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Writing Russell Belk: excess all areas

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Abstract. Russell Belk is one of the most distinguished thought leaders in marketing and consumer research. He is also one of its most distinctive. This paper examines the distinctiveness of Russell Belk’s remarkable writing style, arguing that it exemplifies the ‘academic gothic’. Five characteristically gothic traits are found in his published corpus – excess, monstrosity, irony, supernaturalism, doubling – and the implications for writing marketing research are considered. Key Words • academic gothic • consumer research • Russell Belk • writing marketing

Writing was invented by marketers. The first fully-fledged system of writing was developed by merchants and traders in Mesopotamia during the 5th millennium BCE. ‘Writing’, Manguel (1997: 178) explains, ‘was invented for commercial reasons, to remember that a certain number of cattle belonged to a certain family, or were being transported to a certain place. A written sign served as a mnemonic device: a picture of an ox stood for an ox, to remind the reader that the transaction was in oxen, how many oxen, and perhaps the names of the buyer and seller.’

Seven thousand years after the Mesopotamian revolution, writing remains an important tool of the marketers’ trade. Advertising copy, sales brochures, marketing plans, mission statements, inter-office memos and emails, research reports, press releases, brand stories, IMC policies, customer charters, codes of practice and, not least, spammers’ unbeatable offers, all rely upon the written word, as indeed do academic articles. Academia, in many ways, is the acme of marketing writing. Books, papers, essays, reviews, chapters, monographs and analogous modes of literary output are the pelf of academic life (Brown, 2005). This is the case almost irrespective of an individual’s methodological, philosophical or empirical allegiances – positivist, post-positivist, experimental, interpretive, etc. – and notwithstanding the fashion for ‘alternative’ modes of photographic, video-
graphic, stereoscopic and cybernetic representation (see Stern, 1998). Whatever else they are, written articles are money in the academic bank. They are the currency of scholarly transactions, the specie of intellectual exchange and professional preferment. Writing may not be the be all and end all of marketing research, but it is undoubtedly enormously important.

Inevitably, given its place in the academic scheme of things, the art and craft of writing marketing has attracted the attention of scholarly commentators. These reflections range from heartfelt exhortations to write more mellifluously (Holbrook, 1995; Mick, 2004; Sherry and Schouten, 2002) to analyses of the writing styles of recognized thought leaders (Hackley, 2003; Stern, 1990; Thompson, 1993). Yet, despite such commendable contributions, the academic literature on the academic literature is still scanty. Only one of David Mick’s (2004) list of our discipline’s leading literary stylists (Russell Belk, John Deighton, Morris Holbrook, Chris Janiszewski, Grant McCracken, Marsha Richins, Deborah Roeder-John, Linda Scott, Itamar Simonson) has been written about at length thus far and hosts of others whom Mick doesn’t mention (Eric Arnould, Beth Hirschman, Dennis Rook, John Sherry, Barbara Stern) are still awaiting their Boswell. This neglect, admittedly, is somewhat disappointing in light of writing’s central place in academic life and in light of the topic’s popularity in adjacent disciplines like anthropology, economics and psychology (Geertz, 1988; McCloskey, 1998; Soyland, 1994). The present paper, therefore, aims to address this omission by focusing attention on the first marketing literatus on Mick’s list of stylists, the eminent and much-published consumer researcher Russell W. Belk. It commences with a brief overview of Belk’s illustrious career, continues with a detailed critique of his distinctive writing style, which can best be described as ‘academic gothic’, and concludes with some summary thoughts on future challenges and scholarly opportunities.¹

La Belk époque

Consider the fork. Comparatively few consumer researchers write striking, three-word sentences like ‘Consider the fork’ (Belk, 1995a: 38). Fewer still follow it up with a discussion of the extraordinary history and cultural significance of such an ordinary domestic object. Russell William Belk, however, is no ordinary consumer researcher. Not only is he a thought leader of extraordinary ability, but he is one of the most prolific and consistently creative writers in the marketing discipline. His first impactful article appeared in 1974 and, in the 34 years since then, he has written approximately 300 learned papers, published 16 (mainly edited or co-edited) books and won some 30 scholarly accolades, including the Paul Converse Award, the Sheth Foundation Award, and the JCR 1989–1991 Best Paper Award.

So prodigious is Belk’s academic output that it is almost impossible to encapsulate. As a glance at his CV attests, he engages with subjects as eclectic as office furniture in China, gay pride in Toronto, Aboriginal art in Australia, gypsy musicians in Romania, casino consumption in Las Vegas, and pixilated Sims in
cyberspace; he employs methods as diverse as factor analysis, content analysis, signed digraphs, naturalistic research, cultural mapping and hunt-and-peck ethnography; and he experiments with a host of representational forms from videography and photoessays to creative non-fiction (Belk, 2006a).

Be that as it may, Belk’s compendious corpus is characterized by five fundamental themes: (1) consumption is an ongoing process, something more than the acquisition of objects, since it also involves possession, collection and disposition; (2) goods are meaning receptacles, inasmuch as consumers attach all manner of meanings to the objects they possess and which possess them in turn; (3) materialism is a reflection of personal and communal value structures, a multifaceted phenomenon that may be historically and culturally contingent but is ubiquitous all the same; (4) popular culture is a prism that reflects and refracts consumer society in general and individual identity construction in particular; (5) consumption is a form of production, insofar as consumers do more than merely absorb the values and meanings ascribed to goods and services by producers and marketers – they reject, rework and renegotiate them as well (Schau, 1998).

Fundamental themes notwithstanding, Belk is far from being a fundamentalist. On the contrary, he investigates consumption in diverse ways, in diverse contexts, using diverse methodologies. One of the most noteworthy things about Belk’s academic oeuvre is its evolutionary trajectory. Broadly speaking, five overlapping phases of scholarly development can be identified: (1) the inaugural years, 1975–1980, devoted to quantitative studies of situational influences on shopper behaviour and understanding the essence of gift giving; (2) the transitional years, 1980–1985, dominated by content analysis of comic books and magazine adverts, as well as scaling materialism; (3) the polemical years, 1985–1995, predicated on the pathbreaking Consumer Odyssey project, participation in the paradigm wars, and a summa on the ‘extended self’; (4) the ecumenical years, 1995–2000, where the Belkian embrace was extended to second and third world societies in the throes of transition to consumerism; (5) the magisterial years, 2000–2005, where Belk’s once controversial ideas were recognized, rewarded, and, arguably, recuperated by the marketing mainstream.

The sleep of Russell breeds monsters

Noting fundamental premises is one thing and tracing evolutionary trajectories is another. But what would a literary critic make of Russell W. Belk? The answer to this question depends on the type of literary critic, or school of literary criticism, that’s under consideration. As Stern (1989) shows, there are numerous schools of literary theory, ranging from Reader-response to Russian formalism. Although these schools have often been employed to study metaphorical ‘texts’ like advertisements and brands, they can also be applied to the writings of renowned researchers (Stern, 1990). A new historical account of Belk’s oeuvre, for example, might focus on the author’s fondness for unconventional, non-scholarly textual sources and the cultural conditions of production, such as the paradigm wars
within marketing and the rise of consumer studies in nearby academic disciplines. A post-colonial interpretation of his corpus, by contrast, would undoubtedly interrogate the relationship between Belk and the Other, his scholarly co-optation of second and third world consumption practices for the delectation of American consumer researchers. Conversely, a queer theory take on his position would almost certainly examine the erogenous elements that appear in a surprisingly high proportion of his publications, some of which will be considered below.

However, perhaps the most ‘obvious’ theoretical interpretation of Belk’s body of work is psychoanalytical (Eagleton, 1996; Vice, 1996; Wright, 1998). Not only do psychoanalytical arguments loom large in his articles – Freud, Jung, Lacan, Winnicott, and, most notably, Fromm are major influences on his worldview – but the abundant autobiographical material in his papers implies that such an approach might prove insightful. In this regard, consider the Oedipal arguments with his advertising executive father, which centred on Vance Packard’s notorious anti-marketing diatribe, *The Hidden Persuaders* (Belk, 2002). Consider also the freely-acknowledged mid-life crisis that drove the Consumer Odyssey and led to his brutal abandonment of the research methods he met at college (and which bore his first academic publications) for a glamorous new set of trophy techniques like naturalism and ethnography (Belk, 1991a).

It can even be argued that Belk’s career-spanning desire to break the ancestral bond with marketing, and establish consumer research as a separate academic discipline, is itself a kind of intellectual Oedipal struggle. In the mid-1980s, he denounced mainstream marketing research in the most provocative terms, contending that it was ‘petty, stupid and dull’ (Belk, 1987a: 1). He vociferously argued that consumer researchers should not be beholden to the money-minded managerial classes or accept the consultancy shilling. He loudly and repeatedly declared that there was ‘little worth reading in marketing’ (Belk, 1984: 58); that ‘we know nothing about consumer behavior’ (Belk 1984: 57); and, in a flagrant act of scholarly mutiny, that ‘consumer behavior is a field unto itself and is not a mere subdiscipline of marketing’ (Belk, 1984: 59).

Viewed from a middle-class, middle-of-the-road, middle-American managerial perspective, Belk’s rebellious behaviour can only be considered monstrous. As a business school-based marketing professor and holder of an endowed personal chair, he is not only biting the hand that feeds him, but devouring the dismembered cadaver. This monstrouness, nevertheless, provides a clue to the essential character of Belk’s corpus, the most apt term for which is ‘academic gothic’. The gothic, according to copious cultural authorities, variously pertains to a barbaric Germanic tribe that overran Ancient Rome and trampled on the fruits of civilization; an ornate, late-medieval architectural style characterized by pointed arches, ribbed vaults, flying buttresses et al; and, latterly, a popular consumer subculture with a penchant for black apparel, white cosmetics, morbid music and androgynous aesthetics (Cavallaro, 2002; Davenport-Hines, 1998; Goulding et al., 2004; Myrone, 2006; Powell and Smith, 2006; Stevens, 2000).

In strictly literary terms, however, gothic is a distinctive genre of fiction – a much maligned, admittedly overwrought genre of fiction – which irrupted in 1764...
with the publication of Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, attained its apogee with *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley’s imperishable 1818 classic, and periodically emerges from the dripping literary crypt, as per the gothic revivals of the late-19th and late-20th centuries (Botting, 1996). For iconoclastic literary theorist Leslie Fiedler (1967), gothic is nothing less than the primordial ooze of the American novel; its influence is discernible in everyone from Hawthorne, Poe and Melville to Lovecraft, Faulkner and King. ‘It is the gothic form’, he contends, ‘that has been most fruitful in the hands of our best writers . . . it is a literature of darkness and the grotesque in a land of light and affirmation’ (Fiedler, 1967: 28, 29).

Most would concede that Russell Belk is one of marketing’s best writers. He is also one of its most gothic. The content of his corpus is a veritable charnel house of consumer research. His Mormon Trek paper (Belk, 1992) is chock-a-block with horrific incidents, ranging from the disinterment of dead bodies for their possessions to one pilgrim’s onerous transportation of a weighty wooden coffin (shades of Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*). His Halloween papers are crammed with murder and mayhem, including urban legends about razor blades in trick-or-treating kiddie’s candy (Belk, 1990). His consideration of Christmas not only starts with a shock-horror tale of malevolent Yuletide behaviours, and revels in the details of Tiny Tim’s untimely expiry, but summarizes the Xmas slasher movies *Silent Night, Deadly Night* (Parts I and II) for good measure (Belk, 1989). His Gay Pride Parade paper lingers on the mephitic odours emanating from the fetid leather chaps of its S&M contingent (Kates and Belk, 2001). His description of the theological theme park, Heritage Village USA, conveys the impression of a kitsch gothic mansion, complete with madmen and women in the attic (O’Guinn and Belk, 1989). His story of soap powder marketing in South Africa, which foregrounds natives’ repeated attempts to scrub themselves white, is an indictment of the grotesqueries of western capitalism (Belk, 2000a). His précis of the Paul Mazursky movie *Scenes from a Mall*, perfectly captures today’s post-modern purgatory, where hellfire and damnation are replaced by ennui and alienation (Belk and Bryce, 1993). And, as for his synoptic study of Las Vegas, there is no better illustration of Belk’s academic gothic than the following opening paragraph:

Dateline Las Vegas. Megacorp recently announced plans for a new, entirely below ground, hotel/casino/theme park here to be called ‘Hell.’ Having already themed Pharonic Egypt, the Roman Empire, Caribbean Pirates, South Sea Volcanic Isles, the Land of Oz, New York City, Paris, Venice, Monte Carlo, Bellagio, medieval castles, and other exotic locales and eras, it was perhaps only a matter of time before one of the corporations in Las Vegas tumbled to Hell. The resort ties in nicely with the city’s annual Helldorado celebration as well as its well-entrenched association with the mortal sins of greed, lust, drunkenness, debauchery, and bad taste. With the catchy ad slogans Megacorp is trumpeting – ‘Go to Hell,’ ‘You’ll be Dying to Get Here,’ ‘The Devil Made Me Do It,’ and ‘Damned Good Fun’ – Hell seems destined to become the latest and greatest attraction in this city of excess. With Hell’s promised spectacle of ever-flaming fire and brimstone, the Mirage’s periodically erupting volcano is likely to seem tame. Planned theme rides like The Drop of Doom, From Here to Eternity, and The Bottomless Pit promise much more profound and frightening adventures than the roller coasters and log flumes of other Strip resorts. What’s a wave pool when you can swim in boiling oil? What’s a
barge on the Nile when you can be ferried across the River Styx by Charon? And what’s
赌博 for money when you can play ‘You Bet Your Life’? If the Secrets of the Luxor appeal to
those fascinated with New Age occultism, imagine the Satanic possibilities of titilating
torture in Hell. Demonic and devilishly costumed employees will be fittingly called the croupiers
from Hell, the cocktail waitresses from Hell, and the pit bosses from Hell. The new resort’s
president is to be addressed as His Royal Satanic Majesty. And to attract aging baby boomers,
Megacorp has already signed Mick Jagger to play the big doom, doing ‘Sympathy for the Devil,’
along with warm-up acts Kiss (‘Hotter than Hell’) and Meatloaf (‘Bat out of Hell’), while a
succession of heavy metal bands will appear as lounge acts. It comes as little surprise that the
resort’s restaurants will feature flame-broiled dinners, deviled eggs, soul food and devils food
cake to guests seated in hand baskets. Shops in the resort’s attached shopping arcade include
Needful Things, Souls on Fire Discotheque, Hallmark Cards, Save My Sole Shoes, Rosemary’s
Baby Shop, Devil May Care Clothing, Hellraiser’s Bar, Beetlejuice Julius, Paradise Lost Luggage,
Inferno Hot Tubs, S&M Candies, Purgatory Pete’s Pets, Club Limbo, Death Watch Dinner
Theater (featuring the ‘Corpses on Parade’ musical review), Hell’s Angels Insignia Wear, the
Faustus Follies, Hard Rock and a Hard Place, and Beelzebub’s Brew Pub. In the future Las
Vegas’s rumored underworld connections are likely to have entirely new meanings.

(Belk, 2000b: 101–2)

This mock-Mephistophelian passage, it must be stressed, is not a minor compo-
nent of Belk’s voluminous corpus. His body of work is consistently and congeni-
tally gothic. From his earliest analyses of situational effects, which included an
experimental investigation of hypothetical horror movies, including The Motorcycle
Freaks and (Poe’s) The Masque of the Red Death (Belk, 1975), through organ
recipients’ nightmarish belief that they’re tuning into the donor (Belk, 1988), to
his recent reviews of gross-out stories in the Bible (Belk, 2006b) and spontaneous
combustion in The Sims computer game (Belk, 2003), gothic elements recur
repeatedly. Aply, these include summaries of gothic and neo-gothic novels by
William Beckford, Nikolai Gogol, Stephen King and Bret Easton Ellis, as well as
the decidedly macabre suggestion that McDonald’s restaurant in Tiananmen
Square might mirror Mao’s nearby mausoleum with a wax replica of Ronald
McDonald’s grinning corpse (Belk, 2000c). The videographies, likewise, often
verge on the hideous, most notably the misshapen Zimbabwean artworks (Belk
and Groves, 1999), the vertiginous Bridge Climb (Belk, 2001), and the lunatic
tourists who travel to the empty Antarctic in inexplicable pursuit of lost penguins
(Belk and Groves, 1998).

Death permeates Belk’s oeuvre, furthermore. Neolithic grave goods (Belk,
1985), burial practices in Africa and China (Belk and Bonsu, 2003; Belk and Zhau,
2003) and Australian Aboriginal funeral ceremonies (Belk and Groves, 1995) are
all analysed in detail and the less said about his warped wish to be interred wear-
ing a pair of joke shop Groucho Glasses, the better (Belk, 2000c). Analogously, it
doesn’t take too much imagination to detect traces of David Lynch in the
Mountain Man paper (Belk and Costa, 1998). The article is so vivid that readers
half expect Sasquatch to come strolling out of a wooded glade, arm-in-arm with
Two Tequilas. No less vivid is the extended self concept, which is akin to a
grotesque Frankenstein monster, a great shambling beast dragging its intangible
tail of collectibles, body parts, family members, domestic livestock and manifold
memento mori (Belk, 1988). How people pass each other on the footpath, heaven only knows.

And then there’s ‘A Modest Proposal’, Belk’s mid-1980s parody of the Consumer Information Processing model, which not only caused outrage at the peak of the paradigm wars and reportedly cost him the editorship of the *Journal of Consumer Research*, but depicted a proto robo-consumer that, if not quite in Terminator territory, was definitely within spitting distance of Blade Runner:

The solution to the problem of consumer-behavior departures from the CIP model should be obvious. If consumers are too naturally stupid to behave in the way the computer does, let us provide them with the artificial intelligence that will enable them to do so. I am informed by scientists in both Silicon Valley and Bionic Valley that this is not only technologically possible, but long overdue. With the surgical implantation of one small processor chip and another small coprocessor for added speed in numerical calculations, consumers should not only be able to live up to the models that have been developed to describe their behavior, but they should behave in a much more predictable, logical, and infallible fashion than is currently the case. No more self-indulgent splurges, overly generous gifts of love, nonnutritional eating, ignored advertising, or lamentable susceptibility to well-crafted sales pitches. These benefits are so self-evidently in the consumer’s best interest that consumers will hardly need to be convinced to acquire the requisite package of artificial intelligence. The U.S. economy and society will also benefit from the perfect price competition and the elimination of wasteful emotional appeals that would result.

(Belk, 1987b: 362)

**Weird tales**

There’s more to the gothic than uncanny, transgressive or shocking subject matters, however. Certain salient themes are traditionally associated with the genre, principally excess, monstrosity, irony and the supernatural (Botting, 1996; Hughes, 2006; Moretti, 2005). The opening sentence of Botting’s best-selling primer, for example, ostentatiously announces, ‘Gothic signifies a writing of excess’. Leslie Fiedler concurs. ‘The gothic’, he proclaims, ‘is the product of an implicit esthetic that replaces the classic concept of nothing-in-excess with the revolutionary doctrine that nothing succeeds like excess’ (Fiedler, 1967: 134). So popular has the gothic-equals-excess comparison become that Hughes (2006: 20) ruefully acknowledges its scholarly hegemony: ‘It . . . has come to function as a definition of the genre far more generalized, and thus much more easily applied to disparate material, than any convention of character construction or plot locale’.

When it comes to succeeding through excess, R.W. Belk is the P.T. Barnum of consumer research. Excess is his scholarly calling card, his signature rhetorical stratagem, the essence of Belk. The sheer number of publications on his CV; the huge range of topics he has investigated; the wide variety of countries and cultures he’s studied; the manifold research methodologies he has artfully employed; and the prodigious palette of scholarly sources he routinely draws upon bear witness to his exuberant, brilliantly inventive excess, as does his compendious catalogue of collaborators (63, approximately half of whom co-wrote one article only); as does
the cavalcade of quotes and excerpts that pepper his papers (the ‘agapic love’ article (Belk and Coon, 1993) is essentially an integrated sequence of 102 separate quotations); as does his inordinate love of long lists, lists upon lists and extended synonym strings:

We interviewed people as diverse as foreign and domestic tourists, entrants in a custom car show, owners of goats in a goat show, the Amish, nuns, a family traveling across the country by covered wagon, artists, suburban housewives, circus performers, street people, collectors, and an old man with three garages full of a lifetime’s possessions.

(Belk, 1991a: 9)

Social class is not just a classificatory variable with which to segment the market for clothing and other consumer goods, but is rather a consumption reality, involving wealth and poverty, haves and have nots, hegemonic control, core and periphery, cultures and subcultures, and desires and frustrations. A family is not a decision-making consumption unit, but a fragile and symbolically rich human group relating to one another in ways that are increasingly mediated by consumption. And a product like an automobile is not just a transportation vehicle but a vehicle for fantasy, fun, prestige, power, pollution, carnage, sex, mobility, connection, alienation, aggression, achievement, and the host of cultural changes it brings in its wake.

(Belk, 1995c: 62)

[C]ool synonyms included: awesome, bad, bad ass, beautiful, birchen, bitchen, bonus, brilliant, butter, chic, chill, chinson, choice, crazy, da bomb, digidy, dope, epic, excellent, fancy, fierce, fly, fresh, fun, funky, gnarly, great, groovy, hard, hellacool, hip, hot, ill, impressed, impressive, incredible, jhakass, mad, mad cool, neat, nice crap, niice, off the chain, off da hook, phat, pimp, pretty, rad, radical, righteous, rockin’, sexy, shit, sick, smooth, snap, spectacular, stellar, stud, sweet, the bomb, the shit, the shiznit, styling & profiling, the man, tight, trendy, tubular, unique, up on the QT, wicked, wonderful, and wow.

(Belk et al., 2006)

Number, interestingly, is yet another manifestation of Belkian excess. Although his reputation largely rests on qualitative methods, he repeatedly resorts to the rhetoric of big numbers, as in the following, far from atypical case:

The U.S. Smithsonian Institution, for example, in 1982 had 100,000 bats, 2,300 spark plugs, 24,797 woodpeckers, 82,615 fleas, 12,000 Arctic fishing tools, 14,300 sea sponges, 6,012 animal pelts, 2,587 musical instruments, and 10 specimens of dinosaur excrement in its warehouses.

(Belk, 1995a: 147)

The methods sections of his papers, moreover, are engorged with gee-whiz statistics which signal the stupendous, near-enough superhuman effort that has gone into the article – years taken, transcript pages, equipment used, informants consulted, data sources synthesized and so on. Belk may not be a number cruncher as such but he repeatedly uses numerical rhetoric to compelling effect:

We initiated this project during 1990 and continued to collect data through 1994. We conducted participant observation at 13 rendezvous, each lasting from two to 10 days (a three-day rendezvous being modal), at various sites in Colorado, Utah, Montana, and Wyoming. We also observed and conducted interviews at two mountain man supply stores, two muzzle-loading
shoots, three mountain man weddings, a festival of the American West, and, for the purposes of contrast, six Native American powwows. In addition to approximately 50 formal and informal interviews with participants at mountain men events, we conducted eight depth interviews in the homes of mountain men and their families.

(Belk and Costa, 1998: 219)

Perhaps the most blatant example of Belkian excess – aside from occasional exhortations to embrace Bataillesque shock tactics (Belk, 1998) – is found in his out-and-out citophilia. Without exception, his papers are engorged with citations. So much so, that it is often difficult to extract the argument from the surrounding thicket of surnames, dates, parentheses and semi-colons. Each clause is closed by a cluster of cites (10 or 12 is not unusual), most papers contain 200-plus references, on average (the ‘extended self’ article runs to 350) and, like the academic magus he is, Belk frequently alludes to sources without formal acknowledgement, arcane sources that only aficionados recognize.

Alongside, and interspersed with excess, monstrosity is the characteristic most people associate with the gothic. The genre is replete with Frankensteins, Draculas, mummies, mutants, spectres, revenants, rapacious nuns, defrocked priests, mad scientists, ancestral curses, unnameable things, unspeakable cadavers, and unimaginable grotesques (Davenport-Hines, 1998). Belk’s corpus too is replete with heinous horrors, nowhere more so than in the relentlessly grisly Mormon Trek article:

We wrapped the now frail body of our father in a sheet and then in a blanket and left him casketless in the dry earth. My mother feared that wolves or other wild animals would molest his grave as they had done so many other times. So we all carried stones, many of them and as large as we could lift and piled on top of the grave until it was entirely covered. On top of the stones we piled sagebrush or any other dry brush we could find in the vicinity until the rocks were covered with two or three feet deep, then it was set on fire. The idea was to do away with any odor that would induce an animal to dig him up.

(Belk, 1992: 354)

This excerpt, to repeat, is not unusual. One of the most striking things about Belk’s oeuvre is the frequency with which aspects of the ‘grotesque body’ appear. Almost every paper alludes to corporeal matters. Clearly, many of these are included as ‘eyecatchers’, designed to enliven the prose or lighten a long list or simply shock scholarly stick-in-the-muds – they’re the academic equivalent of ‘boo!’ or ‘don’t look behind you!’ – but when itemized, his gothic inventory veers between graphic, gruesome and gratuitous: circumcision, menstruation, defecation, urination (by wolves, on churches, in computer games), transvestism, hermaphroditism, cannibalism, bestiality, coprophagy, promiscuity, pornography, sexual fantasies, sexual scamming, sexual assault, sexual abstinence, collecting sexual partners, insatiable sexual appetites, sexually transmitted diseases, Biblical cures for yeast infections, fellatio, cunnilingus, contaminated underwear, distressed pantyhose, used condoms, leather dildos, vibromatic beds, penis tattoos, penis gourds, faux sexual organs, frequent use of the F-word, eating chewed food, swallowing expectorated spittle, body heat on toilet seats, body odour, bad breath,
semen retention, lubricious dreams, erotic dancing, topless women, sexually arousing statues, sabotaging public lavatories, ugly bottle blondes, dirty old men, date rape, aphrodisiacs, multiple orgasms, extra-martial affairs, Freud’s phallic statues, mastectomied Barbie dolls, libidinous nuns wearing sexy underwear, cyber-polygamy, learning another gender, handguns as symbolic penises, doorways as symbolic vaginas, convertibles as substitute mistresses, freelance gynaecologists, fornication pantaloons, venereal desserts, dinosaur excrement, member checks and more.

Above and beyond the literal monstrosities in Belk’s oeuvre, there are metaphorical monstrosities as well. Much of his career – and most of the 1980s – has been devoted to that classic gothic archetype ‘overcoming the monster’ (Booker, 2004); the monster in this case being the methodological, philosophical and managerial ogres that preyed on the community of marketing scholars. As noted previously, he challenged the prevailing positivistic perspective, belittled the narrow aspiration to managerial ‘relevance’ and effectively declared independence for consumer research, contending that it should cut its ties with bottom-line fixated executives and seek succour in the Elysian Fields of qualitative methods and untrammeled scholarship (Belk, 1984, 1987a, 1987b). Most would concur that he carried the day – the ascendancy of interpretive research is inarguable (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) – though his laudable latter-day attempt to take on the vampiric bloodsuckers of western capitalism (Belk, 2006c) may prove much too much even for Russell.

From a mainstream perspective, of course, it can be contended that Belk himself was the monster who threatened the field and who, ironically, has been tamed by more circumspect colleagues. Certainly, the slew of awards and his recent return to the marketing fold would suggest that the fire-breathing intellectual dragon of the mid-1980s, who famously denounced marketing’s preoccupation with ‘the dog food level of things’ (Belk, 1987a: 1), has been doused by the discipline, if not quite extinguished. Indeed, many scholarly conservatives might consider it deeply ironic that so much of Belk’s ‘naturalistic’ consumer research is devoted to ostensibly ‘unnatural’ activities like swap meets, grave goods, Mormon Trekkers, Thai prostitutes and, the ultimate dog food level of things, eating domestic pets (Belk, 1988).

Irony, however, is central to the gothic worldview. It is no accident that the first gothic novel, Horace Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto, was a parody and as Stevens (2000: 26) opines about Gothic works of art generally, ‘the very best of them transcend their own formal limitations, often through a subtle sense of irony’. The foregoing quotations concerning Hell Casino and roboconsumer clearly indicate that Belk refuses to take things too seriously, as does his sophomoric assemblage of Japanese brand names like Trim Pecker trousers, Pocari Sweat soda, and My Pee baby talcum powder (Belk and Pollay, 1985), as does his ghoulish joke about chalk-and-talk professors with white lung disease (Belk, 2002), as does his parodic vision of 23rd century societal festivals such as Coke Day, Elvis Day, St Johnny Walker Day and the Feast of the Seven Eleven (Belk, 1996).

As ever, these Belkian examples are the rule not the exception. The titles of his
articles are unfailingly wry, allusive or tongue-in-cheek: Been There, Done That, Bought the Souvenirs; Ella’s Elephant and Three Blind White Guys; Look at Them Blokes, Got No Bloody Control, See! Can’t Buy Me Love; Do Not Go Gently Into That Good Night; Yes, We Have No Theory; Where Have All the Flowers Gone?; Three Coins in Caesar’s Palace Fountain; The Missing Streetcar Named Desire. Likewise, he is inordinately fond of wordplay (‘the bane of abundance’, ‘Indianness is Indianless’, ‘Las Vegas swinger swagger’, ‘the fire of desire’, ‘social construction of unreality’); alliteration (Carnival, Control, and Corporate Culture in Contemporary Halloween Celebrations); and good old fashioned puns (Highways and Buyways, May the Farce Be With You, Seen From a Mall, Out of Sight and Out of Our Minds).

In fact, from his early studies of comic books (Belk, 1987c) to his recent reflections on The Sims computer game (Belk, 2003), Russell has repeatedly stressed the importance of a playful, transgressive, irreverent scholarly attitude: ‘It is essential that the creative scholar engage a playful liminal spirit rather than a deadly serious quest for knowledge’ (Belk, 1997a: 29). Serious play is not only the mark of a successful collector (Belk et al., 1991), but also the secret of successful scholarship. Cynics may dismiss this irreverent advice as juvenile nonsense, an infantile affront to marketing’s scientific aspirations, but Belk doesn’t regard infantilization as a fatal weakness. To the contrary, he sees it as a source of strength. The infantile, he believes, is a privileged state. It undergirds his enthusiasm for Las Vegas, Halloween, Christmas, materialism, and comic books, to say nothing of his studies of children’s birthday parties, collecting activities, advertising recognition, and adolescent dating behaviours. Fairy stories, furthermore, feature again and again in his oeuvre, not only in paper titles like ‘Wolf Brands in Sheep’s Clothing’ (Belk, 2000d) and ‘The Goblin and the Huckster’ (Belk, 1997b), or even in his wry description of himself as ‘a babe in the woods’ (Belk, 1991a: 4). But he also extracts lessons from fairy stories and children’s poems, even on the most formal occasions, not least his ACR Presidential Address and subsequent Fellows Speech (Belk, 1987a, 1995b). ‘What’, he once pointedly asked, ‘should ACR want to be when it grows up?’ (Belk, 1986a).

To be sure, the ironic undercurrent of the gothic does not alter the basic fact that it is a genre preoccupied with the supernatural, the esoteric, the disturbing, the otherworldly (Hughes, 2006). The same is true of Russell Belk’s scholarly territory. His is the otherworldly world of Mountain Men, a buck-skinned yesterescape where testosterone does the talking. His is the otherworldly world of the Mormon Trekkers, a terrifying pilgrimage to the environs of Zion. His is the otherworldly world of Red Mesa, an insalubrious swap meet on the outskirts of a south-western city. His is the otherworldly world of The Sims computer game, a retrotopia where the players play God with their cyber creations. His is the otherworldly world of Heritage Village, USA, a theological theme park in South Carolina. His is the otherworldly world of Aborigine Dream time, Zimbabwean stone statues and Chinese death rituals. His is the otherworldly world of Halloween, Christmas and analogous public holidays. His is the otherworldly world of Las Vegas, Disneyland and similar liminal sites. His is the otherworldly world that readers of Belk’s
articles are spirited to, insofar as his papers don’t simply describe hyperreal worlds apart; they are hyperreal worlds apart:

In the morning, the smell of burning wood mixes with evergreen scents and the earthy smell of damp ground slowly heated by the morning sun. As buckskinners arise, generally an hour or two after sunrise, they begin preparations for the morning meal. The aromas of sizzling grease and percolating coffee fill the air. Early risers begin to call out to one another, stopping for a chat and a cup of coffee. In these high altitude camps, the morning temperature is crisp, sometimes below freezing. The sound of crackling fires is soon complemented by the sharp retorts of black-powder rifles at the nearby shooting range, and acrid black powder smoke begins to waft across the campsites. As the day proceeds, many gravitate to the hustle and bustle of traders’ row, where exuberant greetings of acquaintances from past years are often heard. In the early evenings, smoke rises from the campfires, contributing to a nostalgic ambience and a sense of disjuncture with the modern world that lies somewhere beyond the rendezvous site.

(Belk and Costa, 1998: 223–4)

Above all, his is the otherworldly world of the 1986 Consumer Odyssey, an eight-week expedition into the materialistic heartland of American society, which was consciously modelled on Homer’s mythical Odyssey and which has attained mythical status within our discipline (Belk et al., 1989). One of the high watermarks of post-war marketing research, the Belk-instigated Odyssey is the epitome of scholarly supernaturalism, inasmuch as it uncovered the essential sanctity of contemporary consumption. By showing how the sacred, the hallowed, the everlasting inheres in seemingly profane possessions, collections, places and suchlike – and by identifying the component parts of consumer consecration, such as hierophany, kratophany and sacrifice – Belk and his co-Odysseans transported consumer research to a secondary, supernatural world, a world that has proved a happy hunting ground for many subsequent scholars.

Without doubt, the most noteworthy subsequent scholar is Belk himself. In addition to his ruminations on Christian supernaturalism – everything from apocalyptic Las Vegas to the activities of Bible salespersons – and his analyses of synonymous transcendent states variously termed ‘magic’, ‘aura’, ‘hope’, ‘soul’, ‘flow’, ‘fantasy’, ‘escape’, ‘desire’, ‘being’, ‘liminality’, ‘imagination’, ‘hyperreality’ and ‘agapic love’, Belk’s language is consistently Biblical. He describes, for instance, how ‘economics begat marketing which begat consumer behavior research which begat the new consumer behavior research’ (Belk, 1995c: 58). He confesses to being branded with the ‘stigma’ of the business school (Belk, 1995c: 74). He repeatedly refers to the appeal of ‘forbidden fruit’ (Belk, 1998) and has produced a video on the ‘gospel of prosperity’ in Ghana (Belk and Bonsu, 2005). He sets great store by William Blake’s Swedenborgian vision of the ‘world in a grain of sand/and heaven in a wild flower’ (Belk’s methodology in a nutshell). He throws in uncited allusions to the scriptures, such as the ‘still small critical voice’ of Elijah (Belk, 1995c: 66). And his Old Testamental deification of Steve Jobs begins: ‘In the beginning was the void. And the void was digital. But lo, there came upon the land, the shadow of Steven Jobs. And Steven said, “Let there be Apple.” And there was Apple. And Steven beheld Apple. And it was good’ (Belk and Tumbat, 2003: 1).
Many of these religious allusions, admittedly, are conveyed in a somewhat deadpan, decidedly tongue-in-cheek manner, as in the case of his comparison between Christmas and Halloween (Belk, 1990), or the fancy-dress party in Salt Lake City with its raunchy nuns and lascivious priests (Belk, 1994), or indeed his ironic inventory of retail stores in Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker’s religious theme park, Heritage Village USA, which ranges from Heaven Fudge and Noah’s Toy Shoppe to Der Bakker’s Bakkery (O’Guinn and Belk, 1989).

Joking aside, the key point is that the profane is never far away from the sacred in Belk’s conceptual cosmos. The two spheres interpenetrate. The seven deadly sins are as much a part of Belk’s consumer theology as the seven deified virtues. The sacred pursuit of serious scholarship should be accompanied by gales of profane laughter. Belk is the Lord of Marketing Misrule. He is academic gothic incarnate.

Double trouble

Important though they are, excess, monstrosity, irony and supernaturalism aren’t the only iconic gothic characteristics. Others include melodrama, reflexivity and a preoccupation with the past (Lloyd-Smith, 2004). All of these are readily identifiable within Russell Belk’s compendious corpus, whether it be the melodramatic register of some of his writing (e.g. the hyperbolic claim that our extended selves encompass the entire planet), the reflexive, three-country study of desire’s metaphorical manifestations (Belk et al., 2003), or the historical approach adopted in his studies of Christmas, childhood, collecting, comic books, consumer society, coolness and countless others. There is, nevertheless, another gothic trait that is particularly relevant to the art of Belk. And that is doubling. Doubling is integral to the gothic aesthetic, as innumerable alter egos, doppelgangers, mirror images, evil twins, split personalities, simulacra, replicants and visitations by the living dead bear witness (Davies and Dryden, 2003; Schwartz, 1996).

Doubling is central to Belk. At the height of the paradigm wars, for instance, marketing and consumer research were his Hyde and Jekyll respectively, as were positivistic and naturalistic research methods, as were artistic and scientific approaches to the nature of materialism. At a later stage in his career, the same bipolar functions were performed by ‘old’ and ‘new’ consumer research, American and Third World consumer cultures, and written and visual modes of representation. Indeed doubling, and the associated interpenetration of opposites, pervades Belk’s worldview. It is evident in the classic sacred and profane paper, the eight binary oppositions identified at Red Mesa, the countervailing studies of (burning) consumer desire and (dispassionate) cool consumption and the distinction he makes between good cop/bad cop interviewing techniques, Type A and Type B collectors, Scrooge-like as opposed to Cratchit-like attitudes to Christmas, and many, many more.

It is also evident in a stylistic sense, insofar as he is very fond of diacopic wordplay, where resonant words are repeated for rhetorical effect (‘the desire to desire’,...
how prolonged is prolonged?", 'the overflow area overflowed', 'stuffing them with stuff', 'in love with love'). Reflexivity is another manifestation of this trait, as for example in his propensity to collect collectors, study consumers' odysseys in the course of the Consumer Odyssey or even in his admission that he put too much of his extended self into the extended self paper. However, by far the most striking manifestation of Belk's stylistic doubling is found in the two tones, or registers, of literary voice that he ordinarily employs. Many of his articles begin and end on a lyrical, almost poetic note, though the intervening material is written in conventional academese. True, this two-tone tendency articulates Belk's (1986b) distinction between 'propositional' and 'experiential' knowledge – though some might consider them his sacred and profane styles – but the important point is that the top and tail of Belk's articles are ordinarily written in similar tones of voice. One echoes the other, even to the extent of repeating resonant words or phrases. The opening words of the Mormon Trek paper are 'we move those possessions that are most apt to move us', as are its closing words (Belk, 1992). The epigraph from A Streetcar Named Desire, 'I don't want realism, I want magic', reappears at the end of his chapter on insatiable consumer desire (Belk et al., 2000). The Shakespearean sonnet at the start of 'Possessions and the Sense of Past' is recapitulated when the paper reaches its wonderfully poetic climax (Belk, 1991b).

Above and beyond such stylistic doublings, there's Belk's self-identified intellectual doppelganger, the celebrated inter-war literary theorist, Walter Benjamin. In an autobiographical essay in JM, he specifically compares himself to Benjamin and then, intriguingly, immediately disavows the connection (Belk, 2002). Although it would be excessive to suggest that Belk's acclamation/renunciation of his famous forerunner is an example of the 'anxiety of influence', Harold Bloom's (1973) controversial theory concerning the agonistic evolution of literary tradition, the comparison remains worthy of note. It is noteworthy because Belk and Benjamin's intellectual careers, far from being dissimilar, are strikingly congruent in several significant respects. Like Belk, Benjamin's work ethic was prodigious, as was his published output. Like Belk, Benjamin only wrote one full-length book, since he preferred the essay form. Like Belk, Benjamin drew upon an extensive variety of eclectic domains, everything from Hollywood movies and advertising hoardings to the plots of baroque drama and precepts of neo-Marxism. Like Belk, Benjamin believed that the most profound insights could be found in the most 'trivial' or degraded sources, such as fairy tales, detective stories and domestic pets. Like Belk, Benjamin built up an elaborate card index containing quotes, excerpts and synopses of his book- and source-culling activities. Like Belk, Benjamin was an inveterate traveller, who frequently extolled the intellectual virtues of visiting different places, perspectives and scholarly flanerie generally. Like Belk, Benjamin set great store by the magical, the mystical, the kaleidoscopic, the phantasmagorical and desperately desired to re-enchant the world. Like Belk, Benjamin was heavily influenced by theological sources, albeit the Cabala and messianic Judaism as opposed to the Bible and Pentecostal Protestantism. Like Belk, Benjamin identified the religiosity inherent in western capitalism, arguing that capitalism was a religion (not merely a Weberian manifestation of the Protestant work ethic). Like
Belk, Benjamin was intrigued by what he termed ‘porosity’, the dialectical inter-penetration of ostensibly opposed states (outside and inside, sacred and profane, past and present, male and female, urban and rural, art and commerce). Like Belk, Benjamin was drawn to collecting, gift-giving, the miniature, world fairs, department stores and harboured a secret desire to produce a work composed entirely of judiciously selected quotations (something Belk almost achieved with his agapic love article). Like Belk, Benjamin is famous for a lost work (on shopping arcades) that never actually got written but served as a source of several important papers (cf. Belk’s aborted book on the extended self). Like Belk, Benjamin was fascinated by photography, film and not least the implications of new technology for the standard scholarly article. (His surrealististic photoessay, One Way Street, not only exemplifies this picture writing, but it was a deliberate challenge to established modes of academic discourse.) Like Belk, Benjamin’s often brilliant writings have a hyperreal, quasi-oneiric quality, largely attributable to the montage-like means by which the individual fragments were assembled. Like Belk, Benjamin espoused ‘immanent criticism’, the close reading of individual artworks, and wrote in two registers, poetic and prosaic. Like Belk, Benjamin was widely regarded as a maverick spokesperson for ‘weird science’ – Frankfurt School colleagues dismissed his ‘undialectical dialectics’ – only to be vindicated in the fullness of time. Like Belk, Benjamin considered childhood a privileged state (he collected children’s books, made radio programs for kids, described his unpublished magnum opus as a ‘dialectical fairytale’ and his celebrated ‘Mechanical Reproduction’ paper initially contained a section on Mickey Mouse), but unlike fellow members of the Frankfurt School, who disdained the infantilization of popular culture, Benjamin believed it held the key to understanding consumer society and the commodity form. Like Belk, Benjamin was an intellectual pointillist who not only wrote about sites, situations and specifics, but akin to the collector of erotica he once artfully described (Benjamin, 1978a: 373), the great German cultural critic took ‘Rabelaisian joy in quantities’. That’s Russell to a T.

To be sure, the foregoing inventory doesn’t mean that Belk is some kind of academic throwback, much less a revenant consumer researcher who is channeling Benjamin’s corpus. There are many noteworthy differences between the two. As Belk (2002) himself observes, Benjamin’s social standing steadily declined through time, whereas Belk has moved inexorably upward. Benjamin signal failed to find employment in the academic system, whereas Belk enjoys numerous institutional affiliations. Benjamin’s scholarly endeavours were largely ignored during his lifetime – no one could understand his PhD dissertation and he withdrew it rather than face the ignominy of formal rejection – whereas Belk is lionized, albeit after a self-imposed sojourn in the wilderness. Benjamin’s intellectual project was profane first and sacred second (he championed ‘crude thought’ and ‘profane illumination’), whereas Belk’s has been predominantly sacred with profane appendages. Benjamin’s writing style tended toward the bafflingly gnomic, whereas Belk is commendably lucid. Benjamin believed that the art of storytelling was in terminal decline, whereas Belk contends that it’s stronger than ever. Benjamin regarded the shopping arcade as the quintessential manifestation of
consumer culture, whereas Belk considers collecting to be the apotheosis of consumption. Benjamin never worked with co-authors (with one noteworthy exception), whereas Belk is a collaborator first, last and always. Benjamin was a quasi-Marxist who envisaged a European urban utopia, whereas Belk is non-aligned ideologically and finds paradise in the mountains and forests of the American west. 

Yet, for all the differences, the parallels are fascinating. Russell Belk, arguably, is the Walter Benjamin of our time. Appropriately, perhaps the best description of Belk’s scholarly activities is Hannah Arendt’s (1973: 54) summary of Benjamin’s working methods, which she describes as being ‘Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and to bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths, and to carry them to the surface’.

Whatever else is said about him, either pro or con, it’s undeniable that Russell Belk has an unerring eye for the rich and strange. When all is said and done, and his corpus is considered as a whole, it is not unlike a soaring gothic cathedral, complete with flying buttresses, grinning gargoyles, stained glass windows, subterranean ossuaries, sacrificial altars, swinging censers, and uncomfortable wooden pews. Once occupied by a heretical scholarly sect, weeping and wailing in the intellectual wilderness, Russminster Abbey is now the world headquarters of the consumer research Reformation, a rich and rapidly growing faith that hails from the land of interpretive milk and ethnographic honey. Or so the story goes . . .

Belk may be a gothic cathedral of thought, but there is another macro-environmental point pertaining to his perennial academic quest. Commentators on gothic irruptions in literature and art agree that its periodic reappearances are related to revolutionary events in society generally (Davenport-Hinds, 1998). The French and American Revolutions, in particular, triggered the ‘first’ wave of gothic, and the technological and scientific revolutions of the late 19th century precipitated the ‘second’. Apart from the fact that Belk’s corpus coincides with the current ‘third’ wave of fin de siècle Gothicism (Edmundson, 1997), it is arguable that his rise to academic prominence is inseparable from the ‘paradigm wars’ that convulsed marketing in the mid-1980s. These wars, what is more, cannot be divorced from wider macro-environmental trends, such as executives’ ubiquitous embrace of the marketing concept, consumers’ cognisance of corporate marketing strategies and the increasing abundance of almost identical offerings in every imaginable product category, which altered the balance of power between marketers and consumers, and which latter-day advances in IT have further tipped in consumers’ favour (Brown, 2004). Marketing, in short, is in its Grand Gauginol period and Russell W. Belk is its impresario.

**Gothic a-go-go?**

Regardless of whether the foregoing interpretation is entertained, the single most important lesson of the above exercise is that *writing is crucial*. It is an essential
academic skill, one that every marketing scholar is expected to acquire, usually by osmosis. If nothing else, analysing Russell Belk’s oeuvre raises questions about the ‘good writing guidelines’ found in normative, how-to, Strunk and White-style manuals of best practice (Brown, 2005). Almost without exception, they champion short sentences, simple words and straightforward, ideally unobtrusive, prose. Less is best, apparently.

As Yagoda (2004) shows, however, the basic problem with this excise excess ethos – the George Orwell (1962) school of thought – is that it isn’t adhered to by many acknowledged masters of the written word. ‘It has come to pass that personal style is generally abused, ignored, marginalized, or subsumed under a definition of style that is more or less its opposite. How odd, then, that so many current writers have such strong, distinctive, and affecting styles!’ (Yagoda, 2004: 19).

The same is true of marketing. Studies of the literary styles of Ted Levitt and Morris Holbrook – highly regarded scholars who epitomize opposite extremes of the academic-/practitioner-orientated divide – show that ‘good writing guidelines’ are roundly disregarded by both of them (Brown, 1999). Extremely long sentences, lots and lots of adverbs and adjectives, all sorts of wilfully alliterative firework displays – in short, the gamut of bad habits prohibited by Strunk and White (2000) and the like – are there in abundance. As we have seen, moreover, Russell William Belk is even more extreme than Theodore Levitt and Morris B. Holbrook.

So, what does this mean? Should we reject scholarly convention, rip up the style book, and go wild and crazy? Is it time for a literary – as opposed to a literal – return to Belk’s mid-1980s mantra, borrowed from gonzo journalist nonpareil, Hunter S. Thompson: ‘when the going gets weird, the weird turn professional’?

Not necessarily. Gothic a-go-go may be right for some people but not for everyone. The worst thing we can do is become pale imitations of Belk or Holbrook or Levitt. Mechanical reproduction leads to the diminution of art, as Benjamin (1973a) famously observed. What we do need to do is pay more attention to what we write and, analogously, to pay more attention to those who write well. There are many excellent literary stylists in marketing and consumer research, as Mick (2004) rightly observes. There are many tools and techniques to help us better understand how they do what they do (Stern, 1989). A reader-response study of Shelby Hunt, for example, might be mighty enlightening, as might a neo-Aristotelian approach to Linda Scott, as might the hypothesis that Elizabeth Hirschman is a magic realist. The possibilities are endless.

Some, of course, will say that such studies are unwarranted, since they fall foul of the so-called biographical fallacy. Authors, according to scholars of a post-structuralist persuasion, are an artefact of linguistic tectonics, societal power/knowledge formations and always-already-written regimes of truth (Hix, 1990). As such, they should not be privileged, much less studied in detail. To do so smacks of the ‘great man’ mindset that prevailed in the bad old days of patriarchal recidivism. Again, the principal problem with this undeniably popular standpoint is that the post-structuralist architects of the anti-style, anti-author ethos are themselves distinctive literary stylists, whose works and lives are repeatedly limned and lionized in the great man manner.
Postmodernists, then, might not approve, but there is no reason why marketing and consumer research shouldn’t look to its literary greats. Not everyone can be like Belk, nor should they try to be. However, this peerless exponent of academic gothic has much to teach us about stylish scholarship. Style, Evelyn Waugh observes, is what makes a work memorable and unmistakable. Style, Kurt Vonnegut claims, should be compelling and seductive. Style, Mary McCarthy maintains, is everything.

Notes

1. There are many ways of investigating academic writing styles, ranging from questionnaire surveys of the research community, through content analyses of published articles, to longitudinal studies of the leading journals (Brown, 2005). In keeping with literary tradition, which sets great store by ‘close reading’, the present paper focuses on the corpus of a single scholar, albeit a particularly prolific, enormously influential and highly regarded scholar.

2. It must be stressed that psychoanalytical literary theory and the gothic are not synonymous. Nevertheless, it is widely recognized that the gothic is a kind of literary precipitate that articulates the subconscious workings of the human psyche. As Abrams (1993: 78) observes, it ‘opened up to fiction the realm of the irrational and of the perverse impulses and of the nightmarish terrors that lie beneath the surface of the civilized mind’.

3. Examples include his uncited allusion to Johan ‘homo ludens’ Huizinga’s brilliant breakthrough book, ‘the waning of the middle ages’ (Belk, 1995a: 28); his unacknowledged adaptation of the great comic’s famous line ‘life doesn’t imitate art, it imitates bad television’ (Belk and Bryce, 1993: 293).

4. In his recent contribution to the edited anthology Does Marketing Need Reform? Belk (2006c) recants his previously implacable, out-dealers-out position by confessing that he is, in actual fact, a card-carrying marketing scholar.

5. Benjamin’s life and methods are cogently described by Brodersen (1996) and McCole (1993) respectively. There is no substitute for reading the maestro himself, however (see for example Benjamin, 1973b, 1978b, 1996, 1999).

6. Physically too, it is worth noting that Benjamin was an endomorphic sybarite with health problems, whereas Russell Belk is a famously fitness-fixated ectomorph.

References


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