

Christopher Stephen Browder

Marina DelVecchio

ENG111-190.191

25 November 2012

Essay #3

The Bleeding Edge of Technology and Society

America is presently rebounding from the worst economic collapse since the Great Depression. Headlines cried foul, persecuting the banks for allowing it to occur. The reality is that the crisis was conceived and executed by American culture. A critique of this culture can be found in the Van Dyke Parks musical score “Cutting Edge” from the 1987 film *The Brave Little Toaster*. When one examines the lyrics and imagery of “Cutting Edge,” it becomes evident that this is a statement to the effect that hyper-consumption has destroyed the moral fabric of American society with narcissism, debt and a lack of responsibility.

The need to consume stems from a disassociation of identity. According to Seigfried Zepf’s paper “Consumerism And Identity: Some Psychoanalytical Considerations,” society has become narcissistic and seeks self-satisfaction as a result of being reared and regarded as material objects by parents and the educational system. Zepf states, “Just as their parental figures treated them as thing-like, so these individuals treat their fellow humans” (Zepf 149). In “Cutting Edge,” the 80s appliances demonstrate this concept by throwing away the protagonist appliances at the end of the song. Viewers also witness the 80s appliances perform grotesque behaviors such as belittlement and physical abuse towards their protagonist counterparts prior to their disposal.

Opening with a trendy techno beat, featuring the quintessential 80s synthesizer, strobe lights chase the edge of the screen similar to the opening of *The Price is Right*. But this is no game show, the white gloves come off as the 80s appliances opening remarks are belittling and scornful: “Since you came here uninvited, we all knew you’d be delighted, but this is not the time or place to hedge” (Parks).

The 80s appliances proceed to bestow their “cutting edge” greatness upon their elder kin, informing them of their irrelevance. The style used reflects an infomercial, or a situation in which a young child pokes fun of their grandparents for not being hip from their cultural viewpoint. The visuals and lyrics work in tandem to convince our protagonists of their obsolescence, in the same manner modern advertisers convince consumers to replace a working solution prematurely.

Familiar advertising models are present in the lyrics and imagery of “Cutting Edge.” The 80s appliances utilize standard advertising copy to explain their superiority over our simpler protagonists: “With fiber optics cast in plastic for natural sights that sound fantastic, just read out and talk to your dear old Uncle Emery” proclaims an AT&T landline telephone (Parks). Harry M. Benshoff, Associate Professor of Radio, Television and Film at the University of North Texas, described the visuals as “schizophrenic, [and] a-temporal”, which is the only way one can describe an anthropomorphized desk lamp riding an electric hand mixer into a living room, after having “the print out with the score” spit at it from an all-in-one IBM PS/2-type computer system (Parks).

Benshoff described “Cutting Edge” as a “critique [to] the high-tech inflated exchange value in the postmodern age” in an article published by Animation Journal in 1992, shortly after the film was released to mass-market video distribution. This is evident in the visuals that are presented: “As Seen on TV,” “Not Available in Stores,” “ORDER NOW!...OPERATORS ARE STANDING BY!...” flash and scroll across the screen in maniacal fashion. The 80s appliances reaffirm their superiority complex with the chorus “More, More, More! Everything you wanted and MORE!” The idiom “sticks and stones may break my bones (or in this case, circuitry), but words will never hurt me” is affirmed with on-screen assaults on the protagonists. A boom box detaches its stereo speakers and dangles them like a basketball player blocking a close-range goal shot, gleefully chanting “you get it on the stereo, and you don't even have to go!” while the Bakelite radio quivers like a victim held at gun point (Parks). The Toaster is confronted by a French-accented food processor proclaiming he can “whip you up some mean cuisine I’m on the scene and fully automatic” (Parks). A waiting Midwestern toaster over

informs the Toaster that she can “bake your biscuits too, pop some dough boy out for you” and that she’s “micro solid state, and that’s no static” as she shocks him with her electric cord (Parks).

Benshoff states that the 80s appliances “... fear of their use-value counterparts is stated by their continued nervous reassertion of being 'on the cutting edge'”, arguing that the old fashioned appliances were “produced (and were producing) according to basic capitalist notions of use-value, but the high tech appliances demonstrate clearly that current international capitalism is now about consumption rather than production-is about satisfying status and identity rather than any kind of physical need” (Benshoff). When one reads between the lines of the song, however, you become privy to the more sinister side of consumerism: debt.

The “ultra nylon life of ease” comes with several prices: the most obvious is the sticker (Parks). The Daily Beast featured an article by Odysseas Papadimitriou that proclaimed Americans have not reduced any of their credit card debt since the onset of the 2008 recession. The article explains that the numbers reported by the Federal Reserve, and subsequently other news outlets, is the number less the charged-off debt. Papadimitriou states, “there's been an epic level of write-downs: \$85.6 billion in 2009, \$77.1 billion in 2010, \$45.5 billion in 2011, and \$17.2 billion so far in 2012” (Papadimitriou). This revelation is frightening enough to consider, but more research presents a grim future based on the up-and-coming consumer generation.

A manageable amount of debt is considered healthy in today's economy, however many Americans fail to understand what manageable is. Veneta Sotiropoulous and Alain D'Astoud conducted a study on college students to evaluate their perception of debt. They concluded: “This study provides empirical evidence suggesting that the extent to which individuals overspend with credit cards can be explained by social factors related to their social networks (i.e., social norms and social ties) that interact with one another” (Sotiropoulous & D'Astoud 478). Their study looked at how likely students were to charge items in a social context that they knew they couldn't afford, based on a complex matrix of how much your friends overspend and how much the item costs. An example we could draw from

“Cutting Edge” to this is the prose used by the telephone, but in today’s society this example would be advertising copy used to promote the new iPhone. Devices like the iPhone support Benschhoff and Zepf’s notions that modern consumption is about status than need. Sotiropoulos & D’Astoud’s research proves that young consumers will forgo any debt to obtain the status of cool.

The final point to be made about the impact that consumerism has had on American society is that it has warped our view of responsibility. TIME Business & Money reports Martha C. White recently published an editorial citing multiple studies in which 32% of “Americans are deciding it’s ok to just walk away” (White) from their mortgage debt. This dire precedent being set forth by parents is teaching children that it’s not your fault if you’re in debt, you can just walk away from the responsibility. These findings hark to Zepf’s coloring of society as having become narcissistic, because housing is very much communal—when one house is foreclosed, others are affected—today it seems that homeowners are ready to walk away from their high mortgage payments. Logically, it is a matter of time before the same justifications for defaulting on the mortgage is applied to other debts, such as credit cards. America’s quest for “the ultra nylon life of ease” has destroyed the prosperity and reputation of our nation (Parks).

Van Dyke Park’s “Cutting Edge” was written in the so-called decade of excess. The lyrics and imagery reflect not only the world as it was then, but as it is today: consumed with buying status and identity, forgetting the use-value and debt associated with the new trends. We have allowed ourselves to consume to the point that our economic stability has nearly collapsed, requiring us to borrow more money from foreign entities to maintain operation. Where most people viewed this part of the film as just another required musical component, those looking closely realize that the imagery and lyrics presented detail a trend in narcissism, debt, and the rejection of responsibility. A parallel of “us vs them” can also be drawn when one factors in the 80s appliances are of international descent, having invaded America, and the protagonist appliances are of 1950s and 1960s American construction. Without question, this silly song has deep meaning intended for the parents watching along with their

children.

Works Cited

tobar1p. "The Brave Little Toaster – 'Cutting Edge'." YouTube. Web. 20 Oct 2012.

Benshoff, Harry M. "Heigh-Ho, Heigh-Ho, Is Disney High or Low? From Silly Cartoons to Postmodern Politics." *Animation Journal*. Fall (1992): 62-85. Web. 31 Oct 2012.

Zepf, Siegfried. "Consumerism And Identity: Some Psychoanalytical Considerations." *International Forum Of Psychoanalysis* 19.3 (2010): 144-154. Academic Search Complete. Web. 24 Oct 2012.

Papadimitriou, Odysseas. "American Consumers Aren't Really Paying Down Credit-Card Debt." *The Daily Beast: Business*. The Daily Beast. 21 Oct 2012. Web. 1 Nov 2012.

Sotiropoulous, Veneta and D'Astoud, Alain. "Social Networks And Credit Card Overspending Among Young Adult Consumers." *Journal of Consumer Affairs*. 46.3 (2012): 457-484. Academic Search Complete. Web. 24 Oct 2012.

White, Martha C. "Is the Stigma of Ditching your Underwater Mortgage Fading?" *TIME Business & Money*. Time. 15 Oct 2012. Web. 3 Nov 2012.