Chapter 1

We’re on the road to nowhere, come on inside

Come with me to the margin. That is where real life happens. It always does. [Consilier] . . . newspapers. Page after page of notional pith and moment from every fraught cranny of the globe, yet so little of it touching our core, until, suddenly, there is a single paragraph . . . on, let us say, page nine of The Times yesterday:

Twenty-nine people wanted for failing to attend court, or who had been sentenced in their absence, were arrested after police lured them to a hotel in Liverpool by offering free camcorders. They had all received letters asking for volunteers in a market survey.

Real life or what? Apart, of course, from the sheer relish of the scenario: . . . a dozen CID officers in shiny suits and cheesy smiles welcoming the slavering audience of 29 camcorder-ravenous wallies to the marketing opportunity of a lifetime, the joyous denouement as, on a synchronised nod, the doors are locked, the badges flashed, the rights read out . . .

But it is much more than this. It is more even than a wondrous shaft of clear cold light into the murky corners of our huckstering, double-dealing, free-offering, card-scratching, prize-grubbing, something-for-nothing world. . . . What makes the fell swoop of the Mersey Bill even more than this is the strong possibility that their action may well kill all the geese that lay in eggs. For how many of us can be certain ever again that the appealing con we have just been junk-mailed does not conceal a greater con calculated to get us where we have hitherto managed not to be got? Is any of us so confident of spotlessness as to take that risk?

A cold call, say, informs me that my house has been selected from thousands for the trial of an astonishing new Tonkinese fitted kitchen worth twenty grand, which will be installed for nothing in return for my allowing it to be used in future publicity, and their team will be in my area tomorrow. Shall I invite them in, only to have them whip off their dungarees and begin asking me about apparent discrepancies in my Schedule D tax

return? A letter arrives, fifth of a sequence, pleading that if I do not turn up tomorrow at the spot arrowed on the enclosed map, then my absolutely free Ford Granada/diamond Rolex/fortnight with Sharon Stone will be forfeit: if I rush round, will I discover not only that I cannot get any of these unless I agree to buy Bensim, but also that two large men from the Serious Stationery Squad are waiting to arrest me for the theft of corporate ball-points, typing paper, rubber bands and deluxe box files, going back to 1965?

Never mind the normal errors that too often accompany the kind of constabularly enthusiasm shown in Liverpool: it is not impossible that, should I accept the offer of a buckshee personal organiser for joining The Cricklwood Book Club, I might open the door to take delivery only to find my collar being felt by a man in a flak jacket informing me that they have got me bang to rights for the Abbey National ram-raid, do not argue, sunshine, it is all on the computer, prints, DNA, everything.

Real life has just changed. From today, there is no such thing as a free carriage clock.

(Coren 1996a: 18)

Teenage kicks

Twenty years ago, just as punk rock was exploding on to the British music scene, I moved into a house with three acquaintances I’d met at university. As it was my first experience of living away from home, I confidently anticipated the life of dissolution, dissipation and depravity that I’d always aspired to and fantasized about as an adolescent. Needless to say, my dreams of late nights, wild parties and, let’s be honest, compliant women never quite materialized. Or, to put it another way, they materialized all right, but they materialized for everyone else in the house except me. I slept through the late nights, was not invited to the wild parties and, understandably enough I suppose, all the compliant women in the vicinity gravitated towards my three more glamorous companions. I did, admittedly, strike up a pretty close relationship with the next-door neighbours, but this was predicated on the premise that if I didn’t turn down that bloody music they’d call the police. Naturally, I refused to accede to these totally unreasonable demands, though in the interest of good neighbourliness I offered to play them a couple of requests.

Now one of the guys in the house had a particular facility with the opposite sex. I don’t know what it was about him – well, I do, albeit in these politically correct times I’m not prepared to divulge it – but hardly a week went by without a new and unfailingly alluring addition to his entourage. Charlie’s success, unfortunately, went to his head and, in a moment of rampant egomania-cum-sartorial eccentricity, he
took to wearing dark glasses and black leather gloves on a semi-permanent basis. Come winter, come spring; come rain, come shine; come day, come night, Charlie was poised to pose in his Ray Bans, kid gloves and ubiquitous untipped cigarette (his eyes, you understand, were very sensitive and the gloves prevented nicotine stains).

Pride, needless to say, comes before a fall and it wasn’t too long before nemesis came knocking on the cool dude’s door. One scorchingly hot summer’s evening, when almost everyone in the street was sitting on their doorstep enjoying the unseasonable weather, my car refused to start. After several unsuccessful attempts to get it going, we were about to give up and go for a drink, when Charlie chose to come to our assistance. Sensing, I suspect, an opportunity to parade his freshly tanned physique in front of every hitherto unavenged female in the terrace, the Lothario of Elaine Street descended to join us. Fresh from the shower and wearing only a minuscule midriff-hugging towel, his shades and — I swear — the ever-present black leather gloves, Charlie instructed us to raise the bonnet so that he could ‘listen to the tappets’, even though he knew absolutely nothing about motor car mechanics.

However, as he was peering into the bowels of the machine, pretending to be preoccupied with its timing, whilst clenching his buttocks for the benefit of any admiring onlookers, I whipped away his bath towel. It almost goes without saying that Charlie’s initial howl of rage turned every head in the street, but, in an uncharacteristically modest attempt to shield his nakedness, he instinctively pressed himself against the burning metal of my clapped-out Escort. I would have thought Charlie was well used to blisters and friction burns on that particular part of his anatomy, yet the screams suggested otherwise. We let him wrestle with this ‘frying pan or fire’ decision for a few more minutes and then decided not to return his towel. Charlie was forced to slope back into the house covering his embarrassment with the black leather gloves, though I maintain to this day that if he had any genuine panache he would have pressed his sunglasses into potentially trend-setting service.

The above incident can readily be dismissed as youthful high spirits, as androcentric behaviour of the most recondite and reprehensible kind, or indeed as some sort of Freudo-Lacanian, deep-fried phalussy. But, to my mind at least, Charlie’s impossible position, his mission impossible, his missionary position, is strongly reminiscent of the state of contemporary marketing scholarship. Like Charlie, marketing is endowed with considerable personal charm and has enjoyed more than its fair share of conquests. Like Charlie, marketing is a bit brash, a bit macho, a bit of a lovable rogue that likes to think of itself as a cool academic dude (marketing is the Sam Malone, the Jack Nicholson, the Dave Lee Roth of scholarship). And, like Charlie on that hot and sticky summer’s evening, marketing has to decide whether to expose its intellectual nakedness for all to see or press itself against the searing heat of modernism, with all the likely long-term consequences. Forced to choose, I much prefer the latter option — albeit my prediction for placing private parts and scalding metal in close proximity is none of your goddamn business — though, as this book will endeavour to demonstrate, another alternative is available, an academic equivalent, if you will, to Charlie’s black leather gloves and Ray Bans.

This time it’s for real

At this early stage in the proceedings, I suppose some readers, especially those fortunate enough to have avoided Postmodern Marketing (S. Brown 1995a), are wondering what on earth I’m talking about (better get used to it, there are 300 odd pages still to go). Academic marketing, after all, may have manifold shortcomings, but it is by no means intellectually naked. If the burgeoning numbers of undergraduate and postgraduate students, degree programs, endowed chairs, university departments, professional associations, international conferences, books published and appropriately learned scholarly journals are any indication, then marketing is not only fully clothed, it is wearing formal attire, sporting a natty top hat and carrying an overcoat, umbrella and galoshes for good measure. Indeed, the increasing academic attention that is being devoted to marketing and consumption-related phenomena by non-business disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and history, (e.g. Miller 1995) suggests that far from being the second-hand rose of scholarship, marketing is now something of a fashion leader. Granted, it may not yet have attained the dizzy heights of high-brow haute couture, but surely it is no longer reliant on the conceptual equivalent of dusty thrift shops, sterile factory outlets or dubious car boot sales for its cerebral ensemble and accessories.

Yet despite its developing intellectual chic, the Georgio Armani of the academy has not been striking poses, preening itself or generally admiring its sylph-like reflection in the full-length mirror of pedagogic approbation. Quite the reverse. As a glance at our discipline’s glossy magazines and not quite so glossy periodicals amply demonstrates, marketing’s leading scholarly costumiers are uniformly pessimistic about the theoretical collections that are currently on show:

- Peter Doyle, one of the UK’s foremost marketing thinkers and one of the very few that enjoys international celebrity status, has recently reflected on the state
of contemporary marketing. He concludes that it has fallen from its hitherto unassailable position as 'the all-conquering discipline' (1995: 23). Not only is it in decline; not only is it falling; not only is it anachronistic; not only is it being abandoned by its erstwhile advocates; it is simply no longer appropriate to the changed socio-economic circumstances of the late twentieth century.

- Michael Thomas (1995), a distinguished past president of the Chartered Institute of Marketing (the UK's leading professional body), commences his latest book, not with a ringing declaration of marketing's continuing rude health, but an announcement that it is in an unprecedented state of crisis. Although such contentions are two-a-penny these days, the context in which it was made - a 630-page compendium showcasing the very best of marketing theory and practice - speaks volumes about the discipline's current lack of self-confidence.

- Robin Wensley (1995), another internationally renowned member of the marketing intelligentsia, has also delivered a decidedly downbeat state-of-the-nation address. Concentrating on three key areas of academic research - market segmentation, marketing orientation, and networks and relationships - he posits that, despite an enormous amount of scholarly endeavour, very little progress and almost nothing of lasting value has been achieved in the post-war period.

- Michael Baker, the major-domo of British marketing and an academic ambassador par excellence, notes a 'decline in the incremental value added by current research/publication' (1995: 1003) combined with a grotesque over-extension of marketing's domain into areas that rightly belong to other disciplines. The upshot of these developments is that marketing's own intellectual heritage is being ignored in favour of fashionable but ephemeral panaceas or imported nostrums which are often no better and frequently worse than the indigenous concepts they supersede.

- Francis Buttle, one of the most prominent new-wave marketing theorists, describes 'a crisis of confidence in the dominant paradigm' (1994: 8–9) and, in a devastating assessment of what is currently on offer, concludes that 'New paradigm researchers have found mainstream marketing theory wanting. Consumer behaviour is a theoretical black hole. We do not understand how advertising works... The only thing we know with certainty is that we do not know very much at all. Not much of an outcome for 50 years' scientific endeavour' (1994: 8–9).

- Douglas Brownlie, yet another unreconstructed, out-and-out, bona fide, if-he-didn't-exist-we'd-have-to-invent-him marketing iconoclast, is equally scathing about the present state of academic play. After traversing the boodocks of published research, he maintains that 'marketing as a domain of knowledge and practice is itself becoming as myopic, complacent and inward looking as all the once great but now defunct myopic companies. Is the end of marketing as we once knew it in sight?' (Brownlie et al. 1994: 8).

- Even Malcolm McDonald, doyen of detailed marketing planning, Director of the demurely named Institute for Advanced Research in Marketing,1 proselytiser nonpareil, and possibly the most published marketing intellectual this side of Phil Kotler, is now willing to concede that, 'Perhaps classical 4Ps marketing, with changes in emphasis to its constituent parts, is not as relevant a framework outside the FMCG domain as we have become prepared to accept' (Denison and McDonald 1995: 55).

Some, of course, may say that these concerns, cavils and complaints are a manifestation of that peculiarly British pragmatism - many call it masochism - whereby the worse things get the more there is to grumble about and the more perversely enjoyable the whole experience becomes. Convenient though such appeals to the public-school, stiff-upper-lip and blitz-spirit stereotypes undoubtedly are - not that I would ever resort to such a cheap, nasty and utterly fallacious line of argument - they cannot account for the almost identical set of anxieties currently being expressed by leading European and American marketing authorities. Amongst the Europeans, for example, Giles Marion (1993) avers that, conceptually speaking, there has been 'nothing new' in marketing since the 1960s; Christian Grönroos (1989, 1990, 1991, 1994, 1993) submits that it is time to bid a fond farewell - or, rather, good riddance - to traditional marketing frameworks of the 4Ps variety; and Evert Gummmerson (1987, 1993, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c) has roundly, repeatedly, well-nigh recklessly ridiculed the all-conquering Kotlerite model of modern marketing scholarship.

While the savagery of this European academic assault is doubtless partly

1 Is there, I sometimes wonder, an inverse correlation between the grandeur of the title and a research centre's academic achievements? I certainly hope so, because the institute I once directed was called the Centre for Research and Analogous Publications Pertaining to Education in Retailing, albeit within Ireland it was known as the Centre for Retail Education and Training in the North. (Hope you like the 'real' footnote, by the way. None of your back-of-the-book-lump-them-all-together-because-nobody-reads-them-anything rubbish this time around. How did I get away with it? You'll just have to wait and see.)
attributable to an Oedipal desire to break away from American disciplinary strictures, recent evidence suggests that US marketing scholars are no less contrite about their sins of omission, commission and general theoretical misdemeanours. None other than Shelby Hunt, Fred Webster, Jagdish Sheth and, believe it or not, slick Philly Kotler himself have latterly high-tailed it from the essentially transaction-based ‘marketing as exchange’ nexus, thrown their not inconsiderable intellectual weight behind the burgeoning relationship marketing paradigm (Figure 1.1), and, in so doing, they merely serve to undermine further the very premises of marketing understanding that they have been enthusiastically promulgating for more than twenty years (F. E. Webster 1992; Kotler 1994; Sheth and Parvatiyar 1995; Hunt and Morgan 1995). When asked, moreover, to comment on the current state of marketing thought and practice, a distinguished panel of American academic thinkers noted how ‘AMA journals are not at the cutting edge of research  . . . one rarely sees marketers interviewed on television or quoted in major news publications. Marketers have had little or no impact on major national issues, from health care to social security to welfare . . . one can conclude that all is not well with our field’ (reported in Mowen and Leigh 1996: 1).

Similarly, albeit on a slightly less elevated plane, Pradeep Rau attributes the ‘declines in journal subscriptions and the generally low importance attached to academic marketing research’ to the fact that ‘we are only recycling old knowledge for the benefit of a narrow audience’ (1996: 2). As a result, ‘our batting average has actually been declining from the early decades, and truly meaningful research efforts are getting fewer and farther between’ (1996: 2). Indeed, in what must be the ultimate embodiment of the utter bankruptcy of contemporary US marketing scholarship, a well-meaning if impolitic contributor to the latest Academy of Marketing Science Newsletter explains his reluctance to switch allegiance to the relationship marketing paradigm, not on the basis of its shortcomings, its inappropriateness, or its intellectual and empirical poverty, but because – wait for it – ‘I still need to attain tenure’ (Stafford 1996: 4).

This manifest lack of faith in dat ole time marketing religion is not confined to the scholarly patriarchs, pontiffs, priests and parishioners, however. Practitioners are purported to be equally apostate, albeit in light of the manifold opportunities for managerial/academic interaction (short courses, training programmes, consultancy exercises, etc.), this perfidy is likely to be inflamed by – and reinforces in turn – the faithlessness of the intellectuals (Kell et al. 1996). Be that as it may, the past few years have been characterized by what, to put it at its most charitable, can best be described as a marked loss of confidence in marketing. For example, a much-publicized report by McKinsey has concluded that the marketing function is facing a mid-life crisis (Brady and Davis 1993); Cooper and Lybrand (1994) suggest that marketing departments are critically ill; The Economist (1994) has composed an obituary for the brand manager; Unilever, Procter and Gamble and BT, to name but three blue-chip companies, have abolished the position of Marketing Director (Doyle 1993). ‘Many public policy and opinion leaders’, as Sheth and Parvatiyar coyly note, ‘think that marketing practices are designed to manipulate the consumers and, therefore, that consumer protection and vigilance are critical to balance the abusive powers of the marketers’ (1995: 264). And, for Weir at least, ‘the depressing reality of many marketing campaigns [is], that after comprehensive market research, panel testing, test marketing and carefully orchestrated launch, the customer simply decides to do something else that day. The secret history of marketing, like that of most management, is one of crisis, failure, confusion, misunderstanding, and occasional joyous, inexplicable, successful hitting of the jackpot’ (1996: 28).

**Figure 1.1 The Blois are back in town**

- **Supplier partnerships**
- **Employees**
- **Functional departments**
- **Other SBU's**
- **Composers**
- **Governments**
- **Strategic alliances**
- **Customer partnerships**

*Source: adapted from Doyle 1995.*
Perhaps the most poignant example of this self-abnegating turn occurred a couple of years ago, when the good ship Oriana, packed with the cream of British and European marketing managers, plus the illuminati of the Marketing Forum, set sail for a three-day voyage of discovery, during which the sole topic of discussion was the chronic condition of contemporary marketing. Now, I have absolutely no idea what was said on board, and I know I am only 22 pages into a book where I resolved to avoid plumbing the depths of metaphor, steer clear of the reeds of allusion, skirt the shallows of conceit, evade the sirens of synecdoche and generally refuse to set sail on the metonymyical briny. But this Titanic, this Marie Celeste, this Exxon Valdez of marketing is such a sitting duck that it is all I can do to refrain from referring to running aground, nautical gaits, walking planks, manning life-boats, Captain Ahabs, Davy Joneses, deserting rats, men overboard, full fathom fives, ships of fools, great white whales, muster stations, hunt the bismarcking, rimes of the marketing mariners and many more seafaring allusions besides.

Arc of a diver
In light of the foregoing comments on the marketing condition, it would be easy to conclude that our discipline is sliding below the intellectual waves to the affecting strains of 'Abide With Me' or, depending on your personal preferences, a rousing medley of 'I Am The Walrus' and 'Yellow Submarine'. Before abandoning ship, however, it may be prudent to pause for a moment and reflect on the causes of marketing's ostensible foundering. Perhaps, as some of the cynical old seadogs (or should that be P-dogs?) among you may have surmised, marketing hasn't foun-dered at all. Perhaps marketing is more buoyant now than it has ever been. Perhaps, certain unscrupulous, self-aggrandizing individuals are concocting an 'iceberg, what iceberg?'-style crisis as part of their nefarious desire to promote the postmodern marketing paradigm. Perhaps they are massaging, maltreating, misreporting and generally manipulating the evidence to suit their mendacious purposes. Perhaps the real problem is not marketing in crisis but the marketing of crisis. Marketing is not so much facing a crisis of representation as representations of crisis.

As you can no doubt imagine, I'm completely lost for words when confronted with such scurrilous insinuations. What's more, I'm shocked, not to say deeply disappointed, that you think so little of me. I am, after all, merely the messenger, an interpreter, a neutral channel - who said empty vessel? - for the freely expressed opinions of marketing's great and good. While I recognize that crisis-mongering per se can be construed as a studied act of post-teenage rebellion, a crude attempt to capture the cockpit of disciplinary power, which is in the process of being vacated by the current crop of scholarly plenipotentiaries. Yet, it is the older generation of marketing academics - the Kotlers, the Bakers, the Druckers, the Thomases of this world - who are proving most vocal about the present parlous state of the subject area. Granted, their prominence means that they have easy access to communication channels and, hence, their voices are more likely to be heard, and indeed attended to, by practitioners in particular (some of whom recycle, reinforce or act upon the words of the gurus, and so the whole process is perpetuated). But it cannot be contended that the present crisis of marketing confidence has been engineered by a few fascistic, megalomaniacal marketing academics and their misguided followers (if you so much as mention Brownshirts, my lawyers will be in touch). Nor, for that matter, is it solely attributable to the dyspeptic cavils of older 'things were better in my day' intellectuals, since they were largely responsible for articulating and codifying the position that is currently being called into question.

If, after dismissing the possibility that marketing's 'mid-life crisis' is an instantiation of an internecine intergenerational power struggle or, conversely, a romantically thanatic desire on the part of the captains of marketing consciousness to go down with their unsavoury ship, the only meaningful alternative is that our discipline is facing some sort of 'genuine' crisis of representation. In these circumstances, it seems reasonable to ask the questions: why?, and why now? The first and most obvious answer is that the current loss of conceptual self-esteem is a direct reflection of unprecedented upheaval and turmoil in the marketplace itself – that is, the real, everyday, earn-an-honest-crust-is-that-your-best-price-where's-the-delivery-you-promised-me-you-bastard world of the marketing manager. While it is easy to slip into chrono-solipsism, the assumption that today's business conditions are somehow tougher, more competitive, faster moving, less ethical or whatever than at any time in the past (when, in all probability, they are neither more nor less turbulent, tougher, unethical or what have you – just different), many prominent commentators contend that the contemporary socio-economic environment is undergoing a period of profound, prolonged and possibly unprecedented change (e.g. Dicken 1992; Naisbitt 1994; Handy 1994, 1995). Certainly, in today's paradoxical marketing milieu where organizations are exorted to be both global and local, centralized and decentralized, large and small, and planned yet flexible, and are expected to serve mass and niche markets, with standardized and customized products, at premium and penetration prices, through restricted and extensive distribution networks and supported by national yet targeted promotional campaigns, it is perhaps not surprising that the traditional, linear, step-by-step
marketing model of analysis, planning, implementation and control no longer seems applicable, appropriate or even pertinent to what is actually happening on the ground (S. Brown 1995b).

With this in mind, it is arguable that the real problem is not so much the chaotic business environment – difficult though it undoubtedly is – as our extant marketing conceptualizations; the metaphors, models and theoretical frameworks through which we view, interpret and act upon the marketplace. The traditional constructs no longer apply. They are not up to the challenge. Just as Peter Drucker, the founding father of the modern marketing concept, blames the malaise of many hitherto large and successful organizations on the fact that their theory of the business no longer works' (1994: 96), so too marketing, as a theory of business, no longer works. Marketing’s hegemonic claims to universal applicability have been found wanting, exposed for the hubristic bombast that they are and always have been. And exposed, ironically, at the very time when marketing is being enthusiastically embraced in fields as diverse as heath care, public administration and not-for-profit, not to mention the erstwhile command economies of eastern Europe (S. Brown 1995a).

Paradoxical though this simultaneous success and failure seem to be, it is very much in keeping with the spirit of our postmodern times. As McGinn (1995) observes, it is invariably at the very moment of a concept or culture’s greatest triumph that doubts start to accumulate, that premonitions of decline transpire, that terminal visions materialize. Or, in the arresting words of the high priest of postmodernism, Jean Baudrillard, ‘Ideas proliferate like polyps or seaweed and perish by suffocating in their own luxuriant vegetation. . . . Every idea and culture becomes universalised before it disappears. As with stars, their maximum expansion comes at the point of death, their transformation into red giants and then black dwarfs. . . . The elevation of a value to universality is a prelude to its becoming transparent, which itself is a prelude to its disappearance’ (1994: 103–5).

Another closely related consideration, and one that is likely to appeal to my small but vocal ‘green-ink’ constituency, is the fact that we are not alone. The mere glance across the current intellectual landscape reveals that marketing’s aura of unease, its sense of crisis and impending collapse, is very widely shared. It is shared, moreover, by all manner of academic specialists – economics (Ormerod 1994), anthropology (van Maanen 1995), history (Jenkins 1995), sociology (Lemert 1995), cultural studies (R. J. C. Young 1996), theology (Grenz 1995), architecture (Jencks 1995) and physics (Lindley 1994), to name but a few (take it from me, when economists succumb to self-doubt you can be pretty sure that something serious is amiss). Indeed, certain wild and woolly individuals contend that this penumba of perplexity is an instantiation of PMT (pre-millennial tension), the almost palpable ethos of despondency, lassitude, stasis, melancholia and diffidence that is symptomatic of the present fin de siècle. Now, fin de siècle, as Kermode (1967, 1993), Kumar (1993, 1995a), Shwalter (1991) and Meštrović (1991), among others, have shown, are entirely arbitrary calendrical artifacts – Judeo-Christian calendrical artifacts – and there is no ‘rational’ reason why they should be tainted by an air of decadence and despair, infused with a feeling of doom, gloom and foreboding. Yet they are, they long have been, and, as evinced by the plethora of books, films and television series premised on the imminence of the purportedly apocalyptic year 2000, they continue so to be (Grosso 1995; Dellamora 1995; Thompson 1996; Briggs and Snowman 1996).

For literary critic Frank Kermode, in fact, this fin de psychosis (which is not confined to the ends of centuries, but tends to be accentuated at such temporal turning points) is nothing less than a fundamental correlate of the human condition, a means of making transcendental sense of the flux, chaos and fragmentation of the quotidian round. The idea that we live within and experience a sequence of events between which there is no relation, pattern or progression is simply unthinkable. Hence, he argues, humankind is inclined to foist a beginning, middle and end upon time, whether it be the changing of the seasons, the ticking of a clock (tick-tack being a complete narrative, as opposed to the unending succession that is tick-tack-tick) or periodic predictions of the end of the world (Bull 1995), the end of nature (McKibben 1990), the end of history (Fukuyama 1992), the end of philosophy (Cahoon 1993), the end of science (Horgan 1996), the end of work (Rifkin 1995) or, for that matter, the end of marketing (S. Brown, Bell and Carson 1996).

It cannot be denied that such X-Filesque arguments are tempting, not to say seductive. They help us comprehend the trajectory of twentieth-century marketing scholarship, the entire history of which has been littered with intermittent announcements of crisis, calamity and catastrophe (G. Fisk 1971; Austen 1983; Lynch 1995). However, it seems to me that there is yet another important issue which impinges upon the present uncertain state of the marketing discipline, and that is the radical implications of postmodernity for the so-called ‘Art or Science?’ debate. Few people, after all, would deny that the utopian pursuit of scientific status, and the intellectual legitimacy it confers, has been the leitmotif of post-war marketing endeavour (Bass 1993; Bass and Wind 1995; S. Brown 1996a; Kerin 1996). It goes to the very heart of modern marketing understanding, our sense of ourselves. It represents the axiology, the purpose, the ultimate destination of the discipline’s academic odyssey and it follows that any alteration in the balance between Art and
Science (or swing of the art/science pendulum, if you prefer) has significant implications for the underpinning premises of marketing theory and practice.

Clearly, it is impossible to do justice to such a complex topic in an essay such as this and, let’s be frank, I have no particular desire to alienate my admittedly small (but beautifully formed) readership in the very first chapter. That comes later. However, since this issue is so central to marketing’s self-image, comprises an essential element of the emerging postmodern critique of modernity and, most importantly of all, gives me an opportunity to demonstrate my familiarity with, if not understanding of, all manner of pretentious phraseologies, terminologies and expressions, a lightning sketch of the art or science? controversy may prove illuminating. It also gives me a chance to rewrite history, reveal in invective and generally display my pseudo-intellectual credentials, such as they are, but that is by the by. (Look, I’m really sorry about the next section, but if I don’t resort to academese at an early stage in the proceedings — and thereby establish my right to speak, so to speak — I’ll get into all sorts of trouble. Just hang in there. We’ll rip it up later, I promise you. Please excuse me while I clear my throat and adopt a ‘scholarly’ tone of voice.)

Once upon a time

Although some distinguished authorities demur (Kerin 1996), it is widely accepted that the great marketing: art or science? debate began approximately fifty years ago, when Paul D. Converse alluded to the ‘classified body of knowledge which we call the science of marketing’ (1943: 14). While these were little more than throwaway remarks in a paper primarily devoted to the results of a questionnaire survey of sixty-four marketing researchers, it wasn’t long before marketing’s scientific aspirations and credentials were called seriously into question. Vaile (1949), for example, asserted that marketing was a science where innovation, creativity and extravaganza prevailed, and where the sheer complexity of marketplace behaviours rendered impossible the development of a general theory or theories. In a similar vein, Bartels (1951) emphasized that marketing was not and could not be considered a science, since work that warranted the appellation science was simply not being conducted by marketing researchers and, while it may be possible to study marketing phenomena scientifically, the very idea of establishing a science called marketing was questionable. That said, Bartels found some evidence of the use of the scientific method in marketing research and concluded that, with further theoretical speculation and systematic scholarship, marketing may well become a science in the fullness of time.

Bartels’ suggestion, coupled with the growing preparedness to speak openly of ‘marketing science’ (e.g. L. O. Brown 1948; Alderson and Cox 1948; Cox and Alderson 1950), prompted Hutchinson (1952) to pen a tart rejoinder. ‘In appraising the progress which has been made in developing a science of marketing,’ he contended,

one is tempted to make allowances for the relatively short period of time in which the issues have been under discussion. But whatever allowances are called for, one is likely to be somewhat disappointed over the lack of progress to date. . . . There seems to be little evidence to support the claim that all is needed is time and patience until there will emerge the new and shining science of marketing. . . . There is a real reason, however, why the field of marketing has been slow to develop a unique body of theory. It is a simple one: marketing is not a science. It is neither an art or a practice, and as such more closely resembles engineering, medicine and architecture than it does physics, chemistry or biology. It is the drollest travesty to relate the scientist’s search for knowledge to the market research man’s seeking after customers. In actual practice . . . many and probably most of the decisions in the field resemble the scientific method hardly any more closely than what is involved in reading a road map or a time table.

(Hutchinson 1952: 287–91)

Notwithstanding Hutchinson’s heroic attempt to emasculate marketing’s insatiable physics envy, it is fair to say that by the early 1960s the battle had been decisively won by the scientific emulators (S. Brown 1996a). In an era informed by the Ford and Carnegie Reports and the celebrated Two Cultures controversy, the establishment of the Marketing Science Institute, combined with the AMA’s stated aim of advancing the science of marketing and the publication of Buzzell’s (1963) famous paean to the scientific worldview, ensured that no one seriously questioned the appropriateness of marketing’s aspiration to scientific status. Granted, there was a great deal of discussion about whether the discipline had or had not attained its ultimate objective. For some commentators, marketing was already a science or proto-science (M. D. Mills 1961; Lee 1965; Robin 1970; Kotler 1972; Ramond 1974). For others, it had either a considerable way to go or was pursuing a pleasant if somewhat idealistic daydream (Borden 1965; Halbert 1965; Kernan 1973; Levy 1976). Nonetheless, as G. Schwartz stressed at the time, ‘the various expressions of opinion have not revealed anyone who is opposed to the development of a science of marketing’ (1965: I). Indeed, the culmination of the ‘debate’ occurred in 1976, when Shelby Hunt, in a much-cited, award-winning article, evaluated the state of
marketing scholarship against the three characteristic features of science (distinct subject matter, underlying uniformities and intersubjectively certifiable research procedures) and found that it passed, or certain aspects of it passed, on all counts. ‘The study of the positive dimensions of marketing’, he triumphantly concluded, ‘can be appropriately referred to as marketing science’ (Hunt 1976: 28).

Hunt’s exultations, however, were comparatively short-lived thanks to the intervention of Paul Anderson (1983, 1986, 1989), who challenged the fundamental philosophical premises of marketing science. The received view, variously described as ‘positivist’, ‘positivistic’ or ‘logical empiricist’ rested on the assumption that a single external world existed, that this social reality could be empirically measured by independent observers using objective methods, and that it could be explained and predicted through the identification of universal laws or law-like generalizations. Aided and abetted by like-minded revolutionaries (Peter and Olson 1983; Despande 1983; Hirschman 1986), Anderson contended that marketing was ill served by the traditional positivistic perspective — what he termed ‘science’ — and argued that a relativist approach — dubbed ‘science’ had much more to offer. This maintained that, although an external world may well exist ‘out there’, it was impossible to access this world independently of human sensations, perceptions and interpretations. Hence, reality was not objective and external to the observer but socially constructed and given meaning by human actors. What counted as knowledge about this world was relative to different times, contexts and research communities. Relativism held that there were no universal standards for judging knowledge claims, that different research communities constructed different worldviews and that science was a social process where consensus prevailed about the status of knowledge claims, scientific standards and the like, though these were not immutable. Science was so social, in fact, that Peter and Olson (1983), in their ringing endorsement of the relativist position, concluded that science was actually a special case of marketing, that successful scientific theories were those which performed well in the marketplace of ideas thanks to the marketing skills of their proponents.

It almost goes without saying that this eschewal of the orthodox idea of marketing science — as objectively proven knowledge — and its attempted replacement with the notion of science as societal consensus provoked a ferocious reaction. The foremost defender of the faith, Shelby D. Hunt (1984, 1990a, 1992) was particularly scathing about relativism, arguing that not only would its pursuit lead inexorably to nihilism, irrationalism, incoherence and irrelevance, but it also threatened to subvert the past 400 years of scientific and technological progress (Western Civilization in Peril — Shock!). Battle was thus joined, and over the subsequent decade or thereabouts the heavyweights of marketing scholarship slug it out . . .

(‘Hold on a minute, Stephen.’
‘Francesca, what on earth are you doing in here? You’re part of the framing device, not the body of the text. How do you expect the readers to suspend their disbelief if you’re going to start blundering into the narrative?’
‘Butt out, Brown. I’m the commissioning editor of this book and I’ll butt in if I want to.’
‘Oh, so it’s like that, is it? Well, make it quick, what do you want?’
‘It’s about the passage you’ve just written.’
‘Yeah, pretty good, isn’t it? Cynical yet scholarly, just the sort of postmodern mood I’m trying to convey.’
‘That’s one way of describing it.’
‘Sorry, Francesca, is this a stylistic thing?’
‘No, though you do seem to have a somewhat liberal view of what constitutes literary style.’
‘What exactly is your problem?’
‘It’s just that I’ve read that passage before. In Postmodern Marketing One. Page 143 to be precise, Stephen.’
‘Correct me if I’m wrong, but you were the very person that told me to rewrite the first book.’
‘Not word for word!’
‘It’s postmodern Francesca. We don’t subscribe to old-fashioned notions of plagiarism and authorial authority. Barthes “always already written”, don’t you know.’
‘Bullshit. No more recycling, Stephen, you hear? No more fun and games. Got it?’
‘What, you mean no more frame-breaking textual intrusions by a fictional editorial figure?’
‘Just get on with it, Bozo!’)

Anyway, to cut a long story short, the Hunt–Anderson contretemps opened the door for apocalyptic postmodern critiques of the western scientific worldview. Now, ‘postmodern’ is one of those slippery words that, if you are so inclined, enables you to write several hundred pages of text and still fail to come up with a satisfactory definition. For some commentators, it is a distinctive, late-twentieth-century artistic and cultural movement. For others, the term pertains to latter-day developments in social, economic and political life. For yet others, it is essentially a periodizing concept or, indeed, a fashionably chic — some would say passé — post-ure espoused by the fashion victims of thought (Hollinger 1994; Dickens...
For postmodernists, then, the appellation 'science' is no longer considered
honorable. On the contrary, it is an epithet of opprobrium. Science, to put it crudely,
is seen as cold, calculating, austere, authoritarian, sterile, inhuman, uncontrollable,
Frankensteinian, deceptive, self-serving, patriarchal, rapacious, destructive and
downright dangerous. It is a force for human immiseration rather than liberation.
It is morally bankrupt, spiritually bereft and intellectually barren. It has given us
a very great deal – where, after all, would we be without the Pot Noodle? – but it has
not made us any happier or succeeded in explaining the meaning(s) of life (Apple-

Although such antinomian sentiments are not shared by everyone (Wolpert 1992;
Jacques 1993; Carey 1993; Dawkins 1996; Durant 1996), this latter-day denial of
scientific authority cannot fail to strike a chord with observers of the contemporary
marketing scene. In a recent devastating assessment of the discipline's post-war
academic achievements, for example, L. McTeir Anderson maintains that 'the
dogged pursuit of the mantle of sciencehood has severely damaged marketing's
credibility at a time when international competitiveness demands acumen and
leadership – not the continued railings of pseudo-scientists' (1994: 14). Kavanagh
(1994), likewise, has excoriated marketing science for its utter lack of moral,
spiritual and ethical fibre, as have many academic advocates of an ecologically
informed marketing worldview (McDonagh 1995; G. Fisk 1995). In fact, even
prominent proponents of marketing science have attempted to step back from their
earlier extravagant expectations (Buzzell 1984; Hunt 1994; Kotler 1994) and, irony
of ironies, none other than Shelby D. Hunt has recently acknowledged that
scientists are marketers, the very position he condemned out of hand when it
was articulated a decade or so ago by Peter and Olson (Hunt and Edison 1993).

Countdown to ecstasy

In light of these developments, it may be worth attempting to draw some tentative
lessons from the great 'art or science' debate and thereby set the scene for the
remainder of this book. The first, and arguably most self-evident, point is that
despite half a century of academic endeavour, the holy grail of marketing science
has not been achieved (see Willmott 1993; Desmond 1993; L. McT. Anderson
1994). In 1963, during the salad days of pro-science enthusiasm, Buzzell main-
tained that by the turn of the millennium marketing would become 'a full-fledged
science'. Well, the millennium is now upon us and the anticipated model of science
– rigorous, objective, predictive, theory-building, law-giving, etc. – has simply not
transpired, nor is it ever likely to transpose. Notwithstanding Hunt's specious
claims to the contrary and macho-modellers' much-repeated contention that this
land of marketing milk and honey is just around the corner, provided we all pull
together and refuse to be distracted by the siren voices of postmodern promiscuity,
importuned by the sodomites of post-structuralism or seduced by any analogous
whores of intellectual Babylon, this academic Arcadia has not been attained by any
other social sciences, most of which are longer established and more intellectually
cultivated than ourselves. These days, only the most arrogant, recidivist or – dare
one say it? – myopic marketing academic continues to assume that we can succeed
where our elders and betters have demonstrably failed (Bass 1993; Little et al. 1994;
Bass and Wind 1995).

A second and closely related point is that even if scientific status were attainable,
or could be achieved with one last superhuman effort, the question has to be asked:
is it something that we really want any more? When we look back at the great
debate, the early days in particular, we cannot help but be struck by the sheer
naïveté of the assumption that, regardless of its realizability, western science was
an unproblematic role model for marketing. In truth, and not to put too fine a
point on it, we are appalled by early commentators’ preparedness to hold up the
atom bomb as an exemplar of scientific achievement (L. O. Brown 1948; H. D.
Mills 1961); now find the very idea of a single, all-embracing General Theory of
Marketing laughably absurd (Figure 1.2); consider the advocates of ‘broadening’
whom overambitious at best or suffering from delusions of grandeur at worst;
and, to be frank, increasingly regard our discipline's pseudo-scientific aspirations,
its underpinning progressivist, gung-ho, we-have-the-technology metanarrative,
more a manifestation of 1960s-style American intellectual imperialism than a
meaningful aspiration for late-twentieth-century marketing research (Brownlie
and Saren 1992; S. Brown 1995a). Continuing to aspire to 'scientific' status
Least delay, the introduction of interpretivist perspectives. It is thus arguable that the finer points of any stated position are less important to its acceptability or otherwise than the nature of the prevailing intellectual climate. In other words, what the community of marketing scholars wants to believe at that particular time (M. J. Arnold and J. E. Fisher 1996). Converse, for example, was not the first marketer to wrap himself in the flag of ‘science’, yet his utilization of the terminology, at a time when science was in the ascendant, ensured that his name will forever be associated with it. Similarly, Anderson’s concern with the type of science considered appropriate for marketing, was expressed by several of his predecessors (e.g. W. J. Taylor 1965; Robin 1970; Dawson 1971; O’Shaughnessy and Ryan 1979). But, it was Anderson’s critique, coming at a time of widespread disillusion with the dominant hypothetic-deductive perspective and when the children of the 1960s counterculture were rising to positions of prominence within the marketing academy, that captured the moment, that shaped the contours of the ensuing debate and that is now cited as a milestone in post-war marketing scholarship.

If this Zeitgeist interpretation holds water, then it follows that the key to the future may well be inscribed in the final and, it has to be said, somewhat postmodern aspect of the whole controversy – the appropriately hyperreal fact that the great art/science ‘debate’ never actually took place! Incredible though it seems, not a single person in the entire history of the contretemps attempted to make a case for marketing as an ‘art’. True, many people (most notably Hutchinson) maintained that marketing was an art and destined to remain an art, but they did not suggest that marketing should aspire to artistic status. In fact, most discussions of the art of marketing focused on art as in artisan (i.e. the craft or technology of marketing), rather than art as in aesthetics, art as the very acme of human achievement, art as a quasi-spiritual endeavour. Interestingly, however, growing numbers of prominent marketing academics are now advocating the study of artistic artifacts, such as books, films, plays and poetry, arguing that they can provide meaningful insights into the marketing condition, or stressing the benefits to be obtained from drawing upon the liberal arts (humanities) end of the academic spectrum rather than the traditional orientation toward the hard sciences (Belk 1986a; Holbrook and Grayson 1986; Holbrook et al. 1989; Vargish 1991; Holbrook 1996a). Other prescient thinkers are espousing an increasingly aesthetic-cum-spiritual orientation (Reason 1993; Kavanagh 1994; Chia 1996) and, indeed, certain creative individuals have contended that marketing scholarship can be an artistic achievement in itself (Holbrook 1995a; Sherry 1995; McDonagh 1995a; Smithee 1997). Yet despite academic marketers’ burgeoning enthusiasm for all things aesthetic, it would appear that its adepts are unwilling to argue for the superiority of the artistic ‘paradigm’ or
advocate the abandonment of the discredited scientific model, with its outmoded methods, mechanistic worldview and unattainable axiology. At most, the artistic apologists attempt to make a case for the acceptance of such non-scientific insights, or postulate aesthetics as a useful complement to established approaches.

Until now.

Music for all occasions

The overall aim of this book, then, is to suggest that marketing has much to learn from aesthetics in general and the world of literature and literary criticism in particular. After attempting to show that this storytelling ethos is compatible with the emerging postmodern moment (Chapter 2), the text goes on to examine ‘marketing in literature’, that is, marketing and consumption phenomena as portrayed in works of fiction (Chapter 3). It continues with an analysis of ‘literature in marketing’, the use of literary theory to investigate marketing artifacts (Chapter 4), makes a case for ‘marketing as literature’, the adoption of a more self-consciously literary mode of marketing discourse (Chapter 5), and concludes (Chapter 6) with a few random thoughts, scabrous asides and cheap intellectual shots that you have come to associate with postmodern marketing scholarship (though my harshest comments are reserved for the sorts of readers — cheap thrill seekers, one and all — who flock over to the final chapter in search of gratuitously offensive remarks).

This book, it must be emphasized, does not claim to be the last word on marketing aesthetics — nor the first word, come to think of it. There are several other texts, most notably The Semiotics of Consumption (Holbrook and Hirschman 1993), Consumer Research (Holbrook 1995a), Collecting in a Consumer Society (Belk 1995) and Art, Advertising and the Borders of Art (Bogart 1995), which are much more learned, much better written and, in terms of insights per page, much more of a bargain than Postmodern Marketing Two. You know, for the life of me, I can’t understand why you’ve wasted your money on this volume. It contains nothing new; it isn’t the least bit interesting; and the only reason I wrote it was to soften up the publishers for Kotler is Dead! So, why don’t you just go away and do something useful with your time instead of sitting there reading trash like this. Get a life . . .

Chapter 2

Wild thing, I think I love you

The department store is making a comeback, because customers are coming back to the department store. After a decade of retail flightiness during which they have been seduced into countless brief encounters by each flashy new high street gigolo that cared to wink its neon at them, British shoppers have at last come to their senses. They are returning to the sort of shops that Celia Johnson knew were the best, really. They are flocking back to Selfridges and Harrods and Debenhams and D. H. Evans and John Lewis and all the rest, enabling them, at the eleventh hour, to cheat the bourse from which no Hollingsworth returns.

Nothing, in these harrowing days, could make me happier. For not only have I remained faithful to the department store through thick and thin, I have subjected that loyalty to fine-toothed scrutiny, and am, I submit, in a better position to account for this revival than all the business analysts presently trundling for arcane explanations.

My earliest view of a department store was diamond-shaped. The year was 1944, the store was Selfridges, and I was looking at it through one of those rhomboid peep-holes Mr Churchill had thoughtfully cut into the green mesh designed to stop the Luftwaffe blowing bus-windows all over us. After we got off the bus, my mother, as was her attentive wont, spat on her hankie in order to remove from my face any detritus likely to upset floor-walkers, but for once I did not shrink as my cheeks were shaved this way and that. I stood stock still. Not just still, rapt. Selfridges was the biggest thing I had ever seen . . . Hence, a shop had been a small dark place with a rat snoozing on the breakfast, or a woman saying they only had grey wool due to U-boats everywhere; but here was a shop from one end of which you couldn’t see the other . . .

And then we went inside. The inside was bigger than the outside. That is what happens with magic. It had to be big because there were a trillion things for sale; but most astonishing of all, they were different sorts of thing. I had been only in serial shops before; you bought a cabbage in one, then you crossed the road to another one to buy a scarf, and if you wanted a kettle, you had to go into a third one. But Selfridges sold everything there was in the world to sell, and you got to it by going up on electric stairs