the reader over the authority of the author, Barthes was merely espousing the marketing concept by another name. After all, the revolutionary aspect of the marketing concept was that it considered the needs of the consumer (reader), not those of the producer (author), to be the key to success in business. Barthes’ belief that there are no privileged meanings in a text, that no interpretation is better than any other, makes perfect sense to marketers — we cannot control what consumers think and say — and, when considered in these terms, it is clear that a marketing orientation is characterised by the creation of ‘writerly’ products and services rather than the ‘readerly’ products and services that typify product- and sales-orientated organisations. Ironically, however, it is only when we encounter something as ‘shocking’ as the death of the author thesis that we begin to appreciate the unconventional, counter-intuitive and truly revolutionary nature of the original marketing concept, the magic of which has long since ceased to entrance.

Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy’s Revenge

Given the clear relevance of postmodernism to marketing practice and thought, it is hardly surprising that the movement has attracted the attention of a burgeoning number of academic marketing researchers. As has been the case in many other disciplines, however, the term has been used in a variety of ways and taken to refer to several quite different phenomena. In Chapter 5 we noted that the various approaches to postmodern marketing can be divided into three broad categories. Setting aside the ‘inadvertent’, as it were, studies of chronology, relationship marketing and so on, the first approach comprises ‘genuine’ attempts to grapple with the complexities of postmodernism and assess its implications for marketing. These range from Ogilvy’s (1990) and Firat and Venkatesh’s (1993) exemplary overviews of postmodern marketing practices, to the specific insights into Lyotard, Derrida and Baudrillard offered by Scott (1993), Linstead and Grafton Small (1992) and Suerdem (1992) respectively. The second approach comprises the fashion victims of thought, individuals who have applied the term to research which bears little relationship to postmodernism, or are using the designation in an essentially epochnal sense. In this respect, when a died-in-the-wool ‘modern’ marketing academic like Malcolm McDonald (1994), someone who has been advancing the cause of rigorous marketing planning for nigh on twenty years, starts reciting the postmodern lexicon, it is difficult to determine the most appropriate response — amusement, bemusement, admiration (for the sheer effrontery) or a rueful shake of the head over yet another postmodern paradox.
The final, and by far the most common, approach to postmodern marketing stems from the sub-discipline of consumer research, where the term is closely associated with the recent advent of interpretive perspectives on consumption activities and behaviour (Sherry 1991; Hirschman and Holbrook 1992). Although the ethos of postmodernism, with its emphasis on academic ecumenism and epistemological plurality, is compatible with these manifold approaches to consumer research — hermeneutics, existentialism, semiotics, critical theory, etc. — some of the latter's champions are in danger of confusing the consequences of a postmodern outlook with the premises of the postmodern project itself. Indeed, some of the positions embraced by prominent 'postmodern' consumer researchers — Hirschman's (1986) humanism, for example — would be rejected by most postmodernists. More importantly perhaps, some of the suggestions currently being mooted, principally Hetrick and Lozada's (1993) contention that postmodern insights can only be attained through the intermediary of critical theory, are patently absurd. While marketing has much to learn from critical theory, it is neither a staging post on the postmodern trail nor a destination in itself. It would be profoundly ironic if western Marxism in general or critical theory in particular — positions, remember, that are in retreat across the entire front of contemporary social science — were to circle the wagons and attempt to regroup in marketing of all places. Marketing is the very locus of 'mass deception', according to Adorno and Horkheimer (1973), a milieu that is peopled by propagandists, fascists, jazz musicians and, worst of all, film producers!

Cynics, the mean-spirited and Foucauldians, of course, might be tempted to conclude that interpretive consumer researchers have appropriated the term 'postmodern', with all its cutting-edge connotations, and used it as a weapon to wield in their hegemonic struggle for control of the sub-discipline. After all, the definition of what constitutes marketing 'knowledge' has enormous practical implications for the pedagogic process, publication opportunities and, not least, the career paths and employment prospects of individual researchers. In fairness, however, there still appears to be a widespread belief among marketing academics that postmodern and interpretive (post-positivist, naturalistic, etc.) approaches are one and the same (see, for example, Hill 1993). The fact of the matter is that postmodernism shares many of the characteristics of hermeneutics, critical theory, structuralism, humanism and so on, but it also has important differences with each. As Rosenau (1992, p.14) emphasises,

post-modernists . . . do not agree with hermeneutics if, in its search for explanation, it assumes that one interpretation is better than others, if its goal is to recover a singular meaning for any political or social act. They question structuralism's commitment to science, rationality, reason and logic and critical theory's emphasis on extratextual explanations of

social phenomena. They see the western marxist project of 'emancipation' as logocentric and humanist, criticise its emphasis on the societal totality at the expense of le quotidien (the local or daily life), and consider the critical theorist's search for truth to be naive.

One possible way of demonstrating the foregoing differences is by means of a basic and admittedly oversimplified four-cell matrix. Illustrated in Figure 6.1, this distinguishes between epistemology (the grounds of knowledge) and ontology (the nature of the world) and arbitrarily subdivides these continua along realist and relativist dimensions. The top left hand cell assumes that individuals have direct, unmediated access to the real world and that, notwithstanding the problems associated with sampling, questionnaire design and suchlike, it is possible to obtain hard, secure, objective knowledge about this single external reality. The vast bulk of academic marketing research, from attempts to conceptualise the new product development process to empirical analyses of the shopping behaviour of green consumers, would fall into this category. The top right hand cell also assumes direct, unmediated access to external reality but assumes that people's knowledge of this world is highly individual, subjective, unquantifiable, difficult to access and best illuminated through the use of 'traditional' qualitative research procedures like depth interviews and group discussions. Such studies not only provide hypotheses for subsequent empirical tests, but for some marketing researchers, they also form
the basis of meaningful generalisations and model development (e.g. Carson 1989). The bottom left hand cell presupposes that individuals do not have direct access to the real world – language, culture, theory and other distortions are interposed – but that their knowledge of this perceived world (or worlds) is meaningful in its own terms and can be understood through careful use of appropriate naturalistic or ethnographic research procedures, though generalisations and universally valid findings are unattainable. Much of marketing's interpretive research tradition, from the celebrated Consumer Odyssey and Hirschman's personal revelations, to Gould's (1991) celebration of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, is incorporated within this category. The final, bottom right hand cell represents the postmodern position which not only rejects the notion that individuals have unmediated access to external reality, but it also questions the very existence of the free-thinking 'subject'. It maintains that the knowledge people imagine they possess is unreliable, dispersed, fragmented, pre-existing and an epiphenomenon of language. In other words, it demotes the human subject from a constitutive to a constituted status and, more to the point, presents very serious practical problems for putative postmodern marketing researchers.

Indeed, according to Baudrillard and like-minded commentators on the sceptical wing of the postmodern movement, empirical research is now impossible due to the implosion of the social into the media. Thus, despite Elliott et al.'s contention (1993, p.315) that 'there is a need to derive methodological approaches which can utilise some of the highly abstract postmodernist concepts if they are to gain currency in marketing research', it would appear that undertaking meaningful empirical research of any kind is problematical within a postmodern framework (see Rosenau 1992). In these circumstances, marketing researchers seem to be faced with the choice that has materialised in several other disciplines – sociology and organisation studies, for example – whether to concentrate on postmodern marketing or the marketing of postmodernism. The latter would involve attempts to explain the development, positioning, promotion, distribution and diffusion of the postmodern 'product', and, given the manifold competing epistemological products, account for its undoubted success in the marketplace of academic ideas. The former, by contrast, would be devoted to deconstructing the artefacts of extant marketing discourse, revealing the structural weaknesses of our disciplinary edifice, identifying, tracing and exposing the inherent intertextuality of modern marketing, and generally sitting on the sidelines pouring scorn on the achievements of marketing practitioners and academics alike (can you imagine?).

The difficulties that postmodern marketing raises are not confined to researching the unresearchable or the cavils of dyspeptic scholarly malcontents, postmodernism also poses severe problems for the underpinning philosophy of science in marketing. As a relativist position, postmodernism conceives of the world as a plurality, where morals, manners and mores are specific to individual societies and belief systems, and where no one form of knowledge is deemed superior to any other. Indeed, in its assertion that there are no universal standards of validity, truth and rationality, postmodernism in many ways is relativism in excelsis, scepticism in the extreme (Gellner 1992). Although the attractions of relativism are undeniable – the acceptance of difference, an espousal of equality, a refusal to stand in judgement and an emphasis on the ‘other’, neglected and marginalised groups in society – the standard criticisms of relativism still apply (Hughes 1990; Harris 1992; Hirst 1993). If all norms and rules are equal, then it is impossible to prioritise, compare value systems or make choices between moral alternatives (the bogeys of witchcraft, astrology, Nazism and alternative medicine are usually paraded at this point). More importantly perhaps, relativism is self-contradictory in that to announce that there are no universal standards is, in effect, to make a universal statement on standards. To contend that history has no shape is, as Giddens (1990) points out, to state that history has a shape but that the shape is shapeless. To argue that there are no generalisations, laws or truths is to make a generalisation, law-like or truth statement respectively.

Postmodernism, in short, stands accused of making authoritative announcements on the demise of authority, being absolutist in its denial of the absolute, eschewing theory building whilst adhering to an (anti-theoretical) theoretical stance, employing a meta-narrative to demonstrate the end of metanarratives, repudiating the existence of evaluative criteria on the basis of its own evaluative criteria, advocating equality of interpretation yet elevating the interpretations of the 'other', espousing epistemological ecumenism while excluding the Enlightenment project, using the tools of rational thought to advocate the irrational and rejecting the power of reason on the basis of reasoned argument (Best and Kellner 1991). It is profoundly ironic, moreover, that postmodernism's characteristic disillusion with the universal has become all but universal in itself; that postmodernism seems to enjoy enormous popularity, yet hardly anyone (least of all its leading thinkers) is prepared to endorse it without reservation; that postmodernists reject the elitism and impenetrability of high (modern) culture but their own writings and artifacts are hardly models of accessibility or clarity (as you can doubtless testify!); and, that postmodernists' espousal of cynical, playful and irreverent deconstruction seems to apply to everyone's texts but their own.

Above all, however, it is deeply incongruous that postmodernists champion close and detailed readings of texts yet are apparently content to rely on caricature and oversimplification in their own analyses. As the critics of postmodernism are quick to point out, all four component parts of the alleged epochal shift have been subject to detailed scrutiny and found wanting. The characteristic features of artistic postmodernism –
fragmentation, ambiguity, self-referentiality, etc. – were equally evident in the era of high modernism (Harvey 1989). The notion of the post-industrial society has been exposed as a compendium of errors (Frankel 1987), post-Fordism as gross oversimplification (Callinicos 1989) and research suggests, contra-Baudrillard, that people are more than capable of distinguishing between image and reality (Edgar 1993; Elliott et al. 1993). The ostensible parallels between postmodern and postmodern social theory have also been exploded (Best 1991); the contentions of Kuhn, Feyerabend and the SSK subject to detailed rebuttal (Wolpert 1992) and, Rorty's neo-pragmatism has been challenged more than once (Norris 1990, 1993). What is more, the sheer inconsistency of (say) Foucault, who renounced the human subject only to rehabilitate it, or Derrida, who recently repudiated deconstruction and made an eloquent plea for the traditional literary canon (see D'Souza 1993), is also less than confidence inspiring, as are post-structuralist contentions that there can be no systematic knowledge of the human condition. According to Giddens (1990), this is not only unworthy of serious intellectual consideration but if it were true the position itself would be impossible to write about or articulate. It is, in actual fact, a recapitulation of the anti-foundational philosophy propounded by Friedrich Nietzsche and his manifold forerunners in the anti-Enlightenment. Although the postmodern movement is often portrayed as the latest intellectual affectation from France, many of its premises – anti-foundationalism, eschewal of progress, the end of history, relativism, non-systematicity, the relationship between power and knowledge and, not least, the unconventional style of writing – were anticipated by Friedrich Nietzsche. Along with Heidegger, indeed, Nietzsche is widely considered to be a postmodernist avant la lettre (Koeb 1990; Magnus et al. 1993). Friedrich Nietzsche, as Brown (1994d) has pointed out in his usual hyperbolic fashion, was a postmodernist before there were modernists to be post.

The Last Picture Show

In light of the demonstrable shortcomings, contradictions and aporias of postmodernism, many of you may be reluctant to welcome, and wholeheartedly embrace, the postmodern marketing moment. Many of you may be troubled by Venkatesh et al.'s (1993, p.215) uncritical advocacy of postmodernism; disconcerted by their contention that marketers must board this conceptual bandwagon 'before it is too late'; unconvinced by their justification of this extraordinary leap of faith ('isn't it a fact that the marketing discipline prides itself in being in the vanguard of new ideas?'); astonished by their veiled threats to unbelievers ('anyone who considers postmodernism a passing fancy will do so at considerable peril to oneself'); and, not least, dismayed by their disparaging ad hominem remarks on marketing scholars ('many of whose intellectual positions are ideologically motivated but are concealed behind the facades of disinterested pursuit of knowledge'). In these circumstances, you may well alight, with considerable relief, on Kavanagh's (1994, p.33) emphatic assertion that, 'postmodernism will merely paralyse us into inaction', or even Scott's (1992, p.611) ultimate conclusion that, 'our own disciplinary concerns with communication and persuasion would find post-structuralism lacking'. And, having given postmodern marketing your due and careful consideration, you can proceed to go about your business as if nothing untoward had occurred, albeit you now realise that interpretive researchers are a model of circumspection, rectitude and sotto voce scholarship, compared to the deranged ululations of postmodernists, with their pretentious philosophising, bogus insights, sardonic insouciance, fetid maliciousness and ostentatious attempts to shed pseudo-light on non-problems.

'These concerns are perfectly reasonable and, in many ways, quite legitimate. Make no mistake, buying into postmodernism does not come cheap. As we noted in Chapter 5, it exacts a very heavy price from any prospective purchasers. It challenges the very premises of marketing understanding. It topples the illusory edifice of marketing principles constructed over generations of academic endeavour. It espouses a relativist position which, despite its ecumenism, catholicism and flexibility, is riven with internal contradictions and a refusal to distinguish between right and wrong. It may breed a bland generation of sardonic, world-weary researchers with no respect for themselves, their forebears or the achievements of the marketing academy (whatever next?). It opens the door to obscurantism, relativism and an unhealthy preoccupation with the ironies, aporias, inconsistencies and intertextuality of the marketing literature rather than the generalising social science ambitions of the discipline. 'In the end', as Rosenau (1992, p.137) points out, 'the problem with post-modern social science is that you can say anything you want, but so can everyone else. Some of what is said will be interesting and fascinating, but some will also be ridiculous and absurd. Post-modernism provides no means to distinguish between the two.'

Set against this, however, postmodernism does offer a number of very significant attractions for the marketer and provides a means of comprehending several difficulties with which the discipline is currently endeavouring to grapple. In the first instance, postmodernism holds out the prospect of a rapprochement between marketing theory and practice. If, as we noted in Chapter 4, the practices of marketing are becoming increasingly postmodern in character, there is a danger that continuing, blind pursuit of traditional, modernist marketing conceptualisations will become further divorced from reality than they already are. Although some scholars appear to welcome the prospect of a 'pure' and 'applied'
disciplinary bifurcation (e.g. Hirschman, Holbrook), the consequences of such a rupture are likely to prove very serious if marketing practitioners turn to other academic specialisms which appear to offer more meaningful insights into (say) the consumption behaviour of 'post-shoppers'. In this respect, it is worth recalling that postmodernism emphasises creativity, intuition, spontaneity, ad-hocery, emotion, involvement, uniqueness, local narratives (e.g. case studies and company myths), which the general management literature increasingly elevates over the once pervasive postulates of rigour, planning and predictability (Waterman 1990; Mintzberg 1989; Morgan 1993; Kay 1993).

The second attraction of the postmodern project pertains to its broad compatibility with many of today's much-vaulted marketing restoratives - 'micro-marketing', 'maxi-marketing', 'database marketing', 'new marketing', 'wrap-around marketing', 'value-added marketing', 'relationships marketing' and so on (refer to Table 2.5). Although the premises of these panaceas are many and varied, they all possess one of two basic components: (a) an emphasis on dealing with the customer as an individual; or (b) a desire to retain existing customers, products or services rather than creating them anew. With regard to the former, however, the primacy of the individual - 'different strokes for different folks', 'do your own thing', 'anything goes', 'there is no fashion only fashions', etc. - is precisely what 'affirmative' postmodernism presupposes (Rosenau 1992). Whereas modern marketing is predicated on the development of meaningful generalisations about consumers in the mass (or sizeable segments thereof), 'affirmative' postmodernism emphasises the uniqueness, diversity, plurality and idiosyncrasy of each and every individual. In terms of the latter, likewise, postmodernism is characterised by a predisposition towards the old, the established, the tried-and-tested, the recycled and, in Jameson's (1985) celebrated phrase, the 'perpetual present'. The complete opposite, in other words, of the progressive, modernist odyssey for the new and improved, the innovative, the futuristic, the revolutionary, the 'washes whiter' and so on.

The third opportunity on offer pertains to marketing's perennial search for academic respectability (Cannon 1991). As a result possibly of the discipline's lowly standing in the scholarly caste system, which descends from the illustrious, Nobel Prize garlanded 'hard' sciences like physics and chemistry, through the softer and intellectually suspect social and historical sciences (economics excepted), to the academic 'untouchables', those concerned with the pursuit of profit and commercial activity, marketing has long felt obliged to prove itself 'more scientific than science', aspire to the most rigorous standards of research and, not infrequently, apologise for the inadequacy or immaturity of its conceptual accomplishments. Yet, in endeavouring to emulate the (seemingly) logical, rigorous, model building, law seeking and nomothetic standards of the physical sciences, academic marketing has effectively downplayed and de-emphasised the creativity, spontaneity, adaptability and individual insight that often characterise successful marketing practices (see Carson 1983; The Economist 1989; Gova and Svanfeldt 1992). Postmodernism not only provides the (anti-conceptual) conceptual foundations for the individualistic, idiosyncratic and intuitive end of the 'art-science' continuum, but, in its espousal of heterarchy (flat or overlapping organisational structures) rather than hierarchy, it repudiates the premises of the academic caste system. In a postmodern world, therefore, marketing would no longer occupy the lowest level of the academic firmament, with its necessity for periodic apologia and a more scientific than science outlook. A self-confident marketing, secure in the knowledge that it is the equal of any discipline, physical or human, would be the ultimate outcome.

A fourth advantageous aspect of the postmodern condition is its emphasis on metaphor or, strictly speaking, metonymy. As we saw in Chapter 3, postmodernists often resort to metaphorical reasoning - cf. Baudrillard's fondness for 'scientific' analogies (black holes, fractals, DNA) or Foucault's preference for spatial tropes (site, carceral archipelago, heterotopia) - and place great store by the metaphorical nature of truth, meaning and human understanding. Postmodernism suggests that we need to create fresh marketing metaphors, play different tunes and new games, envision alternative worlds, reconceptualise the marketing concept and, as other discourses have done (e.g. McCloskey 1985; Tyler 1987), pay due attention to the essentially rhetorical nature of marketing discourse. Metaphors, admittedly, may distort as much as they enlighten (van den Bulte 1994), but they shape how we see and interpret our environment. Consider, for example, the various analogies that have been employed by commentators on latter-day developments in the philosophy of marketing science. Almost without exception, these are predicated on the notion of conflict, schism or warfare, thereby emphasising the differences between the two 'sides'. For example, the long-running dispute between the respective champions of realism and relativism, Hunt and Anderson, has been depicted as a sixteen-round boxing contest (Kavanagh 1994). A religious trope - true believers versus heretics - has also been employed (Brown 1993f) and a prayer for the 4Ps of peace has even been proffered (Hirschman and Holbrook 1992). Sherry (1991), similarly, describes the situation of interpretive researchers as being akin to the accused in a court case or the defenders of an isolated frontier outpost surrounded by positivists on the warpath. Indeed, our own discussion of these events in Chapter 5 utilised a wild west, 'quick on the draw' analogy.

The state of contemporary marketing scholarship, however, could just as easily be compared to a multi-screen cinema. After all, it can legitimately be argued that marketing research has been transformed in recent years from a draught, down-at-heel, monolithic 'picture palace', with only
Postmodern marketing

one theoretical programme – positivism/empiricism – on show, to a fashionable, glittering multiplex offering a wide choice of innovative research programmes. These programmes vary considerably in their content and certification, with some aimed at a mainstream audience, others reliant on art-house appeal, and yet others – mentioning no names – only suitable for the delinquent, institutionalised or suitably restrained. What is more, as many of the programmes are (arguably) incommensurable, they cannot be viewed simultaneously, though they are at least showing under the same roof, which we call marketing. The multiplex metaphor, in other words, retains the differences that are central to the warfare analogy but replaces conflict and estrangement with shared values, complementarity, mutual tolerance and the understanding that ‘anything goes’. Well, almost anything.

The final and arguably the most fundamental implication of postmodernism, however, is the unavoidable process of critical self-examination that it imposes upon the marketing discipline. Postmodernism draws our attention to the unassailability of the marketing concept, in that successful marketing practices are invariably lauded as exemplars of the concept in action and marketplace disasters summarily dismissed for failing to adhere to the ‘proper’ approach. It reminds us that the propagation of unproven or debatable principles, be it the product life cycle, Boston matrix or stages theory of internationalisation, is counterproductive at best and pernicious at worst. After all, part of the reason for (say) the latter-day fragmentation of markets is the rise of marketing with the enormous stress it places on segmentation, targeting and positioning. The micro-marketing/database marketing/maxi-marketing revolution has spawned not simply served the much-prophesied ‘markets of one’, the prospect of which is causing so much anguish and heart-searching among marketing practitioners. Even the popular notion of ‘science’, the ideal to which marketing scholarship aspires but will never gain admittance, is partly a marketing creation thanks to generations of washing powder, cosmetics, shampoo and patent medicine commercials (white coats, spotless labs, all-pervasive air of rigour and objectivity). Postmodernism, in other words, reminds us of the reflexive or circular nature of social knowledge, where the very existence of a concept influences and alters the phenomena to which it pertains. As Giddens (1990, pp.41–153) points out,

new knowledge (concepts, theories, findings) does not simply render the social world more transparent, but alters its nature, spinning it off in novel directions. . . . Concepts . . . are not merely handy devices whereby agents are somehow more clearly able to understand their behaviour than they would do otherwise. They actively constitute what that behaviour is and inform the reasons for which it is undertaken.

Postmodernism, in sum, may not provide us with any answers, but it certainly makes us think. It makes us think about marketing thinking. It forces us to ask questions about the nature of marketing ‘knowledge’. In Rorty’s (1980) apt phraseology, it is edifying rather than systematic. Postmodernism may be a relativist position, yet not only can relativism be defended (e.g. Smith 1988; Clark 1990), but the alternatives – realism, conventionalism, instrumentalism or whatever – are equally flawed. Part of the attraction of relativism, as the prominent realist philosopher Harvey Siegel (1992, p.429) openly acknowledges, is ‘the difficulty of formulating a defensible conception of non-relativism’. Postmodernism, moreover, may necessitate the elision of many of marketing’s intellectual achievements, but it can be contended that, in light of their manifest inadequacies, most of the incumbents of marketing’s conceptual hall of fame aren’t worth maintaining anyway. Is it not time, after Barthes, for ‘marketing degree zero’ or a Foucauldian archaeology of marketing discourse? Isn’t it strange that, at a time when science is witnessing a shift from truth to performativity (according to Lyotard), marketing science is being exhorted to move from performativity to truth (by Shelby Hunt)? Should we not be thinking, à la Derrida, of placing ‘marketing sous rature’ (under erasure) and admitting that it is necessary but hopelessly inadequate?

Postmodern marketing, to conclude, tells us that the proponents of marketing orientation have become product orientated. It suggests that if being different is the secret of marketing success, then the marketing concept ought to be abandoned, given its virtual ubiquity. Above all, postmodernism implies that the fundamental issue to which we should address ourselves is not marketing myopia but the myopia of marketing.

(The Terminator)

Now, some of you may be wondering where I stand in all of this, if there are any of you left that is. What, you may well be saying to yourself, do you, the author, think you are playing at? Why do you keep shifting your position? Are you for postmodernism or against it? You told us at the outset how you were a closet postmodernist, yet you have just served up a root-and-branch critique. How can you expect marketers to espouse postmodernism when you’re not prepared to espouse it yourself? And, come to think of it, where do you stand on marketing? One minute you’re defending the discipline from the disparaging comments of left wing intellectuals or lauding our academic achievements, the next you’re making snide remarks about the foremost marketing authorities or recommending the abandonment of almost everything we’ve achieved hitherto. You complain about marketing being caricatured, yet you caricature marketing yourself. You tell us that most modern marketing concepts are about to be swept away, but that the precepts of postmodernism are readily...
translatable into contemporary marketing terms. How, for that matter, do you expect us to take you seriously when you make your case in such an intertemperate manner? We have had just about enough of this and we want answers to the following simple questions: are you a postmodernist or not?; is marketing postmodern or not?; and, what kind of book is this supposed to be anyway?

Faced with these courteous inquiries, it is tempting to state that my position on postmodernism is that I have no position on postmodernism. However, I suspect that you are all too well versed in the wiles of the postmodern project to be fooled by the speciousness of such a pronouncement. Conversely, I could remind you of the post-structuralist assertion that authorial intentions are immaterial and that it is for you to bring your own interpretations to bear upon the text, thereby introducing a temporary stability and coherence. In short, if you find the text paradoxical, irritating, pretentious, disquieting or whatever, that's your problem (sorry, prerogative), not mine. According to Barthes' 'always already written', indeed, I have merely woven this text together from the threads of existing texts — your texts — and, as such, you have no one to blame but yourselves. Alternatively, and in a final desperate attempt to shake you off, I could simply dismiss myself as an epiphenomenon of language, a de-centred, fragmented subject position, a gendered construct of patriarchy, the mouthpiece of discursive ventrilouquism, or an unstable artefact of power relations and regimes of truth. I could then conclude with Scruton's (1994, pp.478–9) charming observation, that 'Deconstruction deconstructs itself, and disappears up its own behind, leaving only a disembodied smile and a faint smell of sulphur', and proceed to live happily ever after (though not on my royalties, I suspect). Appealing though such evasions and circumlocutions undoubtedly are, they are unlikely to stem the ensuing tide of irate personal correspondence, the flood of abusive letters written in green ink or, because sharp objects are prohibited in the institution concerned, in multi-coloured crayon or felt-tip (and that, dear reader, is only from the publishers).

For what it's worth then, let me confess in this little textual coda that my position on postmodernism is unequivocally equivocal. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, I enjoy postmodern films, literature, music, television, etc. and have amassed an embarrassingly large collection of volumes on what we described as 'postmodern science' (anyone for the Dancing Wu Li Masters or The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality?). I am perfectly comfortable with Baudrillard's remorseless cynicism — truth I find him hilariously funny — and reading Barthes is like witnessing a literary firework display. I admire Foucault for the sheer bravura of his unorthodox, counter-intuitive interpretations, though his syntax is impenetrable and sentences interminable. Lyotard's polemic is insufficiently polemical in my opinion — too much Kant, not enough cant — and, much as I respect Rorty, he is excessively avuncular, too laissez-faire, for my taste. Nietzsche, however, I adore. I may not have learned much from my walk on the wild side, but at least it exposed me to Nietzsche. As it is true confessions time, I have to admit that I am still baffled by Derrida and Lacan, slightly less so in the case of the former, though I suspect that my appreciation will develop in due course (the first time I read Jameson's (1983) celebrated essay on postmodernism I was totally lost, but I now consider it to be a model of lucidity and perspicacity).

Yet, despite my admiration for most things postmodern, I realise in my heart of hearts that it is ultimately inadequate. Style is not enough in itself, there must be some content. Call me old-fashioned, call me faint-hearted, call me a modernist post-modernist, if you prefer, but I suspect that people expect answers, a sense of direction, an indication of the way forward, however rocky the road might be. To argue that the answer is that there are no answers; or that the answer is that you're wasting your time looking for answers; or that the answer is that you should do what you think is right for you or your organisation; is insufficient in the final analysis. A Gallic shrug and pass the Gauloises is just not good enough, I'm afraid. Postmodernism, in sum, is like eating chocolate éclairs. They are delicious, indulgent and subversive, but in the end it's back to the exercise bike.

When it comes to marketing, I am equally ambivalent. I have enormous admiration for practising marketers and the undoubted academic achievements of our discipline. I feel marketing has been misrepresented by many outside commentators and, outspokenly inclined intellectuals. Notwithstanding my earlier remarks, I have great respect for the works of Ted Levitt, Wroe Alderson, Shelby Hunt and, especially, interpretative marketing researchers, whose accomplishments in the face of considerable hostility and misunderstanding speak for themselves (would I lie to you?). Most importantly, perhaps, I earn my living by disseminating the marketing message and have no sense of guilt — none whatsoever — in doing so. At the same time, I am chary about championing the tired old marketing mantra. I don't think marketing has all, or even many, of the answers; I don't think the marketing concept can be applied to everything under the sun (luck was right, you know); and I suspect that whereas many marketing practices are becoming increasingly 'postmodern', marketing theory seems resolutely stuck in a modernist time-warp. A serious re-think is long overdue. Worse still, I believe that our continuing propagation of unproven marketing principles is both dangerous and irresponsible (and irresponsibility must be avoided at all costs). While many people share Professor Michael Thomas's (1994) concerns about the fate of marketing, it is my belief that the discipline and profession is ill-served by mindless regurgitation of obsolete marketing ideology. Being critical is not being disloyal. Quite the reverse. Bringing ridicule and hyperbole to bear is vitally necessary, because reasoned argument is all too easily ignored. Granted,
some marketers may contend that as the discipline is well aware of its shortcomings, it is unnecessary to use the sledgehammer of postmodernism to crack the marketing nut. In my opinion, modern marketing is a very tough nut indeed. It is a veritable conceptual cyborg – 'it can't be bargained with, it can't be reasoned with...it will not stop, ever' – which requires extreme measures if it is to be destroyed and, in due course, reconstituted.

Having read the preceding paragraphs, some of you may be on the point of exasperation with my continuing failure to adopt a definitive position on postmodern marketing. I can assure you, it gives me no pleasure either (yes, I'm even ambivalent about being ambivalent). In my defense, I can only say that it is at least postmodern. You see, postmodernism is not about espousing a position, postmodernism is characterised by equivocation (though being equivocal about equivocation is also acceptable, as is equivocation about being equivocal about equivocation...). Postmodernism does not endorse any one approach, not even postmodernism, and, if it were not already un-postmodern to say so, nothing could be more un-postmodern than the passionate advocacy of postmodernism (see Soper 1993). This book, then, has tried to capture the spirit of postmodernism, with all its ironies, inconsistencies, irreverences, paradoxes and equivocations. It has endeavoured to meld form and content by means of its 'double coded' cinematic metaphor; its, admittedly contrived, self-referential ethos (what Holbrook (1994, p.16) rightly describes as 'behold the beholder beholding the beholder'); and, its attempted postmodern fusion of scholarship and journalism, sycophancy and sarcasm, enthusiasm and scepticism, entertainment and edification, self-satisfaction and self-deprecation, humour and hostility, erudition and sedition, hyperbole and humility, discourse and figure, and superficiality and, well, superficiality. Cognisant of the old joke, (Q) 'What's the difference between a postmodernist and the Mafia? (A) 'A postmodernist makes you an offer you can't understand!', this monograph has sought to make postmodernism understandable. It has tried to explain a phenomenon that was once described as, 'something everyone has heard of but no-one can quite explain what it is'. It has tried to avoid the obfuscation of 'decentred hegemonic strategies', 'phallocentric narratological polyphony', meta-critical heteroglossial valorisation' and the like, which are regrettably de rigueur in the postmodern literature, as indeed are pretentious terms like de rigueur, Zeitgeist and Welanschauung (well, nobody's perfect). Above all, the book has tried to make postmodernism sufficiently interesting for you, as marketing practitioners, students or researchers, to want to explore it and its implications in much more detail (and, not least, to petition the publishers about my proposed follow-up volume, Postmodern Marketing 2: The Return of the Shamanistic Drummer).

Let me leave you, however, with one final postmodern thought: if you believe any of the foregoing, you'll believe anything. Hasta la vista, baby!

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I love the smell of napalm in the morning

1 You talkin’ to me?

1 Footnotes, in my opinion, are the 'dark continent' of academic discourse. Everyone knows they are there, but as no one pays any serious attention to them, they comprise an essentially unexplored continent, a virgin territory occupied by hostile asides, carnivorous arguments, dismissive pronouncements, hectors of impenetrable textual thicket capable of deterring all but the most determined explorers and (presumably) Prester John. Footnotes, however, are also a land of opportunity, in that they encourage freedom of expression and permit the types of scrupulous or defamatory statements that would be deemed unacceptable in the civilised textual world of polite academic society. Footnotes, furthermore, are happy hunting grounds for mean-spirited book reviewers, because it is in the footnotes (and appendices) that unruly authors lower their defences, make inadvertent remarks and let slip information which, if exposed to critical scrutiny, can serve to undermine the most carefully constructed scholarly facade. Consider, for example, Shelby D. Hunt's (1990) bizarre footnote which sought to draw parallels between post-positivist marketing researchers and the perpetrators of the Tiananmen Square massacre, but which has only served to reflect very badly on the author himself. Rather than continuing to dwell on the unsavoury side of footnotes, however, let us turn to (the Harvard biologist) Stephen Jay Gould's observation that 'genuine' scholars are driven by one overwhelming ambition. This desire does not pertain to fame, fortune, the Nobel Prize, membership of the Royal Society, the trappings of academic superstardom or whatever, but to writing a footnote which takes up a full page of text. Unfortunately, most of us are denied this aspiration as publishers are increasingly inclined to gather footnotes together into a textual ghetto, though I suppose a full-page 'note' still counts for something. There is, of course, another possibility – another sublime scholarly achievement – and that is to write a book (or paper) where the list of references is longer than the body of the text. In my previous book, I tried and failed to attain this apogee of academic life, and I can tell that even if I were to pad this footnote out with cogitations on the weather we've been having lately, descriptions of my recent holiday experiences or showing you photographs of my wife and family, I'm still not going to get a full page out of it. Of course, I could take this opportunity to apologise at length for my ludicrous textual comparison between myself and the giants of postmodernism (Foucault, Barthes, Derrida, Baudrillard, etc.). I am the first to acknowledge that I am an intellectual ant to their elephant, an amoeba to their homo sapiens, a Rattus to their Tiffany's, a Poundstretcher to Harrods, Aldi to Takashimaya, Happy Eater to Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons. Drat, I can't think of any more. I'm not going to make it. Failed again. The story of my life.

2 It may be more appropriate to describe this as a geo-political problem, in that it isn't simply a question of postmodernism's left-wing political inclination. Most
in the laces of the seven stone weaklings of qualitative research. In fairness, and in a cowardly attempt to avoid the punnelling that the macho modellers are probably planning for me, I should perhaps add that these dichotomous marketing enthusiasts may well have a point. Many contemporary commen-
tators are referring to marketing's so-called 'crisis of representation', but it is equally important to raise questions about and indeed challenge these "representations of crisis" (who are the crisis mongers? why are they propounding this perspective? what's in it for them?).

3 Consider, for instance, the remarks of the AMA Task Force (1988, p.13), 'marketing remains a field of study scorned by its parent disciplines and by the major foundations and funding agencies'. Consider also Greedley's (1986, p.61) comments on marketing planning, 'the planning body of knowledge is still at an early stage of development, within a management science body of knowledge which itself is still poorly developed when compared to other disciplines'. Or, indeed, those of Baker (1983, pp.27 and 30) on marketing theory, 'at date... theory is poorly developed in marketing... Many of the major problems involved in using and developing theory are interrelated with... the... youth of the discipline and the nature of marketing phenomena'.

4 If you read any of the literary or cultural studies literature on postmodernism (e.g. Hassan 1985), you may be slightly confused by the metaphor/metonymy duality as the former is usually described as 'modern' and the latter as 'post-
modern'. Clearly, this is contrary to the position argued in this monograph, where the emphasis on metaphor is considered to be characteristic of the post-
modern moment. It is important to stress, however, that this essay is simply contrasting the postmodern emphasis on figurative thinking with the essentially literal world-view of the logical positivists/empiricists. Both metaphor and metonymy are examples of figurative thinking and if we focus our attention solely on the continuum of figurative thought, then it is true that metaphor, with its holistic emphasis ('Boddington's, the Cream of Manchester') is 'modern', whereas metonymy, with its stress on the part, on taking something related to stand for the whole thing ('Miller, the champagne of bottled beers') is much more 'postmodern' in ethos. I would argue, none the less, that both are 'postmodern' in a marketing context, with metonymy being slightly more postmodern than metaphor.

Look into your heart

I love the smell of napalm in the morning

I love the smell of napalm in the morning


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Made it ma, top o’ the world!

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