

Watching People Work: On the Consumer Experience of Conspicuous Production

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Abstract

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This dissertation explicates conspicuous production as a corporate communicative strategy through rhetorical criticism. To that end, this dissertation argues that conspicuous production provides illusory fantasies that quell consumers' anxieties about the conditions of production while simultaneously delivering gratifying, brand-elevating performances. Such performances of production, I argue, do not require any necessary relation to actual conditions of production, but primarily serve to provide affectations of authenticity, local culture, and transparency. This dissertation contains five chapters: in the first, I review history and literature of conspicuous production. Chapters two, three, and four include case studies of conspicuous production sites in the city of Seattle: Starbucks's Seattle Reserve Roastery, Pike Place Market, and the Burke Museum. Chapter five offers concluding remarks on the value and efficacy of conspicuous production practices in twenty-first century public life.

Contents

Chapter 1	Introduction: The Rise of Conspicuous Production	1
Chapter 2	A Consumable Experience: Affective Value Production at Starbucks Reserve Roastery	42
Chapter 3	Performing Local Identity at Pike Place Market	70
Chapter 4	Conspicuous Knowledge Production at the Burke Museum	102
Chapter 5	Conclusion: Sincerity, Transparency, and the Illusion of Production Knowledge	135
	Bibliography	148

Chapter 1

Introduction: The Rise of Conspicuous Production

In the 2008 Pixar film *Wall-E*, a utopian society lives in fully automated bliss. Humankind, having abandoned earth to live in corporate-owned spacecraft among the stars, relies entirely on robots and advanced tech to perform most tasks, from piloting the spacecraft to simply moving oneself about. Below, Earth is left a massive trash heap, managed entirely by the eponymous custodial robot Wall-E. Such futuristic images are popular in science fiction: humanity subsumed into a fully automated leisure class, while soulless machines continue the drudgery human laborers once had to suffer.

As automation and AI technologies multiply with each coming year, one might expect them to encroach more and more on public and private life. In some ways (and for some people), they have: automatic food dispensers feed house pets, Amazon's Alexa claims to improve users' sleep by attuning sound and light to one's circadian rhythm, and Tesla's automated driving software is taking the work out of commuting. Automation occurs at both the consumer level and the level of production. Many labor sectors, in the twenty-first century, face the same concerns as the nineteenth century's Luddites. Industrial robots replace manufacturers, delivery robots replace DoorDashers, self-checkout technology replaces grocery clerks, Waymo replaces Uber drivers, and chatbots replace customer service operators. Even ChatGPT has automated old-fashioned contract cheating at the universities: where once a student had to pay a friend or an essay mill to get out of classwork, they can now automate their homework for free through Generative AI.

But while automation continues to replace human labor, it has not entirely abolished manual, analog production processes. On the contrary: for some consumer goods, manual labor

thrives as a marker of authenticity and craft. Consider the spectacle of workers processing curds behind a glass pane at Beecher's cheese shop in Seattle's Pike Place Market. Studio Arhoj in Copenhagen's shopping district sells glass artwork that patrons can watch being prepared by expert glass blowers behind the purchasing counter. Patrons at La Parolaccia Osteria, an Italian restaurant tucked in Long Beach, CA, watch their pizza prepared by hand and tossed into the enormous mouth of a pizza oven just behind the bar. Suburban families visiting a Benihana Japanese restaurant watch their food prepared in front of them by a professional Teppanyaki cook. Starbucks Reserve Roasteries in Chicago, New York, and Tokyo display complex roasting machinery that connects all the way from copper still to the coffee bar, managed at every step by expert roasters, brewers, and baristas. Each of these represent manual labor as a core component of consumption.

Manual labor processes are also a popular choice for niche pastimes, often among those best positioned to enjoy the fruits of automation: the middle and upper classes of the Global North, from celebrities running their own small-batch vineyards; to affluent pensioners living out their retirements repairing vintage automobiles; to U.S. outdoorspeople devoting weekends to the rustic labors of tent camping, beer aficionados brewing beer in their basement, and house-flipping influencers producing Instagram videos of DIY home repair like the celebrities on HGTV. The promise of automation has arrived, yet advertisements, narratives, and lifestyle content hearkens to nostalgic visions of an analog past audiences can experience through manual production.

Many corporations have taken note of this nostalgic desire and incorporated it as part of the fabric of everyday consumer experience. Visit any one of the sixteen U.S. locations of Din Tai Fung, a casual Taiwanese restaurant chain popular in West Coast U.S. suburban malls, and

you will be greeted with just such an experience of production. Conspicuously visible at the storefront of every Din Tai Fung location is a large glass pane revealing a restaurant prep room where several cooks roll, fill, and press gyoza and bao. This design approach offers a sensuous consumer appeal that communicates authenticity like those rhetorical choices found on local brewpub menus, describing their French fries as “hand cut” and their cocktails “hand-crafted.” Din Tai Fung needs no such text: every customer visually experiences the handcrafted production of their cuisine upon arrival.

In physical places and virtual venues designated for middle-class consumption, consumers are increasingly invited to see, experience, and learn about aspects of commodity production. These experiences exist at all levels of global commercial production. Across the global South, tourists can pay for guided tours through coffee haciendas, rice paddies, tea plantations, and diamond mines to experience the origins of their favorite consumer goods. Factory tours have become common tourist destinations across the U.S., showcasing how raw materials are refined, manufactured, and packaged for mass consumption. And final assembly is a common feature in food service, from the mundane lunchmeat slicing at the deli counter to the technical command over complex espresso machinery at the local café. Consumer goods attest to their production on packaging as well, explaining on labels and wrappers some aspects of the product origin, ethical production practices, and narratives about the production process. The packaging materials of small-batch coffee company *Kahawa 1893* provides stories of the farmer who harvested the beans and features a QR code where the consumer can send the farmer a tip.¹ In a society that enjoys automation as its guiding technological fantasy, one might expect the automation of such processes to be highlighted (or their manual laborious processes to be

¹ “Kenyan Single Origin – Medium Roast Coffee,” Kahawa 1893, accessed April 5, 2026, https://kahawa1893.com/collections/coffee-bags/products/kenyan-single-origin?selling_plan=4226646231.

concealed); instead, one reads empowering narratives of manual labor in under-resourced nations.

Manual production can be presented as a sensuous, pleasurable spectacle that positively augments consumer attachment towards those goods. Organizations are freely offering up images, narratives, and facts about the goods consumers enjoy. Individuals, too, are sharing their own practices of production to the public on social media. At times, production is rendered visible, made part of the consumption experience; at others, people themselves participate in conspicuous acts of physical production. Every act of conspicuous production, of rendering the manual production process of goods visible, represents a choice: a curation decision made when other options were also available.

This dissertation aims to understand conspicuous production, both as a corporate communicative strategy and as a popular embodied practice, through rhetorical criticism. To that end, this dissertation argues that conspicuous production provides illusory fantasies that quell consumers' anxieties about the conditions of production while simultaneously delivering gratifying brand-elevating performances. Such performances, I argue, do not require any necessary relation to actual conditions of production, but primarily serve to deliver affectations of authenticity, local culture, and transparency. Conspicuous production performances do nothing to stem or subvert the tide of automation and mass production in contemporary life. On the contrary, such performances provide a convenient alibi for consumer capitalism, offering pressure valves through niche craft experiences while the rest of life continues its march toward mass production and automation. One can sate anxieties about one's individual lack of agency and understanding of the global production chain by playing voyeur to performed showcases of artisan labor. Still, the consumer's apparent desire for production knowledge demonstrates a

hunger for an imaginary alternative: a nostalgic vision for an elsewhere beyond the world of automation and mass production. This alternative, though illusory, indicates a potential fracture in the corporate control of politics, culture, and public life—a desire for *real things* made by human hands—that could, perhaps, provide an opportunity for progressive change. In this first chapter, I review humanities and design literature on conspicuous production; recount a contemporary history of conspicuous production practices; invoke affective, material, and place-based rhetorical scholarship to situate the dissertation’s perspective on corporate rhetoric and consumer culture; and preview the chapters for this dissertation.

Conspicuous Production

The term *conspicuous production* evokes a few interpretations, so I begin with an etymology. The word *conspicuous* derives from the Latin *conspicere*, meaning “to get sight of,” and contains the following roots: *con*, meaning “together” or “with;” *specere*, meaning “to look;” and *-ous*, which identifies the word as an adjective in the sense of “abounding in, full of, characterized by, of the nature of.”² Merriam-Webster lists two common definitions of *conspicuous*: “obvious to the eye or mind,” and “attracting attention.”³ *Production* derives from the Latin *producere*, meaning to “lead or bring forth, draw out,” and contains the following roots: *pro*, which has multiple uses including “on behalf of, in place of, before, [and] for;” *ducere*, meaning to “lead” or to guide; and *-tion*, a suffix used to transform a verb into an abstract noun

² “Conspicuous,” Merriam-Webster Dictionary, accessed May 5, 2026, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conspicuous>; “Con-,” Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed May 5, 2026, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/con->; “-ous,” Oxford English Dictionary, accessed May 5, 2026, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/ous_suffix.

³ Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “Conspicuous.”

expressing an action or state.⁴ Merriam-Webster lists several definitions of *production*, including “the act or process of producing” and “the creation of utility.”⁵ Taken together, the phrase *conspicuous production* can refer broadly to any act or process of creation designed to attract public attention. It is an act of creation performed to attract others’ attention, a rhetorical invention for a curious public.

In both Critical Studies and Design scholarship, the phrase *conspicuous production* has taken a few meanings, from the visible return of local manufacturing in the contemporary city,⁶ to the conspicuous visibility of celebrity and CEO “producers” and the “work” they do,⁷ to the prominence of craftsmanship and laborers in product advertising.⁸ Scholars’ conceptualizations of conspicuous production vary according to who is doing the producing and the perceived intentions behind the decision to make such production conspicuous. However, each definition involves the visible display of creation to attract audience attention and shape perceptions of corporate brands.

⁴“Produce,” Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed May 3, 2026, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/produce>; “Pro,” Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed May 3, 2026, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/pro->; “-tion,” Dictionary.com, accessed May 3, 2026, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/tion>.

⁵ “Production,” Merriam-Webster Dictionary, accessed, May 3, 2026, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/production>.

⁶ Karl Baker, “Conspicuous Production: Valuing the Visibility of Industry in Urban Re-Industrialization,” in *Urban Re-Industrialization*, ed. Krzysztof Nawratek (Punctum Books, 2017): 118; Ottavia Cima and Ewa Wasilewska, “Sensing Urban Manufacturing: From Conspicuous to Sensible Production,” *Urban Planning* 8, no. 4 (2023): 198, <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.v8i4.7272>.

⁷ John Overton and Glenn Banks, “Conspicuous Production: Wine, Capital and Status,” *Capital & Class* 39, no. 3 (2015): 473, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309816815607022>; Ben Tarnoff, “The New Status Symbol: It’s Not What You Spend—It’s How Hard You Work,” *The Guardian*, April 24, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/apr/24/new-status-symbol-hard-work-spending-ceos>; Hana Darling-Wolfe and Elizabeth Patitsas, “Passion as Capital: The Cultural Production of ‘Good Computer Scientists,’” *Sage Open* 14, no. 4 (2024): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440241267157>.

⁸ Daniel Kleeschulte, “Conspicuous Production” (MA thesis, Rice University, 2019), 1, ProQuest (28734921); Kyle Asquith, “The Visual Clichés of Legal Cannabis Promotion on Social Media,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 38, no. 4 (2021): 341, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2021.1937669>.

Urban design scholars conceptualize *conspicuous production* as an effort to reintroduce visible manufacturing in urban places. Many global North nations have evolved into postindustrial service economies, hollowing out sites of manual labor and transforming them into trendy food courts. For example, Charlotte, North Carolina's Optimist Hall and Anaheim, California's Packing District are trendy urban food courts housed in a former North Carolina steel mill and a Californian orange packing house, respectively. Such places articulate the historicity of their aged buildings with the authenticity of the eats inside, but some have called for a more direct return to the urban factory. Urban Design scholar Karl Baker argued that "conspicuous" production, the "everyday visibility of industrial activities" realized in investments to a craft sector or local manufacturing, can benefit the public.⁹ Specifically, Baker notes that the "activity of industry, including the noise, smells and rhythms of human and mechanical production" can promote public awareness in production processes, increase engagement between producers and consumers, and enrich inhabitants' experience of the urban environment.¹⁰ Urban Design scholars Ottavia Cima and Ewa Wasilewska argued that Baker's emphasis on production visibility "risks romanticising production" since what is rendered visible is often only one curated portion of production.¹¹ While "small-scale craft production" can be easily incorporated into an urban environment, the less pleasant aspects of manufacturing (the unattractive sights, smells, and sounds of heavy machinery) are often relegated to outskirts, industrial parks, and other nations.¹² Conspicuous production, then, can refer to visible manufacturing in the contemporary city meant to revitalize urban areas and increase engagement

⁹ Baker, "Conspicuous Production," 118.

¹⁰ Baker, "Conspicuous Production," 120.

¹¹ Cima and Wasilewska, "Sensing Urban Manufacturing," 205.

¹² Cima and Wasilewska, "Sensing Urban Manufacturing," 205.

between communities and producers. As we will see from my analysis of Starbucks's Seattle Reserve Roastery and the Pike Place Market, this practice purports to deliver a behind-the-scenes glimpse into the conditions of labor; however, its narrow, curated execution offers instead a fantastical *performance* of production.

Scholars in the humanities have used *conspicuous production* to refer to marketing tactics wherein the production process acts as an argument for the product's value. Often, advertisements conspicuously evoking production will offer impressive production narratives over romantic images of crop fields or complex craftwork. In a critical analysis of cannabis ads on social media, for example, communication scholar Kyle Asquith noted a significant trend in cannabis Instagram ads featuring laborers: a man in protective equipment inspecting a cannabis plant, a person "in dirty jeans dragging a hoe through the dirt," etc.¹³ Such ads connect consumer goods with histories of production to articulate the consumer with the natural environment from which the product was harvested. Hollywood celebrity brands have emphasized conspicuous production practices in their advertising, particularly in alcohol advertising. Video advertisements for Ryan Reynolds's Aviation Gin and Kendall Jenner's 818 tequila, for instance, feature romantic images of laborers in juniper farms and agave plantations.¹⁴ According to environmental scholars John Overton and Glenn Banks, this kind of conspicuous production "allow[s] the investors to reconstruct their class identities" and "attach themselves to a production system that is putatively non-industrial and often pre-modern" through "a fiction that is promoted as artisanal, sustainable and land-based, rather than. . . industrial, urban and

¹³ Asquith, "Visual Cliché," 341.

¹⁴ Ryan Reynolds, "The Process | Aviation Gin," YouTube, December 13, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NjDCH6SiMgol> Worcester Interactive, "Kendall Jenner 818 Tequila Commercial (Full)," YouTube, May 24, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9Mff4dps58>.

exploitative.”¹⁵ Conspicuous production, then, can also describe marketing tactics that connect images of production with brand authenticity. Such authenticity, and the access that curated production experiences can provide, enhance the value of the commodities sold by the organization and transform the consumer’s perceived relationship with the brand. I will discuss these outcomes further in my chapters on Starbucks’s Seattle Reserve Roastery and the Burke Museum.

Finally, conspicuous production can refer to a popular kind of aspirational self-presentation. The phrase *conspicuous production* invites comparison to a similar critical term, *conspicuous consumption*. Conspicuous consumption, first coined by sociologist Thorstein Veblen, refers to a tendency by Gilded Era gentry to flaunt lavish lifestyles as an expression of social status.¹⁶ Whereas the haute bourgeoisie of the early twentieth century displayed social status through conspicuous consumption, the billionaire CEOs in the early twenty-first century present themselves as tireless hustlers who have worked hard to achieve their success. According to Ben Tarnoff, today’s prominent CEOs use “the public display of productivity as a symbol of class power”:

Today’s top executives are devoted work-worshippers, nearly to the point of perversity. Apple CEO Tim Cook told Time that he begins his day at 3.45am. General Electric CEO Jeff Immelt told Fortune that he has worked 100-hour workweeks for 24 years. Not to be outdone, Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer told Bloomberg News that she used to work 130-hour workweeks.¹⁷

Top CEOs opine on their ambitious work habits in interviews and biographies and use these assertions of productivity as justification for their exorbitant wealth. Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and

¹⁵ Overton and Banks, “Conspicuous Production,” 474.

¹⁶ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (Random House, 1934).

¹⁷ Tarnoff, “The New Status Symbol,” pars. 5-7.

other billionaire CEOs deserve their wealth because they produce so much value. Conspicuous production, then, can also refer to a habit among the wealthy to inflate narratives about their own productivity, thus justifying gross inequality. While an analysis of prominent CEOs' implausible allegations of 100-hour workweeks is beyond the scope of this dissertation, it is still important to note the unique class character of conspicuous production in relation to conspicuous consumption. Performances of conspicuous production, largely occurring in urban and tourist environments, typically represent luxury forms of consumption only afforded to—and designed specifically for—the white-collar classes, including the owning classes, the professional-managerial class, and those portions of the working class not involved in manual labor. Performances of production are designed for audiences who experience a reality alienated and distant from the manual production of their commodities.

Conspicuous production experiences are readily accessible for many U.S. consumers, particularly in urban and tourist spaces of luxury consumption. As a marketing tactic, conspicuous production works strategically to augment the perceived value of otherwise undifferentiated consumer goods. As an evolved form of conspicuous consumption, conspicuous production offers those among the owning and aspirational classes a grammar of symbols that valorize notions of taste, refinement, and cultivated sensibility of another class or era. However, every conspicuous production act “works” rhetorically according to its negative association with its implied opposite: manufacture kept out of sight, a dearth of public knowledge of production (or total ignorance thereof), and affluent social identities distinguished by total erasure of productive labor. When a brand grants consumers access to view production, audiences are invited to view this gesture as a sign of transparency, authenticity, and perhaps the feeling of worker agency over production. Conspicuous production tells audiences that there is nothing to

hide; therefore, one can trust the authenticity and ethical quality of the production process.

The spectacular value of conspicuous production thus depends on its authenticity against a broader paradigm of hidden labor. If one expects production to be concealed and disparaged, then its conspicuous presence could act rhetorically as a kind of novel, or even countercultural, act. The next section explores the origins of this inconspicuous labor paradigm from the Industrial Era and its transition to modern production spectacle, highlighting key innovations in production, marketing, and consumer subjectivity that determined this transformation.

From Dickens to Din Tai Fung: A Contemporary History of Conspicuous Production

The success of conspicuous production design lies primarily in its relationship to a supposed absence: that of inconspicuous production, mass production occurring away from the public eye. For visible manufacture to achieve its spectacular quality, it needs to be novel for the voyeur, appealing to their sensibilities, and satisfying a curiosity. To understand how conspicuous production became an appealing rhetorical choice in contemporary consumer spaces, this section traces a history of conspicuous production, from the prevalence of hidden and marginalized labor during the Industrial Revolution, to the rise of advertising, to the transformation of the U.S. from a manufacturing economy to a service economy. The ensuing history presents this paradigm not in its full context (which would be too far afield for this project), but rather as a sketch of a public perception: what contemporary audiences might vaguely recall about such times, so that one can understand how conspicuous production strategically performs against this perception.

Public Perceptions of Industrial Era Production

Watching coal-miners at work, you realize momentarily what different universes different people inhabit. Down there where coal is dug it is a sort of world apart which one can

quite easily go through life without ever hearing about. Probably a majority of people would even prefer not to hear about it. Yet it is the absolutely necessary counterpart of our world above. Practically everything we do, from eating an ice to crossing the Atlantic, and from baking a loaf to writing a novel, involves the use of coal. . .¹⁸

The above quote, from George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*, demonstrates precisely the opposite of conspicuous production. Written in 1937, his depiction of mining labor depicts coal production far away from (and completely unseen by) the consumer at the other end of the transaction. Indeed, Orwell muses that the consumer would probably prefer to remain ignorant of the production process that brings coal to market. Coal mining today remains one of the less conspicuous forms of productive labor, diminishing in prominence and mostly confined in the U.S. to rural Appalachia. Still, the image of the coal miner conspicuously reappears whenever political advocates promote green energy, and the internet has made coal mining production knowledge available to consumers desiring such knowledge.¹⁹

Orwell's basic critique, when extended to the rest of manual labor, offers a fair characterization of Industrial Era socioeconomic realities: that the exploitation of raw materials and their manufacture into consumer goods were toilsome, unpleasant tasks that states and private organizations rendered invisible to consumers. The Industrial eras in the Anglosphere were characterized by grotesque labor conditions that interested parties were careful to keep hidden from consumer society. Today, knowledge of these harsh conditions are firmly established in U.S. public memory: the Library of Congress characterizes the U.S. Industrial Era as one in which factory working conditions were "harsh," with long working hours, "unsafe" and "deadly"

¹⁸ George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (MacMillan Collector's Library, 2021), 31.

¹⁹ James Pasley, "Stunning Photos Show What It's Really Like to Work Deep Underground in an American Coal Mine," *Business Insider*, October 5, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/life-working-in-coal-mines-in-america-photos-2019-10>.

working conditions, replete with “repetitive and monotonous work for employees.”²⁰ Under such conditions, it is unsurprising that Industrial Era businessmen would prefer to conceal, rather than reveal, production to consumers.

Classic social movement literature reflects these harsh realities as well. Both Charles Dickens and Karl Marx opined on the cruel environment of English factory work in the middle of the Industrial Era, and muckraking journalists like Upton Sinclair and George Orwell produced harrowing narratives of U.S. and British labor conditions toward the end of Industrialization. Dickens’s repugnance with manufacture is evident in *Hard Times*, where he describes the factory town setting as an “ugly citadel, where Nature was as strongly bricked out as killing airs and gases were bricked in.”²¹ In *Capital*, Marx highlighted peculiarly immiserating work in the potting industry, quoting a contemporary article describing potters as “a degenerated population, both physically and morally” who are “stunted in growth, ill-shaped, and frequently ill-formed in the chest,” and whose lives are often “short-lived.”²² Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* aimed its rhetorical appeal at both the heart and stomach of its reader, describing meatpacking laborers who would “plung[e] their feet and ankles into the steaming hot carcass” of dead animals to keep warm in the winter and describing occasional meatpacking incidents where human parts would be mixed in with edible meat: workers could fall into steam vats, and “all but the bones of them had gone out to the world as Durham’s Pure Leaf Lard!”²³

Throughout these selected writings, the authors likened the site of labor to hell itself.

²⁰ “America at Work,” Library of Congress, accessed May 3, 2026, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/america-at-work-and-leisure-1894-to-1915/articles-and-essays/america-at-work/>.

²¹ Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (Barnes & Noble Books, 2004), 65.

²² Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I* (Penguin Books, 1991), 355.

²³ Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (Barnes & Noble Books, 2003), 85, 105.

Marx described the match manufacture industry as “pestilent with phosphorous,” adding that “Dante would have found the worst horrors in his Inferno surpassed in this industry.”²⁴ Sinclair similarly described each sector within the packing plant as “a separate little inferno” where “the workers in each. . . had their own peculiar diseases.”²⁵ Orwell likened the coal mine to the Underworld, saying that “most of the things one imagines in hell are there—heat, noise, confusion, darkness, foul air, and, above all, unbearably cramped space.”²⁶ These authors characterize the sites of industrial production as necessarily outside the realm of public knowledge. Dickens’s Coketown was “a blur of soot and smoke” showing “nothing but masses of darkness” through which “not a brick of it could be seen.”²⁷ Orwell’s mine “keeps us alive, and we are oblivious of its existence,” the miner’s work simultaneously “so vitally necessary and yet so remote from our experience, so invisible, as it were, that we are capable of forgetting it.”²⁸ The meteoric rise in mass production over the Industrial Era was depicted in classic literature as bleak, exploitative, and necessarily concealed from public view. But eventually, this changed. The rest of this history explains how spectacles of manual production rose as a trend in twentieth century advertising.

Negative Public Opinion as an Exigence for Conspicuous Production

In the waning days of the Industrial Era, large firms were faced with a public relations catastrophe: negative perceptions of factory work arose from justified accounts of pollution, poor

²⁴ Marx, *Capital Volume I*, 356.

²⁵ Sinclair, *The Jungle*, 103-105.

²⁶ Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, 19.

²⁷ Dickens, *Hard Times*, 111.

²⁸ Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, 32-33.

working conditions, frequent stories of workplace casualties, and repulsive food production standards. Even as labor laws and regulations began to ameliorate the most flagrant abuses of the Industrial Era, the mass productive capacities of the twentieth century Fordist paradigm still necessitated grueling, repetitive, dangerous labor.²⁹ And the very size of mass production facilities led to perceptions that corporations were distant, cold, even “soulless” in the eyes of the public.³⁰ The rise of marketing in the twenties responded to these kinds of issues.

Marketing tactics in the early twentieth century attempted to imbue corporations with a kind of personality to overcome negative perceptions and promote consumer identification. According to historian Roland Marchand, the early twentieth century public saw corporations as “aloof,” lacking a “distinct personality” and “driven by a cold economic logic” that paid no mind to public interest.³¹ Two emergent factors of the early twentieth century led to these perceptions: mass production capacities were fostering vast intra-corporation hierarchies that made the face-to-face relationships once characteristic of consumer culture impossible; and muckraking journalism drew attention to unsafe and exploitative corporate practices. Early marketing efforts sought to overcome these concerns by shaping perceptions of the factory space, the corporation’s founder, and the public benefit of the services provided by the corporation.

Early twentieth century ads attempted to humanize corporate founders through rich hagiographies of their rise to power from modest beginnings. They also aestheticized the factory space with visually appealing renditions of factory architecture. Such efforts were meant to

²⁹ Stephen Meyer, “The Degradation of Work Revisited: Workers and Technology in the American Auto Industry, 1900-2000,” *Automobile in American Life and Society* (2004), http://www.autolife.umd.umich.edu/Labor/L_Overview/L_Overview3.htm.

³⁰ Roland Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business* (The University of California Press, 1998), 8.

³¹ Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul*, 8.

transform the well-established negative public perceptions of mass-productive industries and firms. While low-income laborers were humanized in social realist literature like *The Jungle* and *How the Other Half Lives*, factory owners were humanized in full-page newspaper ads containing pictures and narratives depicting the founders as folksy, hard-working Americans: industrious men whose rise from humble beginnings reflects the national spirit.³² Where Dickens's *Hard Times* depicted the factory as a dreary, polluting inferno, Fleischmann, Pillsbury, and Jell-O's full-color magazine ads and trading cards featured resplendent images of their factories' architectural beauty.³³ To combat the negative public perception of workplace hazard and depraved labor conditions, some companies introduced corporate welfare programs: cooking and sewing classes for laborers, occasional parties, and regular workday exercises to prevent fatigue and chronic pain.³⁴ Such efforts were, in part, disseminated to ameliorate concerns of labor exploitation and improve workplace morale.

Conspicuous narratives of labor began to figure into product advertisements to provide folksy, down-to-earth representations of their products and establish a firm's image as a public service. Bell Systems (now AT&T), for instance, bought several full-page magazine ads depicting the telephone lineman as the "spirit of service" who braves dangerous heights and harsh weather to connect Americans to one another.³⁵ Bell's "Weavers of Speech" ad featured a romantic painting of a telephone operator connecting city, suburb, and countryside with her mass

³² Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul*, 27, 32-33.

³³ Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul*, 29-30.

³⁴ Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul*, 18.

³⁵ Jenifer Robertson, "Connecting Changes Everything (and It Always Has)," *AT&T Blog*, March 10, 2026, <https://about.att.com/blogs/2026/connecting-changes-everything.html>.

of telephone wires.³⁶ Such folksy and romantic depictions of labor reminded customers of the real human relationships fostered through the corporation's services, while conspicuously presenting fantastic imagery depicting the production process.

These strategies were primarily meant to attract the burgeoning "leisure class" of the tens and twenties, who held the dominant share of public purchasing power and whose ample leisure time granted them access to ad-filled newspapers.³⁷ Bright, aesthetically pleasing illustrations of factory architecture could transform perceptions of factories as undesirable, polluting encroachments into notions of the factory as an essential public institution (like the church or the town hall).³⁸ Rich narratives describing the modest beginnings and itinerant tribulations of the successful CEO comported with bourgeois U.S. ideals of individualism and the pioneer spirit.³⁹ Each of these strategies were attempts to humanize the corporation to a public whose primary relationship with the corporation was through consumption.

As the social welfare and jobs programs of the New Deal economy increased the purchasing power of the working class, marketing firms saw opportunities to advertise to an entirely new consumer demographic. Whereas advertising in the first decades of the twentieth century appealed primarily to the leisure class, advertising in the thirties and forties increasingly appealed to the *common man*. According to Roland Marchand, thirties ads "adopt[ed] the language of the waitress and the truck driver" to engage the hopes and illusions of "plain

³⁶ "Weavers of Speech," *Sunset Magazine*, 1915, <https://www.insulators.info/pictures/?id=716098831>.

³⁷ Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 74.

³⁸ See this ad, for instance: "Advertisement for Bradley Fertilizer Company," Getty Images, March 17, 2016, <https://www.gettyimages.com.au/detail/news-photo/bradley-fertilizer-companys-works-north-weymouth-mass-news-photo/516465204>. The following site provides a variety of full-color brewery prints: "History Spotlight: Factory Scenes in Advertising," *Breweriana Aficionado*, April 14, 2025, <https://www.brewaf.com/factory-scenes/>.

³⁹ "W.L. Douglas Shoe Company," The Douglas Archives, accessed May 3, 2026, https://www.douglashistory.co.uk/history/Businesses/WL_Douglas_ShoeCompany.htm.

common folks,” featuring the vernacular of a “grassroots constituency” and the “ethnic names and faces” that made up the contemporary working class.⁴⁰ Historian Stuart Ewen observed that the transition from leisure class-targeted ads to working class-targeted ads accomplished two prevailing corporate goals. First, by constituting laborers as consumers, labor struggles could become issues over access to purchasing power rather than greater control over the means of production. Second, working people’s incorporation into the broader consuming public conveniently met the increased supply of goods brought about by mass production.⁴¹ According to Ewen, these advertisements asked the worker to “locate his [*sic*] needs and frustrations in terms of the consumption of goods rather than the quality and content of his life.”⁴² If the advertisements worked, laborers would be too preoccupied with the maintenance of their lives to consider the structural roots of their oppression. By transforming the laborer’s central identity into that of a consumer, labor agitation could be tempered, and corporations could realize higher sales.

The transition from early corporate identity-craft to post-depression consumer creation resulted in a sophisticated science of marketing practice. The growing popularity of psychoanalysis led advertisers to consider the psychology of the consumer and “develop universal notions of what makes people respond.”⁴³ Rather than emphasizing the utility of a product, advertisers used “psychological methods. . . to turn the consumer’s critical functions away from the product and toward himself [*sic*]” to create desires that consumption could

⁴⁰ Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul*, 211, 214, 216.

⁴¹ Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* (McGraw-Hill, 1976), 27-28.

⁴² Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness*, 42-43.

⁴³ Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness*, 33.

satisfy.⁴⁴ Historians credit Public Relations consultant Edward Bernays with translating the lessons of psychoanalytic theory to marketing strategy. Bernays, the nephew of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, is not only credited with popularizing psychoanalysis in the U.S., but also for ushering the psychological turn in advertising.⁴⁵ According to documentarian Adam Curtis, Bernays “showed American corporations for the first time how they could make people want things they didn't need by linking mass produced goods to their unconscious desires.”⁴⁶ The well-known *Torches of Freedom* campaign sought to expand the market for tobacco, for instance, by transforming cigarette consumption from a dirty, unladylike habit to a symbol of freedom for modern women by articulating cigarette use with women’s equality.⁴⁷ Curtis noted that, while cigarette consumption has no necessary relationship with women’s emancipation, advertisements could make people “feel more independent” if they “link products to their emotional desires and feelings.”⁴⁸ The psychological turn in marketing strategy is an early example of prevailing corporate thought: that the symbolic value of a product is more important than its utility, and that consumers will spend more reliably if they are advertised an identity rather than a product.

The creation of the corporate *brand* manifested from both the psychological turn in advertising and the demands of the Fordist production model. Because the mass production capacities of the Fordist paradigm fostered the proliferation of cheap goods, corporations needed

⁴⁴ Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness*, 37.

⁴⁵ Lisa Held, “Psychoanalysis Shapes Consumer Culture,” *Monitor on Psychology* 40, no. 11 (2009), <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2009/12/consumer>.

⁴⁶ Richard Curtis, “The Century of the Self,” *BBC Four*, 2002, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GFwDc17WZ-A>.

⁴⁷ “Torches of Freedom Campaign,” Digital History—Histoire Numérique, accessed December 12, 2024, <https://omeka.uottawa.ca/jmccutcheon/exhibits/show/american-women-in-tobacco-adve/torches-of-freedom-campaign>.

⁴⁸ Curtis, “The Century of the Self.”

to develop creative ways to differentiate their products from those of their competitors. The *brand* was one way to make a product stand out among its competition. Social theorist and activist Naomi Klein described competitive branding as a “necessity of the machine age” wherein “manufactured sameness” was counteracted through an “image-based difference” signified through the brand.⁴⁹ Oftentimes, the brand name itself invokes the recognition audiences need to distinguish identical products from one another. Brands can also satisfy psychological needs by connecting consumers with desirable experiences through purchases. When consumers purchase a product, they not only receive the commodity but also consume the “brand essence,” which uses imagery in popular advertisements to “equate products with positive cultural or social experiences.”⁵⁰ Products become cultural symbols that refer consumers back to advertisement fantasies as they are consumed.⁵¹ By marketing products through the creation of brands, advertising turned away from the product itself and towards the creation of consumption fantasies.

Post Fordism, Globalization, and the Division of Labor

As the U.S. entered the post-Fordist paradigm, the mass production of consumer goods was displaced further away from the homes and communities of consumers. Consumers of the thirties were likely to live near a factory, form acquaintances with its laborers, and take curated

⁴⁹ Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (Picador, 2002), 6.

⁵⁰ Klein, *No Logo*, 29.

⁵¹ See these Pepsi ads, which use visual imagery to connect Pepsi consumption with style, comfort, and sensuality: “Pepsi Vintage Ads from 1950s,” Adbranch, April 16, 2011, <https://www.adbranch.com/pepsi-vintage-ads-from-1950s/>.

factory tours of their favorite brands.⁵² But the latter half of the twentieth century saw economic upheavals that moved production further from the U.S. consumer. President Richard Nixon's trade deal with China in the seventies, Soviet Secretary Gorbachev's perestroika policy and its subsequent relaxation of the Cold War in the eighties, and President George H. W. Bush's signing of NAFTA in the nineties each contributed to globalization and the transformation of the U.S. from an industrial economy to a service economy. Presidential candidate Ross Perot epitomized NAFTA's economic upheaval, describing the rapid displacement of factory work from the U.S. to Mexico as a "giant sucking sound of jobs being pulled out of this country."⁵³ Michael Moore's debut feature *Roger and Me* depicts the terrifying reality of this economic upheaval, documenting the precipitous decline of Flint, Michigan as General Motors shuttered its U.S. factory to move production to Mexico (where the labor and overhead costs were vastly cheaper). *Roger and Me* juxtaposes the lavish country club lifestyle of the GM chairman with interview footage of anxious, soon-to-be laid-off employees, newsreel footage of state and local officials offering unhelpful solutions to workers' concerns, and statistics about the rise in violent crime in Flint.⁵⁴ The retreat of U.S. manufacturing to Global South nations increased profits for shareholders while immiserating the U.S. communities that relied on the local factory for work. With fewer sites of factory production remaining throughout the U.S., average Americans had fewer images, experiences, and relations they could access to *know* about the production of goods.

⁵² For a more in-depth look at the factory tour's role in 20th century U.S. culture, see Allison C. Marsh, "The Ultimate Vacation: Watching Other People Work, a History of Factory Tours in America, 1880-1950," (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 2008), ProQuest (3311840).

⁵³ "October 19, 1992 Debate Transcript," The Commission on Presidential Debates, October 19, 1992, <https://www.debates.org/voter-education/debate-transcripts/october-19-1992-debate-transcript/>.

⁵⁴ Michael Moore, director, *Roger and Me*, Warner Bros., 1989.

The rise of corporate branding also hailed a marketing paradigm shift that focused less on products and production and more on consumer identity creation. According to Naomi Klein, the post-Fordist corporation produced “*images* of their brands,” while commodity production “was only an incidental part” of overall production.⁵⁵ For Klein, this shift is best seen in the transformation from *advertising* to *branding*: while product advertising represents “only one part of branding’s grand plan,” branding is a broader strategy that persistently communicates “the core meaning of the modern corporation.”⁵⁶ An advertisement simply indicates a product available on the market, but branding is a complex communicative process that packages experiences, moods, and values into customer perceptions of a corporation’s identity. While brand names became an important component of product advertising decades earlier, the late twentieth century saw the brand itself as the core product delivered by the corporate firm.

Around the same time manufacturing saw its retreat from the U.S., certain forms of manual production and analog consumption re-emerged as popular features of public life. As globalization and NAFTA moved manual production of automobiles and apparel southward, other manual practices were becoming more conspicuous. The eighties saw the rise of the “open kitchen” in the U.S., a restaurant concept where patrons are encouraged to view watch cooks prepare the food. According to *Eater* magazine, restaurateurs Wolfgang Puck and Barbara Lazaroff inaugurated this trend with the 1982 opening of Spago, a West Hollywood restaurant where watching the chefs “grilling fresh tuna or sauteing crimini mushrooms, was half of the reason you went.”⁵⁷ As the U.S. economy drifted away from goods manufacturing and towards

⁵⁵ Klein, *No Logo*, 4.

⁵⁶ Klein, *No Logo*, 5.

⁵⁷ Jaya Saxena, “All the Kitchen’s a Stage,” *Eater*, June 5, 2023, <https://www.eater.com/23736307/open-kitchens-chefs-diners-wolfgang-puck-spago>.

service, finance, and branding, certain kinds of labor were becoming more conspicuously visible. In the foodservice industry, hibachi and sushi chefs lent novelty and cultural authenticity to the dining experience. On television, Mr. Rogers' was reminding viewers, through a series of factory visits, that real people make the consumer goods we all enjoy.⁵⁸ Just as certain forms of production seemed to be disappearing from U.S. public life, consumers were craving visions and experiences of production.

The true "origins" of any social trend can be difficult to determine. Still, one can start to understand the popular appeal and effect of a trend when one imagines the trend as a strategic choice. By imagining that things could have been otherwise, we can start to ask why the trend occurred in this particular way rather than another. A rhetorical perspective on consumer culture offers a helpful approach in generating reasonable explanations for human phenomena, and it is to that perspective that I now turn.

Rhetoric, Affect, and Consumer Culture

This dissertation traces the rhetorical power and strategic potential of conspicuous production practices in U.S. consumer cultures. In the upcoming chapters, I assess how conspicuous production draws in and retains consumer audiences, and why it exists as a popular demand for upwardly mobile global North consumers. Consumer choice is often the terrain on which U.S. individuals with disposable incomes can freely construct their senses of self, pursuing trends and choices that align themselves with their communities and differentiate themselves from others. Rhetorical criticism's relationship with consumer culture ought thus to serve an educational and counter-interpellative function, identifying those ways in which people

⁵⁸ "Factory Visits," *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, accessed May 6, 2026, https://www.misterrogers.org/articles/factory_visits/.

are led to believe that consumption matters, and that it is a primary path to personal freedom and individual expression. Such critique offers suggestions for resistance to consumer culture. By thinking politically about consumer choices, audiences can approach corporate bids for transparency with appropriate caution.

The following sections consider human communication phenomena as they impact the ideological life-worlds, desires, and choices of audiences. It is, in other words, a material, affective, and placed rhetorical examination of the marketing, design, and cultural phenomena of conspicuous production. In choosing these approaches, I consider both symbolic and pre-discursive content in the overarching rhetorical strategy that keeps consumers consuming. By using sense, space, and performance as topoi of effective consumer interaction, the different actors participating in conspicuous production confer fantasies for audience enjoyment.

Brand Experience and Tourism

To build this argument, I engage in a series of critiques of consumer culture. The objects of my analysis are refined, curated tourist experiences meant for popular consumption. Therefore, my first theoretical perspective lies in contemporary marketing and design literature. Specifically, I approach my criticism through the framework of contemporary brand logic and its execution in the twenty-first century as *brand experience*. In the past several decades, brand designers have determined their success according to their capacity to connect audiences with meaningful experiences. These experiences connect the consumer to a narrative or feeling that represents the brand itself. When successful, brand experiences invite consumers to regularly re-engage with the brand itself: through products, sensuously designed brick-and-mortar locations, mediated fantasies of aspirational lifestyles in advertisements and on social media, for example.

This turn towards brand experience is an evolution of corporate emphasis on brand identity discussed in the previous section.

As brand design became increasingly concerned with creating consumer loyalty over demonstrating product quality, advertisers and retail designers began developing pleasurable experiences that would help consumers connect their positive feelings with the brand itself. Communication scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser argued that contemporary U.S. branding “is about building an affective, authentic *relationship* with a consumer” based on “the accumulation of memories, emotions, personal narratives, and expectations.”⁵⁹ While brands have exploited memory, narrative, and emotion in commercial advertisements for over a century, cultural critic Naomi Klein argued that nineties-style branding evolved to “take these associations out of the representational realm and make them a lived reality.”⁶⁰ Brands reached out beyond the TV screen to attach themselves to all kinds of experiences, from event sponsorships to collaborative work. With the advent of social media, some brand theorists are calling for brand designers to co-design brand experiences with consumers, integrating consumers with their favorite brands so that their very lives are inseparable from the brands they consume. Urban design scholars Marco Bevolo and Reon Brand coin this paradigm the “experience economy,” which “closes the classic divide between design and marketing” and transforms brand designers from product creators to “alchemists of interactions.”⁶¹ In other words, brand experience has replaced the product as the object of consumption: successful companies in Bevolo and Brand’s world sell experiences, with the actual tendered wares acting secondary to the brand fantasy.

⁵⁹ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York University Press, 2012), 8.

⁶⁰ Klein, *No Logo*, 29.

⁶¹ Marco Bevolo and Reon Brand, “Brand Design for the Long Term,” *Design Management Journal* 14 (2003), 38, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1948-7169.2003.tb00337.x>.

Commercial advertisements still play a crucial role in producing these experiences, but affective interactions play a greater role in the brand experience paradigm. Thus, brand creators pay greater attention to spatial design when working with in-person spaces. Retail management scholar Tony Kent explained that “the retail brand has moved beyond two-dimensional, visual expressions of format and product identity to embrace three-dimensional spaces of the store environment.”⁶² For Kent, branding evolved from the rational communication of product quality to the satisfaction of experiential needs. Shopping in a physical retail environment is one simple way in which these emotional needs can be met. Kent advocated for a designed environment that offers consumers a “theatre” of consumption which takes “the retailer beyond material realities and visual imagery into retail as entertainment.”⁶³ Marketing researchers Jamye Foster and Melinda A. McLelland provide Kent’s argument with empirical force, explaining how “experiential retailing” that creates a “total consumer experience for the shopper” through thematic store design “leads to better differentiation and more brand interaction and immersion.”⁶⁴ For example, an Apple store provides so much more than a convenient shopping location for its patrons; the design aesthetic of an Apple store communicates the sleek high-tech mood that the patron attaches to the brand. Apple in-store customer service representatives are titled “geniuses,” and they wander freely through the open space rather than standing behind a service counter. Apple tech is littered on every surface of the space, often arranged in a way that prompts user interaction with the devices. The Apple patron thus feels like they are entering a

⁶² Tony Kent, “2D23D: Management and Design Perspectives on Retail Branding,” *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management* 31, no. 3 (2003): 131, <https://doi.org/10.1108/09590550310465503>.

⁶³ Kent, “2D23D,” 139.

⁶⁴ Jamye Foster and Melinda A. McLelland, “Retail Atmospheric: The Impact of a Brand Dictated Theme,” *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 22 (2015): 196-201, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2014.07.002>.

creative, futuristic space that centers an egalitarian interaction between workers and consumers. Customer experience is a focal point of consumption, at times overshadowing the significance of the actual products.

Still, such considerations say nothing about why consumers want to participate in brand experience or why such experiences often render production conspicuously visible. In the age of global capitalism, much of this need can be explained as a demand for agency: a feeling that one has the freedom to act, to produce, to make their own decisions and feel empowered to do such things (or, at the very least, to identify with those doing the producing). Various explanations have been given for the cause of such demands. For journalist David Sax, the demand for multisensory consumer experiences is a reaction to digitization: “Surrounded by digital, we now crave experiences that are more tactile and human-centric,” that require “all our senses.”⁶⁵ Brand experiences offer a multisensory antidote to the digital discontent one experiences at work, at home, on our smartphones.

As more of American life becomes digitized, predigital forms of consumption and experience act as nostalgic signifiers to a more human-centric past. In his bestselling memoir *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, cultural critic Matthew Crawford identified the incomprehensible complexity of global trade as the exigence for production experience. Crawford argued that, “as workers and consumers,” contemporary Americans “struggle for individual agency” because they feel they “move in channels that have been projected from afar by vast impersonal forces.”⁶⁶ Though Crawford was undoubtedly describing the abstract malaise of office work in a developed service economy, his insight hearkens to Karl Marx’s early critique of the division of labor. In his

⁶⁵ David Sax, *The Revenge of Analog: Real Things and Why They Matter* (PublicAffairs, 2016), xvi-xvii.

⁶⁶ Matthew B. Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work* (Penguin Press, 2010), 7.

Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Marx describes how the division of labor not only makes the laborer more dependent on capital for their subsistence but also makes them “depressed spiritually and physically to the condition of a machine.”⁶⁷ The painful, repetitive tasks accomplished by workers in an advanced system renders their work more abstract so that they cannot experience the end-to-end achievement of craftwork. To consume conspicuous production experiences are (for the audience, anyway) to receive that which is denied in many kinds of contemporary jobs: an appreciable witness to creation.

While all white-collar work maintains some distance from manual production, many conspicuous production experiences occur in urban and tourist environments patronized by white-collar consumers. There might be a Starbucks on every street corner, but patrons can only observe bean roasting at the five Roastery locations in Chicago, New York, Milan, Shanghai, Tokyo, and (until recently) Seattle. Conspicuous production emerged as a brand experience tied specifically to contemporary middle-class tourism. Alaska cruises sell excursions to experience lumberjack life and learn to pan for gold; explorers of Kentucky’s Bourbon Trail can pay to bottle their own whiskey and get a class “behind the bar;” and just outside of Zürich, Switzerland, chocolate lovers can experience the entire chocolate production process at Lindt’s Chocolate Museum.⁶⁸ Scholar Dean MacCannell calls this “work display” a “museumization of work and work relations,” wherein

Modernity [transforms] labor into cultural productions attended by tourists and sightseers who are moved by the universality of work relations—not as this is represented through their own work (from which they are alienated), but as it is revealed to them at their

⁶⁷ Karl Marx, “Wages of Labour,” *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, accessed May 3, 2026, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/wages.htm>.

⁶⁸ “Alaska Cruise Shore Excursions,” Holland America, accessed May 3, 2026, <https://www.hollandamerica.com/en/us/cruise-destinations/alaska-cruises/top-alaska-shore-excursions>; “This is Where the Fun Begins,” Kentucky Bourbon Trail, accessed May 3, 2026, <https://kybourbontrail.com/things-to-do/>; “Chocolate Museum,” Lindt Home of Chocolate, accessed May 3, 2026, <https://www.lindt-home-of-chocolate.com/en/chocolate-museum-tour/>.

leisure through the displayed work of others.⁶⁹

The conspicuous production experience is ironically constituted as a leisure experience for its target audience. Those who watch people work do so in their leisure time, as tourist-consumers. As a tourism experience, the conspicuous production performance is thus irreducible to that of brand experience. It is also a memory of a place: not just Angel's Envy, but "Kentucky," not just Starbucks, but "Seattle." The tourist is prompted to articulate brand-tourism-production experience together into their experience of place. The following two sections discuss the affective nature of such articulations and the significance of "place" in the production fantasy.

Feeling Material Rhetoric through Affect

Since conspicuous production is a form of brand experience, I deploy rhetorical scholarship that considers both symbolic and sensuous, pre-discursive phenomena as complementary parts of the total communication act. Design choices that play on human sensory experience are topoi of strategic communication, engaging not just sight and hearing, but also smell, touch, and taste. The pleasant aroma emanating from a bakery or a barbecue undoubtedly act as a kind of advertisement for passersby; so too with the sizzling sounds of the popup taco stand and the grinding burr and violent steam release of the espresso machine. These sensations are key to the conspicuous production process: augmenting an audience's positive orientation towards a consumptive experience through spectacle and affect. To consider these sensuous elements of material phenomena as *rhetorical texts* is to be concerned with what rhetorical theorist Greg Dickinson called the "everyday materiality" of "non-discursive texts."⁷⁰ Material

⁶⁹ Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist* (Schocken Books, 1989), 36.

⁷⁰ Greg Dickinson, "Joe's Rhetoric: Finding Authenticity at Starbucks," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (2002): 5-6, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773940209391238>.

rhetorical scholarship considers the strategic symbolic content of extralinguistic phenomena and their influential capacities.

Greg Dickinson argued that material rhetoric exists within “non-discursive texts.” That is, audiences are persuaded into certain subjectivities without the discursive hail of a text or an oration: one’s sensuous experience of a coffee shop could, in theory, move one toward certain perceptions, beliefs, and actions. Dickinson argued, for instance, that Starbucks’s “materially embodied rhetoric” includes the sounds, smells, and tastes one experiences in the café, as well as the images, symbols, and articulations one sees and interprets in artwork, displays, and physical objects.⁷¹ As a material phenomenon, rhetoric works on the whole individual, nudging the audience into subject positions that prime them for persuasion.

Such an extension of rhetorical criticism is, no doubt, at risk of stretching traditional conceptions beyond their intended bounds. Nevertheless, if one wants to take seriously the entire range of communicative strategies that brands are likely to engage, one must attend to the total audience experience of suasory phenomena. To incorporate everyday materiality into rhetorical considerations, Brian L. Ott and Greg Dickinson advanced the following definition of rhetoric:

[rhetoric is] the capacity of the thing-symbol—via its aesthetic qualities and signifying practices—to generate affect and discourse, whose intertwined sensory and cognitive processing elicit presence and meaning effects in a particular space-time.⁷²

Such a definition does justice to conventional rhetorical approaches while incorporating the eclectic turn towards materiality, sensation, and affect. Therefore, material rhetorical scholarship considers the physical matter of rhetorical phenomena alongside its symbolic content. To broaden my consideration of conspicuous production and consumer subjectivity, I consider how

⁷¹ Dickinson, “Joe’s Rhetoric,” 11-12.

⁷² Brian L. Ott and Greg Dickinson, “Redefining Rhetoric: Why Matter Matters,” *Berlin Journal of Critical Theory* 3, no. 1 (2019): 45.

sensuous, non-discursive phenomena act alongside symbols to communicate meaning and interpellate audiences.

Dickinson's "sensuous, non-discursive phenomena" aligns well with the rich interdisciplinary literature of *affect studies*. The broad terrain of affect theory illuminates the persuasive capacities of material phenomena by considering how audiences are non-cognitively primed to respond to rhetorical situations. Affect scholars agree that affect occurs on the non-cognitive level of human perception: it is a "state of being,"⁷³ a "physiological phenomenon,"⁷⁴ an "orienting device,"⁷⁵ and a "co-presence of potentials"⁷⁶ that "operate[s] on an entirely different level than rational deliberation and self-interested choice."⁷⁷ Some affect scholars use *affect* and *emotion* interchangeably.⁷⁸ Others claim that emotion is but a "partial expression of affect"⁷⁹ or the "conscious experience of affect"⁸⁰ that transforms affective experience into "'narrativized' content, shaped through specific cultural, social, and political contexts."⁸¹ While the phenomenological study of affect is often construed as "prediscursive," the experience of affect often includes its transformation into symbolic/narrative content as it is interpreted by the

⁷³ Clare Hemmings, "Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn," *Cultural Studies* 19, no. 5 (2005): 551-552, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380500365473>.

⁷⁴ Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Cornell University Press, 2004), 5.

⁷⁵ Jenny E. Rice, "The New 'New': Making a Case for Critical Affect Studies," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 94, no. 2 (2008): 206, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630801975434>.

⁷⁶ Brian Massumi, *Politics of Affect* (Polity, 2015), 5.

⁷⁷ Catherine Chaput, "Rhetorical Circulation in Late Capitalism: Neoliberalism and the Overdetermination of Affective Energy," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 43, no. 1 (2010): 15, <https://doi.org/10.1353/par.0.0047>.

⁷⁸ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Routledge, 2004), 1; Rice, "The New 'New'," 206.

⁷⁹ Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 5.

⁸⁰ Donald A. Norman, *Emotional Design: Why We Love (Or Hate) Everyday Things* (Basic Books, 2004), 11.

⁸¹ Rice, "The New 'New'," 201.

person experiencing it. While affect describes visceral, physiological experiences that prime a person to make a judgment, it is the jump from affective experience to judgment that most concerns this rhetorical scholar. Affect can work through a body's interaction with sensuous matter, but it can also work through symbolic articulation (what Ahmed refers to as an "affective economy").⁸² It is a physiological explanation that explains non-cognitive human feeling, interaction, and decision-making.

For instance, scholar Sara Ahmed claimed that the articulation and circulation of certain signs can increase a person's physiological response to those signs.⁸³ When the phrase "illegal immigrant" circulates in discourse and is articulated alongside *crime*, *unfairness*, *white genocide*, and the visual signifier of brown skin, the body of the target audience member is primed to respond with anger or fear whenever they hear of an "illegal immigrant." According to design scholar Donald Norman, humans' "affective system makes judgments and quickly helps you determine which things in the environment are dangerous or safe, good or bad."⁸⁴ In other words, humans make decisions through a shortcut mechanism that helps us navigate the infinite complexity of our worlds through physiological expression of emotions. Split-second emotional judgments are coupled with physiological responses when the body perceives an affective cue. The "tense and edgy" feelings one gets when anxious corresponds to "'knotted' feelings in [one's] gut" that are "real manifestations of the way that emotions control [one's] muscle systems."⁸⁵ Affect scholarship is concerned with the ways human judgments correspond to

⁸² Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 119, <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/55780>.

⁸³ Ahmed, "Affective Economies," 120-121.

⁸⁴ Norman, *Emotional Design*, 11.

⁸⁵ Norman, *Emotional Design*, 12.

physiological experiences caused by external phenomena. Affect, by operating on the non-rational level of decision-making, primes audiences for physiological experiences that “cajol[e] us into habituated movements” in moments of quick decisions.⁸⁶ Affect is transmitted through physical interaction with the surrounding environment, such as the feeling of excitement one experiences upon visiting their favorite bakery, or opening a new book, or beginning a new season of one’s favorite TV series. An “affect perspective” assumes that human consciousness is determined in some part by the physical conditions, physiological states, and material circumstances around and within humans.

Affect helps the rhetorician consider how a highway billboard advertisement may be less influential than the same visual advertisement in a shopping mall because of the difference in an audience’s affective state: the sights, sounds, smells, and temporal experience of rush hour traffic constraining the audience’s ability to be affected by the billboard ad, while the multisensory bacchanal of the shopping mall primes that same audience to be moved by the ad. Thus, rhetorical considerations of affect can explain how the sensuous qualities of a place can orient audiences towards consumptive experiences. The conspicuous production performance occurring in, say, a factory tour, attaches itself to the consumer’s sense data and their self-concept in an overarching tourism experience. By analyzing the affect of consumer objects, media, and spaces, I consider how emotions are articulated alongside symbols, tropes, and bodies in conspicuous production practices to draw in audiences.

Locating Rhetoric in the Conspicuous Production Place

To assess the interpellative phenomenon of brand experience, I enter the places designed

⁸⁶ Chaput, “Rhetorical Circulation in Late Capitalism,” 15.

to reproduce feelings, sensations, and fantasies as part of the consumer experience. The rhetorical literature on space and place provides an important perspective for my criticism. Space/place criticism is a rhetorical approach to the total makeup of places, including their affective/material features, symbolic content, and the connotations that come along with performances of *place-ness*. Space/place criticism describes a series of scholarly engagements with the ways places perform power, constitute identity, and empower (or constrain) agency for the inhabitants of said places. According to Communication scholar Raka Shome, space constitutes “a medium for the enactment of cultural power. . . that is socially constituted through material relations that enable the communication of specific politics.”⁸⁷ Not just a context for rhetorical action, space performs a rhetorical function through its implicit constitution of the bodies within. From a rhetorical perspective, analysis of space demands a reconsideration of what constitutes the text of the critic’s analysis.

Early efforts to critique the rhetoric of space in Communication scholarship focused on the persuasive effects and symbolic meanings of architectural design. One such example is Charlotte L. Stuart’s article on architecture in Nazi Germany, which argued that the symbolic forms of Nazi architecture enacted “persuasion with buildings” that “parallels [Adolf Hitler’s] oral persuasion in thematic structure.”⁸⁸ Another early example of space/place rhetoric can be found in Darryl Hattenhauer’s semiotic approach to the rhetoric of architecture. In it, Hattenhauer argues that architecture is a “persuasive phenomenon” because “it induces us to do

⁸⁷ Raka Shome, “Space Matters: The Power and Practice of Space,” *Communication Theory* 13, no. 1 (2003): 40, <https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.2003.13.issue-1>.

⁸⁸ Charlotte L. Stuart, “Architecture in Nazi Germany: A Rhetorical Perspective,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 37 (1973): 253, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570317309373796>.

what others would have us do.”⁸⁹ Hattenhauer argued that symbolic meanings in architecture predominate over function in modern design and thus persuade visitors through the connotative messages of the building material.

In the past few decades, space/place rhetorical scholarship has extended analysis beyond the symbolic content of physical places to consider their total material effect on visitors. Rhetorical critic Carole Blair, for instance, argued that a rhetorical text’s material existence in space-time is part of the rhetorical address.⁹⁰ The materials that make up a text, such as the marble of the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial, accentuates the import of the communicated content differently than if the names on said memorial were read out in a public address. Blair also noted that the audience’s subjective experience of the material text contributed to the text’s meaning. In Blair’s “Reflections on Criticism and Bodies,” she argued that rhetoric “acts on the whole person” rather than exclusively on the conscious thinking part of the audience member.⁹¹

Where Blair introduced material considerations into the analysis of memorials and museums, Greg Dickinson extended the materiality of space/place criticism to places of everyday consumption. Dickinson argued that “our most pressing and constant concerns” are found in “daily habits of eating, drinking, conversing, [and] working” rather than with “formal politics or large philosophical problems.”⁹² For Dickinson, everyday spaces are more important sites of identity formation than public memorials since “it is in the interstices of the everyday. . .

⁸⁹ Darryl Hattenhauer, “The Rhetoric of Architecture: A Semiotic Approach,” *Communication Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (1984): 71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463378409369534>.

⁹⁰ Carole Blair, “Contemporary U.S. Memorial Sites as Exemplars of Rhetoric’s Materiality,” In *Rhetorical Bodies*, ed. Jack Selzer and Sharon Crowley (University of Wisconsin Press, 1999).

⁹¹ Carole Blair, “Reflections on Criticism and Bodies: Parables from Public Places,” *Western Journal of Communication* 65, no. 3 (2001): 46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570310109374706>.

⁹² Dickinson, “Joe’s Rhetoric,” 5.

that we most thoroughly materialize our selves and our bodies.”⁹³ In several critical engagements, Dickinson and his colleagues practice rhetorical criticism of everyday places of leisure and consumption, interpreting the sensual experience of place to understand how those places constitute audiences and foster identity formation.⁹⁴

Space/place rhetorical criticism involves the embodiment and, consequently, the immersion of the researcher into the very object of their study. According to Greg Dickinson, space/place criticism distances itself from the primacy of a “cognitive and symbolic approach,” instead moving toward “a full commitment of our bodies” by “attending to my embodied experience of the places out to discursive, cultural, and material formations.”⁹⁵ Considering one’s own body within the object of analysis “demands that we critically evaluate power, and requires that we think carefully about bodies, selves, others, and identity.”⁹⁶ Embodied methods of rhetorical analysis allow the critic to interpret meaning from their subjective experience of place. Toward that end, for this dissertation, I visited places of conspicuous production to assess the sensual consumptive experience of spectacular production displays. By analyzing the media, products, and places where conspicuous production is key to the consumer experience, I elucidate the key features of conspicuous production as a design strategy and offer explanations for its effectiveness on consumers today: how it works, why some consumers crave it, and what this craving tells us about U.S. society.

⁹³ Dickinson, “Joe’s Rhetoric,” 6.

⁹⁴ Greg Dickinson, “Memories for Sale: Nostalgia and the Construction of Identity in Old Pasadena,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 83, no. 1 (1997), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335639709384169>; Dickinson, “Joe’s Rhetoric;” Greg Dickinson and Casey M. Maugh, “Placing Visual Rhetoric: Finding Material Comfort in Wild Oats Market,” in *Defining Visual Rhetorics*, ed. Charles A. Hill and Marguerite Helmers, (Routledge, 2004).

⁹⁵ Greg Dickinson, “Space, Place, and the Textures of Rhetorical Criticism,” *Western Journal of Communication* 84, no. 3 (2020): 305. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2019.1672886>.

⁹⁶ Dickinson, “Space, Place, and the Textures of Rhetorical Criticism,” 300.

My selected artifacts can all be found in the city of Seattle. While I have selected cases I mean to be representative of a certain kind of Global North culture, I also acknowledge that these artifacts are, in some ways, unique to the city they call home. The global creep of mass culture over the late capitalist epoch determines that one encounters so many of the same amenities, styles, and trends whether one is in Toronto, Tijuana, or Taipei. It is not difficult to imagine that conspicuous production is happening in all kinds of urban environments around the globe. But Seattle is an interesting city to assess because its urban identity stands at the very crossroads discussed in this chapter: that of automation and high-tech capitalism on the one hand, and of craft micro-production and working-class counterculture on the other. The Seattle metropolitan area is both the headquarters of Microsoft, Amazon, and Nintendo America; and the home of the U.S. craft beer movement, the second wave of U.S. coffee culture, and the 1999 World Trade Organization protests. One can thus see a proliferation of conspicuous production design choices in Seattle representing a general turn in global urban culture *and* a response to a particular local audience. Conspicuous production in Seattle contrasts with the tech colonization of the city, showing fantasies of small-scale human production in the same place that houses the U.S.'s second highest concentration of tech employees (behind California's Silicon Valley). The economic dominance of the tech sector in Seattle is part of what makes conspicuous production performances novel, necessary, and effective.

Dissertation Outline

This dissertation proceeds as a series of rhetorical criticisms of a social phenomenon, analyzing conspicuous production as a rhetorical practice: a series of symbolic acts and sensuous phenomena strategically produced to affect identifiable outcomes. My rhetorical criticism of

conspicuous production involved an ethnographic investigation of places where conspicuous production occurs. First, I scouted out tourist places in the Seattle region that feature conspicuous production. The three cases I studied were sites I had visited previously as a tourist/consumer, that appeared to me to be both popular among the public and purposeful in their emphasis on visible manual production. To produce the critiques that follow in chapters 2-4, I visited each place several times over a two-week period, remaining onsite for 3-4 hours each visit to develop notes about the consumer experience. My notes included thick descriptions of the places and my experiences of them: descriptions of the architecture and interior design, the colors, lighting, smells, and materials around me, as well as the taste of food and drink and the quotidian interactions of the employees in the place. I gathered my ethnographic field notes of Starbucks's Seattle Reserve Roastery between August and September 2025; of the Pike Place Market in February and March 2026; and of the Burke Museum in April and May 2024. I then applied the theoretical perspectives introduced in the previous sections to these cases to better understand why organizations engage in conspicuous production practices, and why consumers find them so spectacular. The criticism that follows contributes to scholarship on the relationship between rhetoric and consumer culture and to cultural understandings of class and ideology in the Global North.

Chapter 2 investigates the consumer experience of conspicuous production performances at the urban food space. Specifically, I explain how the conspicuous production on display in Starbucks's Seattle Reserve Roastery adds value to the goods being sold. The Seattle Reserve Roastery is an exemplar of the conspicuous production model because its physical space exhibits sensuous end-to-end production of the consumable objects within: roasting, refining, and packaging of coffee beans for sale in the gift shop and put to use at their multiple in-house cafes,

all visible within the consumer space for patrons to observe as they sip their coffee. The consumer experience of conspicuous production adds *affective value* to the commodities for sale, binding the consumer with the purchasable object through experience, feeling, and attachment rather than the use-value that the object offers. This added value is lost, however, when conflicting experiences disrupt the production fantasy.

Chapter Three investigates the ways in which conspicuous production reenacts local identity and memory through its performance of place. In this chapter, I consider how conspicuous production in a public market alleviates concerns about the absent producer: the nagging lack of knowledge about who produces commodities and where these producers are. To consider this theme, I analyze the consumer experience of Seattle's Pike Place Market, an international tourism destination. Specifically, I explore how Pike Place Market merchandizes wares through effectuations of place: by communicating fantasies of "Seattle" as a distinct, historic place, and offering embodied interpretations of Seattle's most recognizable themes. I argue that Pike Place offers an imaginary version of Seattle that deliberately contrasts with the tech colonization of the urban space. In a city known for its tech industry, a historic market provides a competing urban identity rooted in local produce and artisanship.

Chapter 4 interrogates conspicuous production practice as an effort to anticipate questions and critiques an audience might direct towards an institution. This chapter investigates how conspicuous production transforms the role of the natural history museum in public life. I analyze the Burke Museum at the University of Washington to consider how its conspicuous bids for transparency affect consumer experience and transform goals of science communication. The Burke Museum is an excellent choice to investigate transparency because its current curation ethos exudes transparency through conspicuous production: many of the walls of the interior

have been replaced with massive glass windows where patrons are invited to observe students and researchers interacting with the objects that eventually go on display or are used in scientific research. I argue that the Burke rhetorically situates itself as a response to well-established critiques of the natural history museum genre in its design choices and conspicuous production practices. By overtly addressing ethical concerns and rendering the knowledge production process conspicuously visible, the Burke creates its own progress narrative that prompts visitors to remember traditional natural history museums as problematic and the Burke, by contrast, as ameliorative.

The final chapter reasserts the historical perspective provided in this introductory chapter, while reflecting on the rhetorical framing of conspicuous production performances. I examine conspicuous production's relationship to two epochal frames. Then, I argue that conspicuous production performances add both experience value and fictions of transparency for the benefit of its firms. I conclude with a critical discussion of conspicuous production as a means of manufacturing authenticity, emphasizing certain kinds of labor while rendering other kinds invisible. I argue that the choice to highlight certain kinds of labor as conspicuously visible forecloses imagination of the complex relationships connecting all laborers. While the proliferation of conspicuous production demonstrates a desire for interconnection between white and blue-collar labor, such experiences are constituted as gratifying fantasies that require no necessary relationship to the conditions of production. Instead, they seek to preemptively respond to questions consumers might otherwise ask about labor conditions. The constructed "transparency" of production ultimately functions as a bid to assuage curiosity and anxieties about production by offering a portion of the production process for public view.

The turn towards conspicuous production represents different strategic goals according to

the parties that adopt it. Middle-income consumers who crave conspicuously produced luxury goods might value the authenticity and quality of the goods sold. The experience of production may also fill a feeling of discontinuity in consumers' own lives: service, communication, and managerial work are often abstract and disconnected from physical products, leaving many workers hungry for experiences that bring them in touch with experiences that feel real and concrete. The firms that display production performances can charge higher prices for the perceived physical effort gone into production, while cities and local communities value conspicuous production in their commercial districts as a means to increase foot traffic and tourism, contributing to the economic growth and "local character" of the community.

The contemporary classes of affluent consumer-citizens, from the middle-manager to the landed aristocrat, are far from the fully automated human layabouts of *Wall-E*. But even as the world "up there" differs greatly between Pixar's and our own, the other world "down here"—the lower depths wherein wretched robots engage in endless toil—is far closer. For it is only certain parts of the labor process, and certain kinds of labor, that are rendered visible in conspicuous production practices. Spectacular and pleasant images of conspicuous production serve a particular labor imaginary for the consumer, offering an alibi for that vast system of global capitalism. Starbucks, for instance, reproduces imaginaries of dedicated baristas serving their local communities to obfuscate now-pervasive messages of labor exploitation and violation; it similarly reproduces romantic images of fair-trade agreements between U.S. salespeople and Global South farmers to massage concerns about the relations of extraction that make coffee consumption possible. If such imaginaries are freely given to the consumer, perhaps the consumer will not think to ask inconvenient questions, such as "what did it take for my latte to arrive here?" and "what is the quality of all the labor that I cannot see?"

Chapter 2

A Consumable Experience: Affective Value Production at Starbucks Reserve Roastery

Contemporary society offers many places where one can pause, linger, and watch people work. Some opportunities to watch work are built into our social norms, like parent sit-ins at their child's classroom and "bring your child to work day" in U.S. office spaces. One could open Google, TikTok, or YouTube on and spend hours observing videos of manufacturers, service workers, and government officials providing an "inside look" at what they do. Or, one could hop on an LA freeway around four pm and experience thousands of commuters rubbernecking at EMTs and CHP doing their daily work. Drive on Seattle surface roads any time or day and see if you can spot a construction crew drilling under the pavement. While this labor is publicly viewable and interesting for some, much of this work is not designed for public view. On the contrary, construction crews and EMTs would probably prefer the absence of the public during their work period. The design of a consumer place as a kind of viewing area for novel performances of production is niche and rhetorical, rather than strictly practical. U.S. consumers are most likely to experience conspicuous production in places of luxury consumption: at urban eateries, "craft" production spaces, and tourist hubs.

As a feature of consumer goods manufacturing, conspicuous production acts as a node in the broader "analog turn" occurring in U.S. popular culture since the early years of the twenty-first century. Journalist David Sax describes this turn in his 2016 book *The Revenge of Analog: Real Things and Why They Matter*. According to Sax, the Digital Revolution—the radical transformation of analog industries like paperback publishing and vinyl record production—created a renewed demand for those analog products it had rendered obsolete. Where e-readers and the iPod offered cheaper, more efficient alternatives to their analog predecessors, they also

created a nostalgic demand for the tactile materiality of older technologies. According to Sax, “we now crave experiences that are more tactile and human-centric” *because* we are seemingly surrounded by digital technologies.⁹⁷ Analog products communicate taste, nostalgia, even “cool” that are missing from digital artifacts: after falling into obsolescence, film photography, vinyl records, and Moleskine notebooks eventually “became cool, in the way that candles and bicycles are cool, even if they are technically ‘obsolete.’”⁹⁸ Whereas dominant technologies are broadly used by the general public for their intended purpose, obsolete technologies represent a consumer choice that indicates one’s values and interests.⁹⁹

The analog turn is not just a matter of consumer identity, though. While a focused commitment to obsolete technologies might convey niche interests or personal preferences, the cultural turn towards analog may also indicate a deeper longing for an imagined past. Following Sax, communication scholar Robert Hassan’s *Analog* explains how the analog turn represents a desire for authenticity through human connection with nature and history.¹⁰⁰ Specifically, Hassan focuses on the *continuity* of analog technologies. Digital technology is necessarily arcane: reduced from its origin to binary code and reassembled through fiber-optic cables and complex microchips. The average consumer is unlikely to apprehend the digital materiality of their iPhone or tablet. Hassan argues that while automated digital technology often appears in the guise of saving labor, it actually “serves to separate us from having an active role in the building of our material culture.”¹⁰¹ Both Sax and Hassan argue that the return of analog reflects a desire for

⁹⁷ David Sax, *The Revenge of Analog: Real Things and Why They Matter* (PublicAffairs, 2016), xvi-xvii.

⁹⁸ Sax, *The Revenge of Analog*, 44.

⁹⁹ Sax, *The Revenge of Analog*, 35.

¹⁰⁰ Robert Hassan, *Analog* (MIT Press, 2022), 31.

¹⁰¹ Hassan, *Analog*, 206.

authentic and human-scaled experiences in consumer culture, and Hassan locates this authenticity in the historical continuity between humanity and its creations, or the imaginary feeling that the production of a thing is plainly knowable, as opposed to the “discontinuous” digital form, which lacks a sense of history.¹⁰² Conspicuous production is another node in the turn to analog: a performative display of material production processes used to create a sense of continuity, transparency, and authenticity for contemporary consumers.

A persistent detail of Sax’s narrative is that, while the digital revolution initially destroyed analog industries, those industries returned to the marketplace commanding a much greater value than they previously held. While physical media is no longer the primary way to experience a song or a photograph, it is now often the most expensive. New vinyl records retail for forty dollars, and standard film development can cost twenty dollars a roll. But despite the premium price tag, physical media sales are more lucrative today than they have been in decades.¹⁰³ In a century of astounding technological advancement, some consumers are craving the nostalgia, authenticity, and sense of continuity of the old thing. Not only do analog products possess the aura of a different time: they also involve physical handling of materials to engage. Most media is immediately available on our smartphones, but there is a sensuous, tactile quality about handling physical objects that connect consumers with an imaginary past.

Conspicuous production in consumer spaces serves to highlight the historicity of analog products. The performance of some stage of production, like the gyoza assembly at Din Tai Fung, the pretzel twisting at Auntie Anne’s, or the milk frothing at a local café, offers consumers

¹⁰² Hassan, *Analog*, 31.

¹⁰³ Rob Errera, “Printed Books vs eBooks Statistics, Trends and Facts [2024],” *Toner Buzz*, December 11, 2024, <https://www.tonerbuzz.com/blog/paper-books-vs-ebooks-statistics/>; “The Vinyl Records Revival and the Growth of Vinyl LPs: Why Is There a Resurgence of Vinyl Records?” Taylor, October 14, 2025, <https://www.taylor.com/blog/increased-vinyl-sales-and-the-vinyl-revival>.

a glimpse at production that accords with this analog turn. While many coffee drinkers enjoy the convenience of Keurig machines, others prefer less efficient, analog forms of coffee craft: hand-cranking a grinder and serving pour-over coffee at home, for instance. This chapter turns to the conspicuous production of coffee beans for elevated coffee experiences. I analyze how the conspicuous production on display in Seattle's Starbucks Reserve Roastery adds a kind of value to the goods being sold. The consumer experience of conspicuous production adds *affective value* to the commodities for sale, binding the consumer with the product through experience, feeling, and attachment rather than the use-value that the object offers.

This chapter unfolds in four parts: first, I discuss how value is added to commodities through carefully manipulated affect. Then, I describe the conspicuous production practices of Starbucks's Seattle Reserve Roastery, showing how its production performances provide consumer fantasies of coffee production. Third, I explain the rhetorical implications of such performances, highlighting how the Roastery's design and display choices add affective value to Starbucks craft coffee. In the final section, I evaluate the meaning of such practices for consumer society, highlighting the dissonance between customer experience of conspicuous labor and underlying material factors.

On Value

I find it difficult to measure the value of my morning cup of coffee. How could I possibly determine how much I value my coffee? I could start with its abstract sensory experience: I cherish the toasty smell of fresh grounds and enjoy the warm feel of a coffee mug in my hand. The taste is, regrettably, less important to me: my local roast claims to have notes of anise, port wine, and molasses, but all coffee tastes like shoe leather to me (consequences of a blunt palate, I

suppose). I could instead consider the practical effects of coffee consumption: my morning cup helps me avoid afternoon headaches and gives me a small mid-morning energy boost I would otherwise lack. I have been told that coffee consumption carries health benefits but am typically skeptical of such bias-affirming claims. Still, I might be able to triangulate a kind of personal coffee value by enumerating these simple things the drink does to me.

But I find these shallow considerations miss the point. If coffee only gave me a warm feeling, a nice scent, and some energy, I could probably make better use of my money. There is a *je ne sais quoi*, an immaterial remainder, that also explains my personal attachment to my coffee ritual. Perhaps I could instead try to describe the fantastical, imaginary qualities I attach to coffee consumption: the affective associations I make with coffee that affect my mind-state. To my mind, the image and ritual of daily coffee consumption feel very cozy, and combine with an aspirational, indulgent vibe when purchased and sipped at a local café. Sipping coffee at home feels like an autumn day, or a relaxing weekend, or a comfy paperback; sipping coffee at a café feels like a Paris vacation, or like the carefree days of undergrad. The smell and taste bring back memories of times I was happy and coffee happened to be in my hand. The act of consumption recalls certain fantasies that maintain my attachment to my drink and remind me of a particular self-image I wish to cultivate.

Considerations of value have plagued economists and consumers alike for centuries, forming the subject of countless disputes over the relationships between usefulness, production cost, and (real, perceived, and manufactured) scarcity that often come close to, but never quite resolve, the definitive value of a thing. I focus this chapter specifically on how an organization communicates the value of its products through conspicuous production performances. Specifically, I am interested in how the value of Starbucks coffee increases when consumed at a

Starbucks Reserve Roastery, a mecca for Starbucks enthusiasts and a prime location of conspicuous coffee production.

Theories of value tend to fall on a spectrum between the practical and the imaginary. One can conceptualize value according to material factors or according to imaginary factors. Classical concepts of value, such as use-value, exchange value, and the labor theory of value weigh practical, material facts of the market to determine the value of an object. Each of these concepts determine value through socially intelligible vectors of material conditions: supply and demand, use, exchange, and labor. But these conceptions of value come to mean something only on the supply side (when a capitalist must determine which investments will turn a profit) and in situations of need (when a purchaser must choose between necessary goods).

In a robust consumer society like the contemporary U.S., consumers are more likely to be drawn towards consumer goods through a complex web of ideas and experiences. According to Communication scholar Christine Harold, value is better understood, not as a “simple formula,” but rather “as a network or a constellation of aspects—material, political, affective, and symbolic.”¹⁰⁴ For example, Harold cites “ritual” and “project” values as kinds of value that manifest through one’s imaginary, experiential relationship with objects. Following the work of Walter Benjamin, Harold describes *ritual value* as how one “delight[s] in” and “desire[s]” an object through “rituals of self-expression” while often being “ignorant of the conditions of its emergence.”¹⁰⁵ In other words, we may be drawn to an object because it helps us construct our identity. One drinks morning coffee from the same souvenir mug each day because the object speaks to the kind of person one imagines oneself to be. Harold argues that such objects hold

¹⁰⁴ Christine Harold, *Things Worth Keeping: The Value of Attachment in a Disposable World* (University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 212.

¹⁰⁵ Harold, *Things Worth Keeping*, 111.

particular significance when created or self-assembled by the consumer. Alternatively, something has *project value* when we identify with and value highly something when we have created it ourselves (or at least participated in some part of the final assembly).¹⁰⁶

Another imaginary conceptualization of value centers on the power of positive experiences. Greek economist Yanis Varoufakis conceptualized *experiential value* to describe the imaginary value of the consumer experience of labor. Experiential value is the added thing that imbues a commodity with abstract phenomenal significance, created through “experiential labor.” Varoufakis defines experiential labor as those parts of the labor act that add value to a commodity external to those things which directly determine its exchange value: for instance, the “effort, passion, and flair” one puts into their work that gets experienced by the consumer.¹⁰⁷ In each imaginary approach to valuation, it is not so much the practical qualities of the commodity or material conditions of the market that determine the value of the thing; rather, it is the fantastical, affective relationship the consumer has with the brand or object that determines its worth. This is less a careful economic valuation than a compelling feeling that one’s experience of being at the place of consumption will somehow make their day better and more meaningful. Each of these is a kind of affect-added value or what we might call “affective value.”

As mentioned in the previous chapter, affect theory deepens our understanding of persuasion by considering how audiences are non-cognitively primed to respond to rhetorical situations. Affect describes visceral, physiological experiences that prime a person to make a particular judgment. Affect can work through a body’s interaction with sensuous matter, but it

¹⁰⁶ Harold, *Things Worth Keeping*, 111.

¹⁰⁷ Yanis Varoufakis, *Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism* (Melville House, 2023), 14.

can also work through symbolic articulation.¹⁰⁸ Put simply, affect offers a physiological explanation for human action. One's cognitive suggestibility, primed to make impulsive purchasing decisions while on vacation or gamble one's savings in a windowless Las Vegas casino, corresponds with the bodily experience of the dopamine rush that accompanies such experiences. I take an affect perspective in this chapter because retailers and service providers, both multinational and local, capture today's consumers through affective cues. Successful customer retention depends on the careful management of a kind of brand experience: a favorable imaginary that keeps people returning to their happy places. This is accomplished through a multisensory design process that ensures consumers have a particular kind of experience when visiting physical spaces of consumption. Full-service hotels, for example, often use warm, low lighting and soft, jazzy music to trigger feelings of safety and relaxation.¹⁰⁹ Many restaurants use music to prime patron behaviors, too: slow-paced music could be implemented in a restaurant to prompt customers to stay longer, while fast-paced or loud music could be implemented to influence quicker table turnover.¹¹⁰

Affect is a core component of contemporary brand design. The past century of branding has centered on the need to establish value apart from the functionality of the goods and services they provide. This is, in part, because of the vast availability of such goods and services for the U.S. consumer. Search for an infrared thermometer or a digital bathroom scale on Amazon and you'll receive an endless scroll of indistinguishable products in the same price range. Surrounded

¹⁰⁸ Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 119, <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/55780>.

¹⁰⁹ Zarafshan Shiraz, "Why Hotel Lobbies Make You Feel So Relaxed: Smart Interior Design Psychology Tricks Hotels Use to Keep You Hooked," *Times of India*, April 29, 2026, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/130596693.cms>.

¹¹⁰ Dafina Zymeri, "9 Ways Background Music Can Influence Your Restaurant's Customers," *BackBar*, June 3, 2019, <https://academy.getbackbar.com/9-ways-background-music-can-influence-your-restaurants-customers>.

by sameness, brands must emphasize qualities beyond mere functionality to create loyal consumers. According to business researchers Dean, Arroyo-Gamez, and Punjaisri, successful brands express core values that are “functional, emotional, experiential, and symbolic, which develop an emotional connection with consumers and create a unique brand experience.”¹¹¹ The emotional and experiential levels of a brand are what affect audiences to have positive feelings about that brand. Communication scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser notes that one’s experience of a brand creates an “affective relationship” that reflexively prompt self-expression and validation. For Banet-Weiser, “brands are the cultural spaces in which individuals feel safe, secure, relevant, and authentic.”¹¹² A well-designed brand thus caters towards an experience of comfort, authenticity, and validation.

Brand designers manage consumers’ affective orientation towards the brand through “brand experience.” Design scholar Donald Norman claims that this process is what distinguishes excellent brands from all others: “Great designers produce pleasurable experiences [and] experience is critical, for it determines how fondly people remember their interactions.”¹¹³ Brand names are supposed to encapsulate all the experiences consumers are likely to have with the brand. Norman argues that “Brands are signifiers of our emotional responses. . . that represent one’s entire experience with a product and the company that produces it.”¹¹⁴ Retail analyst Tony Kent argues that the physical store environment is one of the brand designer’s most

¹¹¹ Dianne Dean, Ramon E. Arroyo-Gamez, Khanyapuss Punjaisri, and Christopher Pich, “Internal Brand Co-Creation: The Experiential Brand Meaning Cycle in Higher Education,” *Journal of Business Research* 69, no. 8 (2016): 3041, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.01.019>.

¹¹² Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York University Press, 2012), 9.

¹¹³ Donald A. Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, rev. ed. (Basic Books, 2013), 10.

¹¹⁴ Donald A. Norman, *Emotional Design: Why we Love (or Hate) Everyday Things* (Basic Books, 2004), 60.

powerful tools to reinforce commitment through brand experience. Kent claims that “the store environment has come to communicate strong visual sensory experiences of the retailer’s identity” to “to instil trust, consistency and quality in the consumer’s mind.”¹¹⁵ An effective store designer “must create customer ‘cues’ to draw the customer into a more fulfilling experience.”¹¹⁶ Kent compares this approach to a “theatre stage,” since it moves brand experience beyond functionality and visual symbolism towards “retail as entertainment.”¹¹⁷ The stage design of the store environment includes both tangible elements and intangible cues. According to design scholars Calienes, Carmel-Gilfilen, and Portillo, tangible elements are what “can be seen, felt, or touched and include color, lighting, layout, merchandise groupings, displays, and signage,” while intangible cues include “perceived or sensed qualities such as ambient scents, music, temperature, and services or experiences with the environment such as crowding and customer service.”¹¹⁸

Rather than isolate a few symbolic facets of brand design, the scholars cited above are interested in the total experience of a brand environment, which is then channeled back into the brand name. Very little of this could be said to be functional in any obvious sense: the value that brand designers have struck on is experiential and emotional. Yes, experiential brand design uses “tangible” symbolic elements as part of its schema; but it also relies on audience co-creation through articulation to “work” on the consumer. In other words, it is up to the consumer to

¹¹⁵ Tony Kent, “2D23D: Management and Design Perspectives on Retail Branding,” *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management* 31, no. 3 (2003): 137, <https://doi.org/10.1108/09590550310465503>.

¹¹⁶ Kent, “2D23D,” 139.

¹¹⁷ Kent, “2D23D,” 139.

¹¹⁸ Elizabeth Calienes, Candy Carmel-Gilfilen, and Margaret Portillo, “Inside the Mind of the Millennial Shopper: Designing Retail Spaces for a New Generation,” *Journal of Interior Design* 41, no. 4 (2016): 49, <https://doi.org/10.1111/joid.12085>.

perceive the variety of cues surrounding them in the store environment and subconsciously attach these cues to positive feelings, that will then connect back to the brand name. Whether or not the designer's bid for positive brand evaluation succeeds depends on the power of intangible cues to create an appropriate affective orientation for the audience. The next section provides an example of such success.

Sensuous Production Experience at the Starbucks Reserve Roastery

Coffee was once considered a generic staple like milk or eggs, a cheap necessity purchased in bulk. It had none of the symbolic value, like product origin or tasting notes, now used to differentiate consumers from one another. In simpler times, the main consumer decisions were confined to Folgers vs. Maxwell House or regular vs. decaf. Indeed, twentieth century coffee snobbery, as parodied in the 1991 comedy *L.A. Story*, confined its caricatures of elite Angelino coffee preferences to decaf, half-caf, and (most audaciously) “with a twist of lemon.”¹¹⁹ Coffee was a ubiquitous daily ritual, but the way most Americans consumed it lacked the vast differentiation that now comes with the consumption of coffee. In other words, coffee *culture* had not yet arisen as a complex representation of one's unique lifestyle choices, in the same way that, say, car culture had developed by the mid-twentieth century.

Starbucks changed the way U.S. consumers drink coffee. Rather than fill an existing demand, Starbucks was in the business of creating a new one. An article from *Boston Brand Research and Media* explains that former Starbucks CEO Howard Schulz, initially hired at Starbucks as a marketing director in 1982, transformed the Starbucks brand by envisioning its

¹¹⁹ Mick Jackson, director, *L.A. Story*, TriStar Pictures, 1991.

future as an Americanization of European café culture.¹²⁰ Under Schulz, Starbucks changed U.S. coffee consumption in two primary ways. First, Starbucks turned coffee consumption into an identity marker by presenting the consumer with a plethora of choices: dozens of different drinks, sizes, brews, and temperatures that, through their specificity, communicate something about the unique individual consumer's preferences. Second, Starbucks highlighted the "where" of coffee consumption by presenting the café as a "'third place' between home and work, where customers can relax, socialize, or work in a welcoming environment."¹²¹ Right around the time Robert Putnam was bemoaning the decline of community organizations in "Bowling Alone," Starbucks was providing a commercial third space replacement. And, like a rising tide, Starbucks increased the image of the entire coffee industry. According to Vijay Vishwanath and David Harding in the *Harvard Business Review*, Starbucks's success increased the cache of all coffee brands, including those sold at supermarkets and non-Starbucks U.S. cafés.¹²² Vishwanath & Harding conclude that Starbucks's success in "increase[ing] the perceived 'premiumness' of a product" resulted in higher profits for the entire product category.¹²³

This is all difficult to recall today. By the new millennium, Starbucks franchises were popping up in every mid-size suburb in the U.S. It is, today, just one among many breakfast-oriented fast-food restaurants, complete with a drive-thru window in most locations. Before the new millennium, it was a cool place to sip coffee and read the paper; by the late aughts, it

¹²⁰ "Starbucks: A Global Coffeehouse Phenomenon," Boston Brand Research & Media, December 12, 2024, <https://www.bostonbrandmedia.com/news/starbucks-a-global-coffeehouse-phenomenon>.

¹²¹ Boston Brand, "Starbucks."

¹²² Vijay Vishwanath and David Harding, "The Starbucks Effect," *Harvard Business Review* 78, no. 2 (March 1, 2000): 17, <https://research-ebsco-com.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/c/2onyl7/viewer/pdf/klnjurde55?route=details>.

¹²³ Vishwanath and Harding, "The Starbucks Effect," 17.

became the most popular place in town to purchase a five hundred-calorie frozen coffee drink; in 2026, it competes with several other established chains, such as Dunkin' and McDonald's McCafé, as an entrenched fast-food coffee brand. Whatever place Starbucks now occupies in the national psyche, *cool*, *trendy*, and *craft* are unlikely to materialize as descriptors. Starbucks's fast-paced, mass-produced contemporary brand image contrasts starkly with its earlier identity as a laid-back local haunt. Mass production of the brand has, no doubt, exponentially increased its reach and profitability, but in some ways the brand's image has plateaued; receded, even, from its status as a premier Seattle coffee brand. Apart from its flagging sales and floundering stock price, Starbucks is losing its cache as a third place.¹²⁴ Few urban coffee connoisseurs would darken a Starbucks entryway without great need for its speed, convenience, or public toilets. In its current form, there seems to be little space upward for the brand to go.

Enter the Starbucks Reserve Roastery, an urban invention designed to put the artisanship and craft back into the Starbucks brand. The Seattle Roastery was one of six Starbucks Reserve locations (the others include Chicago, New York, Shanghai, Tokyo, and Milano) until its abrupt closure in September 2025. Each Reserve Roastery offers elevated consumer involvement in the Starbucks brand through guided tours, paid experiences, and exclusive food offerings available only at these locations. Described in its menus as “the essence of Starbucks. The very best of Starbucks. The ultimate Starbucks,” the Roasteries offer environments where consumers can experience more of the coffee production process than they would at a regular Starbucks location.¹²⁵ While patrons at every Starbucks location witness the final assembly steps of coffee

¹²⁴ B. Joseph Pine II and Louis-Étienne Dubois, “How Starbucks Devalued Its Own Brand,” *Harvard Business Review*, June 26, 2024, <https://hbr.org/2024/06/how-starbucks-devalued-its-own-brand>; Redd Brown, “Starbucks Customers Are Exiting Fast, Not Linger Over Coffee,” *Bloomberg*, October 29, 2025, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-10-29/starbucks-sbux-is-for-quick-service-not-hanging-out>.

¹²⁵ “Starbucks Reserve Main Bar,” restaurant menu, *Starbucks Reserve*, August 28, 2025.

beverage creation (grinding, brewing, and pouring), the Roastery's visitors experience the roasting, sifting, scooping, and packaging of Starbucks beans. The Seattle Reserve, in its conspicuous production practices, makes visual arguments that elevate the value of the Starbucks brand.

The Seattle Reserve Roastery stood proudly in Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood, its tall glass windows, spotless white brick, and brilliant brown border accents quite conspicuously occupying the only spot on the block without a hint of graffiti. The entryway imposes itself on passersby with its massive double doors and the bronze figure of a Starbucks Mermaid adorning the entryway's mantle. To enter, one must first gather the strength to lurch the heavy, imposing wooden doors towards you. The interior design is exactly what you might expect from a late millennial third space: nothing but brown wood on every surface, ceilings bare and overstuffed with massive AC tubes, water pipes, and spotlights hanging precariously from thin wires. Everything that isn't made of wood is painted brown. Unfinished wooden beams adorn the ceiling and pillars, held together with thick black metal. It is far easier describing what is not covered in a faux-wooden veneer than attempting to identify what is. The ground is plain concrete; the stills, hoppers, and roasting machinery are mostly black and copper, with some gray pieces standing out here and there. Even the curtains adorning the windows are drab brown. A lone pride flag hangs in the front window, the only decoration that distinguishes itself from the muted interior browns pervading the space. The omnipresent wood finish recalls a direct sensation of the raw material from whence the furniture piece or building was made: *trees*. Drywall, concrete, metal, and glass carry no such signification: they recall industry rather than recalling an earthy origin. Wood gives you the sense that this thing was *made*, that it comes from somewhere.

But the chief draw to the Seattle Roastery is not its décor. The chief guiding aspect of the Roastery's vision is its production and performance of the *experience* of coffee beverage production. According to former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz, the Seattle Roastery is designed to “create for our customers the most immersive, sensory demonstration of how we source, roast and craft the finest coffee from around the world.”¹²⁶ Everything inside the Roastery centers visible production. The entire back half of the Roastery resembles a chic variation on the classic factory tour. A round coffee roaster in the foreground sifts hot beans while a roasting specialist monitors the actions close by, paddle in hand. A massive copper cask looms behind, storing beans for the post-roast rest. Just to the left, a conveyor belt divides roasted beans into Starbucks packaging as a tour guide narrates the process to a small group of customers paying for the factory tour experience. Storage silos full of beans stand idly by, supposedly passing beans above through pneumatic copper piping all the way to the shiny hoppers at the center of the main bar. Even without a paid factory tour experience, the casual visitor is invited to imagine the complexity of coffee beverage production through the integrated design of the space.

Each of the four main purchasing areas features sumptuous conspicuous production experiences. The main bar, located just left of the entrance, is the primary location for visitors to purchase Starbucks beverages and classic Starbucks pastries. The customer line, wrapping its way around the oval bar, is organized so that it sidles the bar all the way around till it ends at a small set of barstools. At the center of the bar stand an abundance of baristas, each performing a separate task: one taking orders, another steaming milk for a latte, another striking up a conversation with a customer, and another replenishing pastries freshly delivered from the

¹²⁶ “The Seattle Roastery,” Starbucks Reserve, accessed August 28, 2025, <https://www.starbucksreserve.com/stories/the-seattle-roastery>.

bakery. This design choice encourages visitors to watch coffee production as a paid performance. Rather than scroll your phone blankly as you saunter along the queue, you can watch expert baristas steam, roast, shake, stir, and pour drinks as you go. Sometimes, baristas strike up conversations with customers, explaining what they are making or asking if guests have questions about the menu. A baker occasionally enters the scene with a fresh tray of steaming scones or croissants to refill the display window by the register. By the time one reaches the register, one will likely have witnessed the creation of several other patrons' drinks.

The Starbucks Reserve Café stands on the opposite end of the space from the Main Bar, serving freshly baked pastries, breads, and lunch items available only at the Reserve location. Resembling a French patisserie, each of the items behind the glass window is baked in-house from scratch by the Reserve's bakery staff—each of whom is clad in the classic white baker's smock and poofy white hat. There is a bustle to this section, as bakers handle the vintage wood-fired ovens lining the wall just behind the café, pulling fresh-baked goods from the ovens' blazing mouths. Bakers stock most of these goods here at the Café, and occasionally run a sheet of croissants over to the main bar. Directly next to the Café is the Mixology Bar, where mixologists in flannel shirts and khaki aprons crowd the bar area, measuring, shaking, and stirring Starbucks-flavored twists on classic cocktails. Finally, the Scooping Bar stands between the cocktail area and the gift shop: the final stop on one's self-guided experience. The Scooping Bar functions as a final takeaway area, where one can purchase any number of high-priced coffee instruments and Starbucks-themed novelties in the gift shop (a neon "Handpicked at the Roastery" sign hanging above the products). It also features the titular scooping area at the checkout register, where the cashier hand-scoops a selection of beans for sale at premium prices.

While the production performance is the highlight of the space, the Roastery does serve a

variety of special items only available at this location: drinks, pastries, and cocktails too. Some of the drinks on the menu are billed as “signature experiences.” These usually involve a particular method of consumption to be experienced the proper way. For instance, the espresso martini flight and the whiskey/cold brew tasting flight invite customers to compare the flavor profiles within each beverage. By tasting whiskey in between sips of the whiskey barrel-aged cold brew, the customer is invited to taste the notes drawn from the whiskey barrels by the cold brew beans. Another experience includes a “siphon experience,” where the customer is given a fancy glass siphon to experience the water running through the coffee grounds. This experience appears to be an elaboration on the recurring trend of “pour over coffee,” where a barista pours hot water directly into the grounds which sit in a small filter just above the coffee cup. This is not just coffee, but an experience of coffee as a creative process.

Certain buzzwords of production appear in product descriptions: “handpicked,” “aged,” “artisanal,” “by hand,” words which affect a sense of handiwork or craftsmanship. These words invite the customer to think of the products they purchase here as having been made somewhere, sometime. The “somewhere”-ness of this effect is heightened when products are identified as being from someplace. Many of the beans for sale identify their point of origin: Vietnam, Malawi, Puerto Rico, Sumatra. Rhetorical critic Greg Dickinson makes note of this feature of Starbucks’s beans in his own essay about Starbucks: the customer is supposed to connect the faraway origin of the beans with some kind of authenticity to their origin—that the beans carry special qualities arising from their *origin*-ality.¹²⁷

In each of its design and production choices, the Seattle Roastery invites visitors to become both spectators and participants in the conspicuous production of coffee. By seeing

¹²⁷ Greg Dickinson, “Joe’s Rhetoric: Finding Authenticity at Starbucks,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (2002): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773940209391238>.

multiple stages in the production process, participating in guided tours that reveal hidden knowledge about the coffee craft, and then consuming the products for sale, the Roastery delivers a sensuous fantasy of coffee production. This fantasy is central to the experience of the goods sold and offers visual arguments justifying increased perceptions of value. Surplus experience value is added to the coffee at the Roastery, because consumers are not simply watching the final assembly step of the goods tendered (as one sees at a standard café), but what feels like the entire process of coffee production. Experience value is added through the performances of production—both machine and human—that transform raw materials into specialty items. The customer is bombarded with an exhibition of labor, craft, performance, and expertise designed to get them to think differently about their coffee: to increase the value they ascribe to a cup of bitter bean water.

Roasting as an Affective Overdetermining Practice

The design and performance goals of the Roastery aim to influence consumer perceptions: perceptions of the brand, yes, but also of the value of a cup of coffee. The overlapping messages, images, and sensations that make up the Roastery experience prime the audience's physiological states to *feel* the value of their coffee. No single consumer will be able to appreciate the many sounds, smells, tastes, and experiences of the Roastery. But by bombarding every visitor with a wealth of sumptuous affect, something is bound to stick. The Roastery is therefore designed to produce an affective orientation in their audience: a subject position that perceives the authenticity and value of the brand through positive experiences, tangible elements strung together alongside intangible cues.

First, there is the immediate, textual evidence provided by the Roastery. The Roastery

makes textual arguments attesting to the experience value added to their products through human labor. The paper menu, sitting at the front of the Main Bar, emphasizes human activity in the production of their beverages. The list of “Today’s Coffees,” titled according to their origin (Vietnam, Galápagos, Colombia) are available to drink three different ways, distinguished through the verbs indicating the production process: “brewed,” “pour over,” and “espresso” (the latter being an Italian word meaning “pressed out”). The literal terms used to distinguish beverages are the actions baristas perform to make them. The menu includes a QR code to book “experiences” where patrons “discover the craft” behind Starbucks coffee through “hands-on workshops.”¹²⁸ Presumably, such experiences provide attendees with narrative arguments demonstrating the skill, precision, creativity, and labor power required to produce coffee beverages. The analog split flap sign above the Main Bar produces evidence of value through a changing series of paragraphs describing different roasts on hand. For instance, the sign describes Starbucks Decaf Costa Rica Hacienda Alsacia beans thus: “This coffee comes from the first and only farm that Starbucks owns. At Hacienda Alsacia we seek to deepen our knowledge of agronomy and our commitment to the farmers that work the land.”¹²⁹ You may notice that such a description says nothing about the taste of the coffee; its value comes from its commitment to farm laborers.

The website materials also include textual arguments about the value of production. The online description of their Whiskey Barrel-Aged Cold Brew (also available as a QR code) explains how the coffee “is created by aging Guatemalan coffee beans in Knob Creek Kentucky

¹²⁸ Starbucks Reserve, “Starbucks Reserve Main Bar.”

¹²⁹ “Starbucks Decaf Costa Rica Hacienda Alsacia,” restaurant sign, *Starbucks Reserve*, August 28, 2025.

Straight Bourbon Whiskey barrels.”¹³⁰ Further down, the site explains how you can make the cold brew yourself (after buying a forty-two dollar bag of the beans, of course). The website also highlights human action in production, advertising “Rare Starbucks Reserve coffees roasted on-site,” “Eight distinctive coffee-prep methods to watch, taste and learn,” and a “Staff of Starbucks Certified Coffee Masters who love to talk coffee.”¹³¹ The site asks visitors to experience “the entire coffee-making process unfold before your eyes—raw green coffee beans stored in massive silos are roasted, ground and brewed in an industrial assembly line that winds, dips and soars across the entire space” while you “chat with some of the world's foremost roasting and brewing experts.”¹³² The textual evidence of the Roastery is rich with symbols of conspicuous production.

The Roastery also implies arguments about product value through visual imagery and laborious performances. By experiencing the equipment, performances, and descriptions of end-to-end production, you can appreciate just how much care, effort, and expertise—in other words, how much experience value—went into the production of your drink. Explicit referents to the beans’ faraway origins reminds you how crucial the complex interconnectedness of global trade is to contemporary coffee consumption (while reminding you of Starbucks’ commitment to its Global South farm laborers). The massive “factory tour” style machinery, visible for all patrons but accessible up-close to those who book exclusive experiences, overwhelms the viewer with the engineering precision necessary to roast, sift, age, sort, and package each bag of Starbucks coffee. The abundance of food production staff across the Roastery’s six stations shows you how much labor power is necessary to process the thousands of food and beverage orders the place

¹³⁰ “Whiskey Barrel-Aged Cold Brew,” Starbucks Reserve, accessed August 28, 2025. <https://www.starbucksreserve.com/brew-guides/whiskey-barrel-aged-cold-brew>.

¹³¹ Starbucks Reserve, “The Seattle Roastery.”

¹³² Starbucks Reserve, “The Seattle Roastery.”

receives each day. Baristas, bakers, roasters, and mixologists are all partitioned to their specific role in the division of labor, making best use of the individual worker's specialized skillset. Even the restroom provides visual arguments about the labor process, depicting the twenty-five-step life cycle of coffee from the faraway soil to your favorite mug.

Finally, the Roastery is rich in *affect*. All of the production signifiers and performances are amplified by the sensuous feelings bombarding one in the Roastery: the low hum of machinery in the background, the crackling roll of beans sifted by a roast master, the intermittent clacking of the split flap signboard, the occasional steam and grind of the espresso machine, the ice tumbling about in a Boston shaker, and the crusty flatbread scooped out of a cast iron oven. The soft brown hues of the wood interior, complimenting the ruddy shine of the copper hoppers, the steampunk beakers, copper tubes, and exposed infrastructure of the ceiling unexpectedly harmonizing with cozy mid-century modern furniture. The sweet confection of a pumpkin tart, or the crackle of pastry dough as you chew your chocolate-hazelnut cornetto, the buzzy boost of a complex cocktail or the heart-thumping feeling from the heavily caffeinated cold brew all have their effect on the consumer. And, of course, the toasty scent of fresh brewed coffee, an aroma wafting ever-present through the air of the place, is something all can experience. Each of these ephemeral, sensuous qualities augment the texts, visuals, and performances that communicate value.

Which of these sense-experiences will capture the patron in a nostalgic reverie, or a fleeting feeling of decadence, a brief desire to capture this moment in time? Will the third space design of the seating areas, organized for group consumption and conversation, prompt the visitor to feel part of a greater human community? Will the end-to-end demonstration of production bring the consumer to a feeling of enlightened consumption, a feeling that for once,

they are appropriately in perfect sync with the object of their desire? Or will it be the simple smell of pumpkin spice, or the crunch of a flaky pastry, that connects present experience with past longings? The Roastery's bid for value works because something is bound to affect each visitor, even though the particulars will vary according to the customer.

The Roastery also implicates the consumer as a kind of connoisseur of fine coffee products through its curated tasting experiences. Take, for instance, the Whiskey Barrel-Aged Cold Brew Comparison Flight available at the Arriviamo Bar. It consists of two rocks glasses on a wood tray and a tasting card. The glass on the left contains a shot of Knob Creek Bourbon Whiskey, while the right contains Starbucks's Whiskey Barrel-Aged Cold Brew. The tasting card asks you to sip one after the other, so that the whiskey brings out the flavors of the barrel-aged cold brew. Does the whiskey actually bring out the flavor of the barrel-aged beans? I found it difficult to tell. While the cold brew might taste a little sweet, the bourbon that sits on my tongue after a sip invariably changes my palate for the duration of the experience. The whiskey could be bringing out the flavor of the beans, but it could also simply be transforming the consumer's palate to experience sensations that literally were not there prior to the alcoholic influence.

Consider a hypothetical example: if I eat a donut with my morning coffee, the coffee tastes less bitter and more decadent. This is not because the donut is bringing out the coffee's true flavors, but because my tongue is coated with sugary glaze from the donut. Or perhaps the experience is entirely illusory: by telling me that the cold brew *ought to* taste like whiskey, I am priming my brain to expect what I will taste. To give another example: the tasting notes card for the Roastery's Indonesia West Java Jamuju roast claims that the beans contain notes of tangerine and hazelnut butter. I can taste no such notes, but I can imagine that there are those who do. For those that do "taste" the tangerine and hazelnut butter, is it because they have a more refined

palate than me, or because they are better able to participate in the fantasy that the emperor is, indeed, wearing the most wonderful clothes?

Where text, imagery, and performance provide tangible displays of the value of work, affect is the glue that attaches these to the visitor's lifeworld to influence behavior. According to Catherine Chaput, affect "acts as an energy moving between human beings. . . that inspire behavior instinctively" through nonrational feelings like "gut sense."¹³³ Chaput argues that "affective energy" offers an explanation for how an outcome can be "overdetermined" through an accumulation of scattered instances of rhetorical influence.¹³⁴ Reserve Roastery customers *will* see coffee differently during their visit because of the manner in which text, performance, and imagery articulate disparate symbols into an affective economy. Coffee consumption is articulated with craftsmanship, decadence, leisure, expertise, and a cosmopolitan ethic towards fair trade policy, affecting the visitor through sense experience that ties these symbols together and attach to individuals' attitude.

The conspicuous production fantasy performed by the Reserve is overdetermined to guarantee this harmonized interpretation: affectively overworked to guide consumers to the same end, regardless of what "piece" of the experience they latch onto during their visit. The Roastery is performing, in the words of Christine Harold, "an opening up of the life cycle of objects."¹³⁵ Harold explains that, while critics of material culture have tended to emphasize the lifelessness of consumer objects, consumers participate in a co-creative relationship with these objects. The Roastery is rich in affective cues to overdetermine co-creative interaction. You may not pick up

¹³³ Catherine Chaput, "Rhetorical Circulation in Late Capitalism: Neoliberalism and the Overdetermination of Affective Energy," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 43, no. 1 (2010): 7-8, <https://doi.org/10.1353/par.0.0047>.

¹³⁴ Chaput, "Rhetorical Circulation," 7.

¹³⁵ Harold, *Things Worth Keeping*, 17.

on all the Roastery's cues—you may not be aware of which cues your body is picking up—but the proliferation of these cues guarantees that patrons will find something to attach to and participate in relationship with the brand. While the Seattle Reserve Roastery's performance qualities and design components affectively overdetermine its value, its conspicuous production performances act as articulating practices that tie it all together. The production performances continuously re-enact the production process while you are bombarded with multisensory information that all work on the person, influencing belief through sight, sound, smell, taste, touch.

Diminishing Returns

On September twenty-second, 2025, Starbucks workers in the Seattle area planned a rally outside the Reserve Roastery to demand a fair labor contract.¹³⁶ Local news outlet KIRO 7 reported that the rally was organized by Starbucks workers in response to “understaffing, low pay, and retaliation for union organizing.”¹³⁷ The rally was one incident in a larger conflict between Starbucks laborers and their employer over labor rights and union busting that began in 2021, when the first corporate-run Starbucks location unionized in Buffalo, New York.¹³⁸ Three days after this rally, Starbucks announced the immediate closure of the Seattle Roastery, along with hundreds of other locations across the U.S.¹³⁹ The official language from Starbucks

¹³⁶ This was, coincidentally, about a month after I had concluded the first draft of this chapter.

¹³⁷ Frank Sumrall, “‘We need a contract’: Starbucks Workers to Rally at 12 p.m. Monday at Reserve Roastery,” *KIRO 7*, September 22, 2025, <https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/we-need-contract-starbucks-workers-rally-12-pm-monday-reserve-roastery/HH4NDHYHCJE4RDM45R46I37XZI/>.

¹³⁸ “Our Story,” *Starbucks Workers United*, accessed May 4, 2026, <https://sbworkersunited.org/our-story/>.

¹³⁹ Juveria Tabassum and Waylon Cunningham, “Starbucks Closing Stores, Including Iconic Seattle Roastery, as CEO Deepens Restructuring,” *Reuters*, September 25, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/starbucks-close-some-stores-part-restructuring-plan-2025-09-25/>.

leadership denied that unionization was a factor in this decision, instead citing poor financial performance as the cause of the restructuring.¹⁴⁰ Still, the closure occurring so quickly on the heels of a major labor rally (combined with Starbucks's history of unlawfully retaliating against unionized stores) is a coincidence that is difficult to ignore.¹⁴¹

This analysis of the Roastery and the potential meanings of its closure offer key takeaways. My initial inspection imagined that the Roastery was succeeding as a place of affective value creation. Just as Starbucks singlehandedly raised the cache of coffee as a luxury beverage three decades ago, the Roastery's conspicuous production practices further heightened coffee's status through surplus experience value. The products in the Roastery were, after all, much pricier than those at a standard Starbucks, and even on a sleepy weekday the Roastery would be packed a few hours after opening. For those who could afford it, conspicuous production in an upscale service environment like the Roastery offered access to backstage processes while simultaneously capitalizing on the experience value extraction of produced goods. By intertwining production experience with consumption, consumers were invited to associate sensuous memories with their café experience, thereby justifying the higher purchase cost. One didn't simply sip one's coffee at the Roastery: one watched and learned, tracking the story of their drink from start to finish, affected by the sights, sounds, and smells within.

But the Roastery's closure complicates this conclusion. If the conspicuous production performances were working, adding affective value to consumer goods to increase brand attachment, then why shut it down? From a corporate perspective, perhaps the closure

¹⁴⁰ Tabassum and Cunningham, "Starbucks Closing Stores."

¹⁴¹ Daniel Wiessner, "Starbucks Closed 23 Stores to Deter Unionizing, US Agency Says," *Reuters*, December 14, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/business/starbucks-closed-23-us-stores-deter-unionizing-agency-claims-2023-12-14/>.

demonstrates the limitations of affective value production. Perhaps the Roastery was a loss leader, an unprofitable business meant to create affective attachments that would foster greater brand loyalty and potentially reap benefits through that loyalty. If so, then the closure could either be a short-sighted move to shore up a flagging quarterly earnings report or a more sober reflection of the limits of transforming affective value to increased return on investment. In the former, cutting payrolls offers a short-term solution to the impacts of stagnation on end-of-year corporate goals.¹⁴² In 2025, several large employers like Amazon, Verizon, and Starbucks all announced major staffing cuts in the lead-up to 2026.¹⁴³ Still, Starbucks leadership could have simply decided that the outcomes of surplus affective value production were not worth the cost.

But if the closure was a response to unionization efforts, a cynical ploy to influence non-unionized Starbucks employees to know their place, then the closure reflects the contradiction between the consumer experience of performative labor and its material reality. The notion of “craft” carries meanings: not just related to product quality, but also to an imaginary relationship between the craftsperson and the product. Sociologist Richard Sennett refers to “craftsmanship” as “an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake” and the promise of a reward: “a sense of pride in work.”¹⁴⁴ In *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, author Matthew Crawford conceives craft in a similar manner: it involves “the desire to do something well, for its own sake” that grants the craftsperson a “greater sense of agency” than white-collar work.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Timothy Noah, “The American Holiday Tradition of Firing Workers for No Reason,” *The New Republic*, December 21, 2022, <https://newrepublic.com/article/169675/american-holiday-tradition-firing-workers-no-reason>.

¹⁴³ BI Staff, “The List of Major Companies Laying off Staff this Year includes Verizon, IBM, Amazon, Starbucks, American Airlines, and More,” *Business Insider*, December 16, 2025, <https://www.businessinsider.com/recent-company-layoffs-laying-off-workers-2025>.

¹⁴⁴ Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (Yale University Press, 2008), 9.

¹⁴⁵ Matthew B. Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft* (Penguin Press, 2010), 14, 5.

If Sennett and Crawford represent common attitudes towards craft, then Reserve Roastery patrons could be forgiven for imagining that the performances of coffee production translated to pride, meaning, and agency for the laborers. But knowledge of poor labor conditions breaks this spell. While conspicuous production at the Roastery represented a kind of sensuous craftsmanship—a utopian manufacturing experience—it was also a place rampant with labor violations and anti-union retaliation. As long as these two phenomena coexist, any labor action at the location was bound to “break the spell” for the many who came to experience the brand. Understaffing and anti-labor practices are fundamentally opposed to the fantasy that conspicuous production is meant to provide: an imaginary experience of unalienated labor.

Ultimately, the Seattle Roastery was a space designed to produce a fantasy of consuming handcrafted coffee for its patrons. As an added benefit, the visibility of the workers contributed to audience identification with those workers. While the fantasy may have worked for a time, it was compromised when rumors of labor unrest enter mainstream discourse. The image of Starbucks as a cozy third space dissipates when you see striking workers expressing grievances against your favorite coffee spot. The imaginary feeling of an expert roaster imbuing your beverage with love and care is undermined by the possibility that she may be underpaid, overworked, or intimidated. The authenticity of beans roasted in-house is compromised when dissonant thoughts revoke one’s pleasant imaginary of the beauty of craftsmanship. On further reflection, the production process itself is woefully incomplete, despite the *feeling* of that glimpse behind the curtain. That authenticity, that sensuous narrative about where and who your coffee comes from, clashes with narratives of exploitation.

The Seattle Roastery was carefully designed to invite consumers into the process of production, to see a cup of Starbucks coffee as an artisanal product with its own vivid history.

This history, along with the sensuous, affective qualities of the consumer space, prompted consumers to evaluate highly their own relationship with the Starbucks brand. But this evaluation can be tarnished when dissonant ideas are brought to the fore. While the Roastery was designed to overdetermine success with the consumer, the affective value was not deep enough to withstand contrary information; and the rhetorical value of the Roastery was too marginal to withstand a quarterly earnings valuation. Therefore, a conspicuous production design strategy as cohesive and multisensory as the Seattle Reserve's is but a transitory spectacle for corporation and consumer alike. In the following chapter, I turn to conspicuous production at a public tourist destination to see, not just how conspicuous production adds value, but also how it communicates a sense of place to its patrons.

Chapter 3

Performing Local Identity at Pike Place Market

The previous chapter discussed how conspicuous production can sate curiosities about product origin and product value by immersing audiences in a sensuous production fantasy. By experiencing a part of the production process, consumers at the Starbucks Reserve Roastery are transformed into witnesses to the commodity's authenticity. In this chapter, I consider how conspicuous production in a public market alleviates concerns about the absent producer: the nagging lack of knowledge about who produces commodities and where these producers are. In an age of mass production and globalized manufacturing, there appears to be nostalgia for a world in which our systems were human-scale and knowable.

In the U.S., the division of labor is so sophisticated that the average consumer is unlikely to know, meet, or see the producers of their goods. Indeed, manufacturing is so distributed that workers laboring over a single product may not even see each other.¹⁴⁶ This was not always the case. Prior to the Second World War, it was common for consumers to interact with local butchers, furniture makers, and farmers. Today, when supermarkets and big box stores dominate most market sectors, one is inclined to ask, "Where have all the producers gone?" Cordoned to the rural periphery or transported to the Global South, perhaps. At the supermarket, the shopping mall, and the online marketplace, the experience is the same: consumers rarely see manual labor in action and do not know who is doing the manual labor. Ursula K. Le Guin satirizes this reality in her 1974 novel *The Dispossessed*, in which she depicts an extraterrestrial alien visiting a contemporary Earth-style shopping district for the first time:

¹⁴⁶ In the auto industry, for example, a U.S. factory might host the vehicle's final assembly, but the parts often arrive from elsewhere, like Canada or Mexico. See Alexandra Byrne, "There's No Such Thing as a Fully American-Made Car," *NBC News*, March 31, 2025, <https://www.nbcnews.com/business/autos/trump-tariffs-fully-american-made-car-rcna198974>.

He had dreams about it for months afterwards, nightmares. [The shopping district] was two miles long, and it was a solid mass of people, traffic, and things: things to buy, things for sale. Coats, dresses, gowns, robes, trousers, breeches, shirts [etc.]. . . And the strangest thing about the nightmare street was that none of the millions of things for sale were made there. They were only sold there. Where were the workshops, the factories, where were the farmers, the craftsmen, the miners, the weavers. . . *where were the hands, the people who made?* Out of sight, somewhere else. Behind walls. All the people in all the shops were either buyers or sellers. They had no relation to the things but that of possession.¹⁴⁷

Indeed, where have all the laborers gone, the great masses of urban proletariat and rural peasantry that once staffed the mills, factories, and farms? People still work in every city, and all consumer goods come from somewhere. But the dense neighborhoods that once housed the laborers, and the factories that once employed them, have mostly been replaced in the urban core with skyscrapers or gentrified into upscale eateries. Urban mills and packing houses have been demolished or reinvented as trendy food halls, and the vast quantities of farmed produce arrives by logistics companies to supermarket chains, rather than being brought to market by local farmhands. Anaheim, California's Packing District and Charlotte, North Carolina's Optimist Hall were, in the previous century, a packing house and a steel mill. Years after these places of industry shuttered, they were transformed into shopping spaces featuring local food vendors and crafts boutiques. Repurposing a local mill lends a sense of place and nostalgia to what would otherwise be another shopping mall.

In the current era of global capitalism, more and more urban space is deterritorialized, scrubbed of the geographic specificity of its working-class material culture in favor of a hi-tech cosmopolitanism.¹⁴⁸ Part of this reflects the transformation of dominant industries in the U.S.: no longer primarily engaged in manufacturing, the U.S. economy is increasingly dominated by the

¹⁴⁷ Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (HarperCollins Publishers, 1974), 123-124. Emphasis added.

¹⁴⁸ Gil-Manuel Hernández i Martí, "The Deterritorialization of Cultural Heritage in a Globalized Modernity," *Transfer: Journal of Contemporary Culture* 1 (2006): 92.

service, finance, and technology sectors. Skyscrapers, both residential and commercial, better serve the current paradigm than the sooty smokestacks of the steel mill. Seattle is a representative example of just this trend. Entire neighborhoods that once displayed their own historicity in their rustic, aged facades have been decimated in exchange for the cold reflective surfaces of each new skyscraper.¹⁴⁹ The city government participates in this thematic change, charging a design review board to reject building plans that appear “too historic.”¹⁵⁰ As a result, Seattle is rapidly evolving from Northwestern fishing hub to a vision of twenty-first century capital. Few places remain where a local can see manual production being accomplished: walking downtown, staring at the skyscrapers, much of what we see is glass reflection. Philosopher Fredric Jameson highlighted this postmodern feeling of dislocation well in his analysis of Los Angeles’s Westin Bonaventure Hotel: “the glass skin [of the skyscraper] achieves a peculiar and placeless dissociation of the Bonaventure from its neighborhood.”¹⁵¹ All of this, of course, has a history: the historical trajectory of high-tech Seattle is one inaugurated by the 1962 World’s Fair, when Seattle’s monorail and Space Needle aligned the city’s burgeoning identity with the utopian futurism of Silver Age comics and the Jetsons.

But this is not the only story of Seattle. Like all contemporary cities, downtown Seattle is a place of contested histories. Seattle is also the city of craft beer, the Second Wave of coffee, nineties grunge, and the WTO protests. It is a historic land of Duwamish, Suquamish, Muckleshoot, and Snoqualmie tribes, a major hub of nineteenth century Chinese immigration and twentieth century Japanese internment. History is reflected in the material makeup of the

¹⁴⁹ Benjamin Lukoff, *Seattle Then and Now* (Pavilion Books, 2015).

¹⁵⁰ Andrew Engelson, “Is it Time for Seattle to do away with Design Review?” *PubliCola*, May 30, 2022, <https://publicola.com/2022/05/03/is-it-time-for-seattle-to-do-away-with-design-review/>.

¹⁵¹ Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (Verso, 1998), 13.

city. Which histories and identities are prioritized and marginalized are a result of competition, deliberation, market forces, political priorities, and community resistance over time. Though much of Seattle is representative of its recent identity as a futuristic tech hub, counterimages reflecting diverse competing identities can be found throughout the city's many neighborhoods. Seattle's urban core, stretching from Columbia Center northward to South Lake Union, is the most thoroughly modernized segment of the city. Nestled within this contemporary urban core is Pike Place Market, a corner where public memory of old Seattle is carefully preserved.

Pike Place Market provides sharp contrast to the late modern feel of the skyscrapers. By preserving a particular kind of nostalgic working-class material culture in the Public Market tourist space, Pike Place offers an imaginary working-class identity within the city's urban core. In a city where most of its inhabitants compete with tech workers' premium salaries for housing, transit, and everyday commodities, this competition is re-presented through the Market's curious existence alongside the high-tech feel of the rest of downtown. As a visual simulacrum of Seattle history, it offers both nostalgic representations of manual labor while also providing an entertaining space of bourgeois tourism. Furthermore, the Market dismisses concerns about unethical production or the disappearance of the working class by showcasing worker-performers at the heart of the city.

In this chapter, I argue that Pike Place Market's conspicuous production provides an imaginary view of manual labor in contrast to the tech colonization of the city. As more of the city is transformed into a tech hub for Amazon, Google, and Microsoft, Pike Place Market provides a visual indication of where the manual laborers are. Producers tell stories of production, craft souvenirs, throw fish to each other, and hand out free samples at the Market, encouraging audiences to imagine Seattle as a place of local craft culture. By re-enacting a

twentieth century public market in the present, Pike Place quells concerns about the absent producer in the globalized economy and offers an alternative local identity in contrast to the placeless world of big tech. The fantasy of the public market relies, however, on patrons' capacity to collapse complex processes of production into discrete images of the market producer, while remembering historic Seattle through a white colonial bourgeois perspective. The daily re-enactment of the public market co-created between producers and consumers feels distinct and authentic, but it requires no visible continuity between point of sale and process of production.

This chapter unfolds in four parts: in the first, I describe the function and design of Pike Place as an urban public market; in the second, I examine how the Market invokes public memory; in the third, I explain how the Market constructs local identity through embodied performance; in the fourth, I assess the Market's position as an alternative representation of the city's identity. The Market's conspicuous production performances increase the perceived value of the goods sold while simultaneously telling a different story about what Seattle is. The performance of manual labor at the Market alleviates concerns visitors may have about gentrification, automation, and alienation from manual production by presenting a fantasy of agrarian harvest and local artisanship. In what follows, I explore Pike Place Public Market through the embodied experience of traversal: both as an inhabitant of the city it serves, and as a kind of recurring tourist. I attend to the symbolic visual aspects of the Market, but also to the affective meanings that are tied up in the bodily experience: connecting the performances and architectural design with how it feels to traverse the space, partake in the free samples, engage with the sellers, smell the food, and purchase a souvenir to remember the experience.

Going to Market

Pike Place Market is a public market located between Seattle's dense downtown and its recently redesigned Waterfront. Aside from the iconic Space Needle, the Market is among Seattle's most well-known tourist spots.¹⁵² The namesake of Starbucks's most popular roast, the Market hails itself as the "soul of Seattle," a "home" to hundreds of farmers, craftspeople, buskers, small businesses, and residents living in the HUD-subsidized affordable housing units within the facilities. Founded in 1907 and established as a Historic District in 1971, the Market is operated by the not-for-profit Pike Place Market Preservation and Development Authority (PDA).¹⁵³ According to the PDA's charter, it must work alongside the city's Historical Commission to "preserve, rehabilitate, and protect the Market's buildings; increase farm and food retailing opportunities, incubate and support small and marginal businesses; and provide services for low-income people."¹⁵⁴ Preserved according to a democratic mandate and managed by a nonprofit organization, the Market exists in the interstitial spaces of public and private, its present makeup the result of both cooperation and friction between residents, citizens, governmental bodies, and the private businesses operating out of the Market.

Urban marketplaces have likely existed as long as people have been trading goods with one another. Architectural historian Mohammad Gharipour notes that primitive marketplaces existed in the ancient Near East as early as the sixth century BCE.¹⁵⁵ Trade centers arose as cities

¹⁵² Debra Dunning Brouillette, "Seattle, Washington: Best Things to See, Do and Experience," *FWT Magazine*, March 3, 2022, <https://fwtmagazine.com/seattle-washington-best-things-to-see-do-and-experience/>.

¹⁵³ "About the Market," Pike Place Market Preservation & Development Authority, accessed May 4, 2026, <https://www.pikeplacemarket.org/about-pike-place-market/>.

¹⁵⁴ Pike Place Market Preservation & Development Authority, "About the Market."

¹⁵⁵ Mohammad Gharipour, "Introduction. The Culture and Politics of Commerce: Bazaars in the Islamic World," in *The Bazaar in the Islamic City: Design, Culture, and History*, ed. Mohammad Gharipour (American University in Cairo Press, 2012), 3.

were formed and trade networks were established between peoples. According to Gharipour, the ancient bazaar “played a key role in the economic, cultural, and even political transformation of cities”: because trade, commerce, and the division of labor are constitutive elements of the human city, the ancient bazaar was “the generator of urban form and the definer of urban elements.”¹⁵⁶ The earliest use of the term “market” originated around the twelfth century CE, derived from the Latin “mercatus”: to trade, buy, and sell.¹⁵⁷ Historian Mark Cartwright notes that Medieval towns often held temporary markets a few times a week in public squares, while larger cities might have a permanent market square.¹⁵⁸ Typically, nearby farms supplied meat and produce at temporary market stalls, while urban craftspeople sold market goods directly from their shop windows, traveling merchants attended selling exotic wares, and occasional street entertainers would perform at the medieval market.¹⁵⁹

In the early modern period, urban marketplaces became stable, sanitary commercial districts that lasted till the early contemporary period. In the U.S., the rise of market laws and municipal regulation led to stronger consumer protections against spoliation and fraud.¹⁶⁰ American Studies scholar Helen Tangires identifies a symbiotic relationship between citizen, city, and marketplace: the city set aside public space for markets and provided sheltered stalls, urban citizens would patronize sellers at the market, and the market would contribute to the

¹⁵⁶ Gharipour, “Introduction,” 2.

¹⁵⁷ “Etymology of market,” Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed March 31, 2026, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/market>.

¹⁵⁸ Mark Cartwright, “Trade in Medieval Europe,” *World History Encyclopedia*, January 8, 2019, <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/1301/trade-in-medieval-europe/>.

¹⁵⁹ Cartwright, “Trade in Medieval Europe,” *World History Encyclopedia*.

¹⁶⁰ Helen Tangires, “Feeding the Cities: Public Markets and Municipal Reform in the Progressive Era,” *Prologue Magazine* 29, no. 1 (1997), <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1997/spring/markets.html>.

public good through donations to the poor and discounts for the elderly.¹⁶¹ “Contrary to modern notions of cleanliness and hygiene,” Tangires writes, “the open-air sheds and food exposed to the elements represented positive qualities in a market—where transactions could be witnessed easily and where the food itself was literally open for public inspection.”¹⁶² The market provided space for relationships between consumers and producers that reflected the character of the city.

With the rise of suburbanization in the U.S. during the postwar period, it became far more common for Americans to shop for groceries at supermarkets rather than public markets. Today, public markets still exist in most major cities, and many smaller cities hold weekly farmer’s markets. But only twelve percent of the American public regularly purchase their groceries at a public market; most Americans shop at mainstream grocery chains, and a growing minority pay for grocery delivery.¹⁶³ While the public market has historically held a significant role in public life, the grocery chain acts as a private alternative, primarily as a middleman between producers and consumers. One does not interact with producers at a grocery store, and supermarkets could hardly be said to occupy a central place in local community. The grocery chain patron experiences commodities *ex nihilo*, staples always available stocked in perfect rows on the shelves. Grocery shopping at a supermarket is an instrumental, rather than a social, activity.¹⁶⁴

The twenty-first century public market thus reemerges in contrast to the supermarket

¹⁶¹ Tangires, “Feeding the Cities,” *Prologue Magazine*.

¹⁶² Helen Tangires, “Public Markets and the City: A Historical Perspective,” *Project for Public Spaces*, October 29, 2005, <https://www.pps.org/article/6thmktstangires>.

¹⁶³ Emily Rodgers, “Grocery Store Statistics: Where, When, & How Much People Grocery Shop,” *Drive Research*, April 25, 2024, <https://www.driveresearch.com/market-research-company-blog/grocery-store-statistics-where-when-how-much-people-grocery-shop/>.

¹⁶⁴ Verisimilitude and reliability are core components of the U.S. grocery chain. Occasional supply disruptions and product shortages can result in societal breakdown. See Janni Leung, Jack Yiu Chak Chung, Calvert Tisdale, Vivian Chiu, Carmen C. W. Lim, and Gary Chan, “Anxiety and Panic Buying Behaviour during COVID-19 Pandemic—A Qualitative Analysis of Toilet Paper Hoarding Contents on Twitter,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 3 (2021): 1127, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18031127>.

chain. It is a reintroduction of a discontinued social relationship within the Western imaginary, that invites consumers to participate in an imagined time in U.S. settler colonial history.

Producers bring their wares to the market, and patrons come to see what is available for purchase. In the contemporary grocery store, much of this is lost: one can spy some symbolic references to farms and fields in brand logos and can read some gestures to artisanship in ad copy; some remnant of conspicuous production is found in the butcher, deli, seafood, and bakery departments of the supermarket chain. But what is missing at the grocery store is a coherent relationship between producer and product that the consumer can directly experience. One might expect a supermarket deli clerk to know relevant facts about the meats and cheeses for sale but would not imagine that the clerk has been to the site of production or has personal experience with the cattle. The public market reintroduces these relationships.

Pike Place Market explicitly invokes its laborers as *producers* that patrons are invited to meet. At the main entrance a massive neon “Public Market Center” sign announces the Market, while a faded “meet the producer” sign looms in the upper right corner of the building’s facade. Both sides of the street feature open-air grocers, bakeries, restaurants, and souvenir shops arranged in a fashion that encourages serpentine meandering, on the sidewalk, along the Post Alley, and through the labyrinthine corridors inside. Producers abound on all sides of the market, handing out free samples and inviting conversations with patrons. Pike Place Fish Market, a well-staffed tender of fresh seafood, occupies the most prominent point in the indoor market. Clad in orange rubbers and branded suspenders, the fishmongers shout at onlookers and passersby while performing their famous fish-tossing whenever a customer makes a purchase, and hand out free samples of smoked salmon. The ice-filled display cases are stacked with a smorgasbord of Pacific favorites, from classic Coho and Dungeness crab to the colorful rockfish

and the ugly monkfish.

Directly to the left of the fish market is a collection of boutiques and counter service restaurants selling teas, spices, jerky, local honey, local art, Chinese food, Indian food, and local wine. Souvenir and produce stalls line the alley in the opposite direction: florists shaping bouquets, artists painting hats and shirts in neon colors, a dried flower stand smelling of lavender with the sign “fresh picked daily; from garden to you.” Several fresh produce stands are stuffed with fruits, vegetables, and mushrooms, anything you could find in a supermarket produce section but appearing more bounteous in their tight quarters. A greengrocer stands at the front carving seasonal Northwest fruits (pears, plums, and apples) offering free samples, encouraging visitors to ask questions about the goods. Besides the usual staples, these vendors also sell local curiosities like freshly foraged truffles and hedgehog mushrooms, and exotic rarities like Romanesco Broccoli and purple asparagus.

A wide variety of producers fill the outer portions of the Market area. The northwest corner of the Market is reserved for pop-up local art and crafts, much of which reflects the popular symbols of the region: prints, T-shirts, greeting cards, and figurines featuring Mt. Rainier, the Space Needle, the Public Market neon sign, bigfoot, orcas, and octopi. The Market has several shopping levels below the main level, which are more akin to a flea market: no produce and little art, mostly collectibles and souvenirs, like yarn, jewelry, cardboard movie cutouts, vinyl records, Funko pops, and a Zoltar machine. Boutiques, bakeries, and ethnic counter service restaurants line the street outside, and temporary foodservice tents line the street itself on days when the main road is pedestrianized. The street-facing shops that typically host the longest lines are Beecher’s Cheese, a counter service restaurant where audience members watch cheesemongers process curds from the large glass window; the first Starbucks, established

in 1971; and Piroshky Piroshky, an Eastern European pastry shop.

Pike Place Market offers a public place to connect local producers with all kinds of consumers, and part of its design success is its reproduction of the public market imaginary. Like the medieval European market square, Pike Place Market houses local fishmongers and butchers, greengrocers, cheesemongers, bakers, and brewmasters. The artisans of yore have been replaced by souvenir craftspeople; jesters and minstrels have been replaced by balloon artists and buskers; apothecaries and hucksters are reimagined through natural remedy sellers and collectibles boutiques; and the local medium has been replaced by the Zoltar machine. While the live animals are no longer in attendance, the market does feature several brass pig statues to help audiences imagine their presence. Pike Place Market explicitly connects its present purpose to its historical function in its interpretive signage. One sign tells visitors that

Seattle has a long history as a regional marketplace and global business hub. Here at the Market, that story began in the Main Arcade (which you are about to enter), where local farmers and produce sellers attracted throngs of customers. . . These owner-operated specialty stores sold coffee, spices, butter, eggs, and cheese, alongside multiple butchers and fishmongers. . . This story continues today with the Market's more than 500 small, independently owned and operated businesses.¹⁶⁵

The Market encourages contemporary visitors not just to engage in the joys of consumption, but also to step back in time: to imagine a history of artisan and agrarian labor, to remember the historic role the city has played in human commerce, and for patrons to see themselves as travelers among it. Beyond inviting relationships between consumers and producers, the Market invites relationships between patrons and memories of the city's history.

¹⁶⁵ "Come for the Apples, Stay for the Coffee," street sign, Pike Place Market Preservation & Development Authority, March 27, 2026.

Remembering Seattle at the Market

Pike Place Market encourages a particular vision of Seattle's labor history: one that contrasts with the producer's absence at supermarket chain stores and with Seattle's economic identity as a high-tech city. By reproducing a nostalgic public market that reflects images of Seattle's past, the Market shapes public memory. Rhetoricians Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott define public memory as those "beliefs about the past" that are "shared among members of a group."¹⁶⁶ Public memory is the conglomeration of ideas and attitudes about a group's history that tell them who they are and what they value. Pike Place Market is both a popular tourist destination and a historic place beloved by local Seattleites. Its major icon, the neon Public Market sign, is a chief signifier for Seattle, and the many interpretive signs around the Market help audiences connect the Market's present with a white settler version of its historic past. The Market is thus a public memory place: a constructed location that shapes audience remembrance of history. By approaching Pike Place Market as a kind of public memory place, we can better understand how this tourist space participates in the shaping of spatial identity.

A public memory place organizes, shapes, and maintains public memory of historical events. While history is always subject to contestation, debate, and disagreement, a public memory place delivers coherent, consumable historical narratives for general audiences. According to Communication scholar Susan Mancino, museums present "memory narratives" to their patrons that "shape the ongoing reception and representation of the past."¹⁶⁷ History museums, for instance, are sites where visitors are invited to share in a partial remembrance of

¹⁶⁶ Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott, *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials* (University of Alabama Press, 2010), 6.

¹⁶⁷ Susan Mancino, "A Communicative Review of Museums," *Review of Communication* 15, no. 3 (2015): 267, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2015.1077988>.

past events to manage present attitudes towards the nation. History museums narrate experts' interpretations of past events, presenting historical documents and objects as historical artifacts. The specific presentation of such facts is executed through narratives that interpellate visitors into the purpose of remembrance. Rhetorical critics Greg Dickinson, Brian L. Ott, and Eric Aoki, for instance, argued that the Buffalo Bill Museum in Cody, Wyoming prompts visitors to imagine the myth of the American frontier through a masculine, white perspective.¹⁶⁸ As visitors read textual narratives and observe artifacts in the museum displays, the "facts" presented are organized so that audience members perceive themselves as inheritors of (white) Western, rather than Black, Brown and Indigenous, history and culture.¹⁶⁹ Museums shape visitors' memories of history because they "transport and personalize artifacts from the exhibit to one's embodied understanding of the past" to shape the visitor's very identity.¹⁷⁰

On initial inspection, perhaps, a public market could hardly be said to organize public memory. After all, it is a space of commerce, not of history. But Pike Place Market, as a popular tourist place, shares in the reproduction of Seattle's story in quite the same way that a national museum or monument would. The city designated the Market as a historical district, and its contemporary presence reflects an antiquated commercial paradigm unavailable in most U.S. municipalities. Blair, Dickinson, and Ott enumerate six qualities of public memory rhetoric, each of which apply to the Market:

(1) memory is activated by present concerns, issues, or anxieties; (2) memory narrates shared identities, constructing senses of communal belonging; (3) memory is animated by affect; (4) memory is partial, partisan, and thus often contested; (5) memory relies on

¹⁶⁸ Greg Dickinson, Brian L. Ott, and Eric Aoki, "Memory and Myth at the Buffalo Bill Museum," *Western Journal of Communication* 69, no. 2 (2005): 85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570310500076684>.

¹⁶⁹ Dickinson et al., "Memory and Myth," 96-97.

¹⁷⁰ Mancino, "A Communicative Review," 266.

material and/or symbolic supports; (6) memory has a history.¹⁷¹

While Pike Place Market does not primarily exist to “tell” history in the strict sense, it clearly demonstrates the above features. Yes, it is a consumer space, but it constructs an imaginary of a shared Seattle identity. It has a history and is activated by present issues and anxieties. It is also partial and partisan, invoking a specific moment in settler Seattle history, and evokes nostalgia to interpellate audiences as white settler subjects while minority and Indigenous subjectivities are at the margins.

Pike Place Market is stamped everywhere with markers of authenticity indicating its historicity. Interpretive signage throughout the Market directs visitors to recall the historic origins, happenings, and uses of the Market. A sign at the front entrance titled “Meet the Producers” narrates its origins: “the Market was established on August seventeenth, 1907. The City Council granted space for a public produce market on Pike Place and a handful of farmers gathered at this very corner.”¹⁷² A sign on the opposite side of the Market, several floors below on Western Ave, explains how the Market developed its vertical orientation: “The Pike Place Market rises five floors above you, cleverly making use of the steep bluff below Pike Place. Between 1907 and 1922, the Market grew in popularity and buildings were expanded down the hill.”¹⁷³ These signs are admittedly sparse but they do direct audiences to imagine the Market as a historic place, a place designed to prompt audiences to remember a particular version of historic Seattle.

The Market’s material qualities also indicate it as a historical place. By crossing the

¹⁷¹ Dickinson, Blair, and Ott, *Places of Public Memory*, 6.

¹⁷² “Meet the Producers,” street sign, Pike Place Market Preservation & Development Authority, February 28, 2026.

¹⁷³ “Climbing up a Vertical Neighborhood,” street sign, Pike Place Market Preservation & Development Authority, February 28, 2026.

boundary between downtown Seattle and the Market, one steps from contemporary architecture and urban design to rustic, antiquated building materials. The contrast between the Market and the rest of the downtown area is striking. With one's back facing the front entrance, the pedestrian's field of vision is covered in skyscrapers, the most prominent of which are the glassy thirty-nine story West Edge Tower and the Target at Newmark Tower. Against this contemporary vision, the cobblestone streets and brick facades of the Market could not feel more distinct. If the pedestrian keeps to the eastern side of Pike Place, they are enclosed within the rustic feel of the space. But if one walks along the western side, the downtown skyscrapers tower over the Market's eastern rooftops. Viewed thus, the Market may feel to some visitors like a nostalgic refuge from contemporary life. South of the Market, twentieth century brick and mortar extend through Pioneer Square and Chinatown to Lumen Field, Seattle's NFL stadium; but skyscrapers dominate the neighborhoods north, east, and west of the Market. Pike Place Market appears as a distinct remnant of pre-contemporary urban Seattle.

The Market is not mere merely nostalgic spectacle, though. As a working public market, it negotiates past and present as a contemporary fantasy of pre-contemporary history, offering modern amenities as it gestures towards fantasies of the past. Several scholars have analyzed the contradictory and fantastical invocation of public memory in tourist spaces. The earliest instance in rhetorical studies may be Greg Dickinson's discussion of public memory in Old Pasadena, which extends public memory from the space of "official" history to the realm of the consumer place. Dickinson refers to Old Pasadena, a 5-block stretch of antiquated buildings repurposed into a shopping area, as a "memory place."¹⁷⁴ During the shopping experience, patrons are invited to experience the rustic architecture as a landscape symbolizing a "stabilizing and

¹⁷⁴ Greg Dickinson, "Memories for Sale: Nostalgia and the Construction of Identity in Old Pasadena," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 83, no. 1 (1997): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335639709384169>.

authenticating past”: a *somewhere* that offers refuge away from the disjointed modernity of the urban city.¹⁷⁵ Neither Pike Place Market nor Old Pasadena invoke official narratives of their history, but they still encourage a partial remembrance of bygone eras through their material and affective qualities. They invite a vision of public memory as part of the shopping experience.

The extension of a public memory framework to consumer space has produced invaluable insights. Dickinson and Casey Malone Maugh’s analysis of an upscale organic grocery store offers a similar argument, discussing how the conspicuous presence of fishmongers, butchers, bakers, and cheesemongers within the store invokes a “warmly remembered past [...] in which the local butcher prepared the meat and the local baker baked the bread.”¹⁷⁶ While the grocery store does not tell a specific history one is supposed to interpret as factual, it evokes a fantasy that visitors will likely connect to an imagined past. This past does not even need to be imagined as real, but simply as a shared imaginary. In Communication scholars Christopher J. Wernecke and Virginia Massignan’s analysis of Universal Studios’ Wizarding World of Harry Potter, they argued that a fabricated theme park place like the *Wizarding World*, through its “materiality and placeness,” uses public memory of a fictional movie series to realize an authentic collective identity.¹⁷⁷ In other words, Universal Studios has created a space where an “artificial collective memory” can be made more real through materiality and embodiment.¹⁷⁸ By visiting the

¹⁷⁵ Dickinson, “Memories for Sale,” 1.

¹⁷⁶ Greg Dickinson and Casey Malone Maugh, “Placing Visual Rhetoric: Finding Material Comfort in Wild Oats Market,” in *Defining Visual Rhetorics*, ed. Charles A. Hill and Marguerite Helmers (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 269.

¹⁷⁷ Christopher J. Wernecke and Virginia Massignan, “‘Is this Real? Or has this been Happening Inside My Head?’ The Wizarding World of Harry Potter as a Constructed Site of (Artificial) Collective Memory, Identity, and Resistance,” *Communication and Democracy* 57, no. 2 (2023): 231, <https://doi.org/10.1080/27671127.2023.2250428>.

¹⁷⁸ Wernecke and Massignan, “Is this Real?” 237.

Wizarding World and participating in its grand fantasy, one's memories of the series are made more real and one's identification with the Harry Potter fandom becomes more concrete.

The main street view on Pike Street offers a quaint and nostalgic view of white Americana, with a classic flatbed truck obstructing traffic on the brick-lain street. The truck serves as a reminder that the producers are literally bringing their wares to market from elsewhere, like the farm. Visitors, on the other hand, travel by foot. Seattle's recent pilot pedestrianization program temporarily closes the street on Pike Place to car traffic so pedestrians can freely walk the cobblestones as one presumably would have one hundred years ago.¹⁷⁹ The rustic facades and cobblestones envelop patrons in a fantasy, allowing them to travel back in time by stepping away from the contemporary urban infrastructure on to the cobblestones. The conspicuous performances of the producers at their stalls further contributes to this fantasy. While the supermarket displays consumer goods as just *there* on the shelves, the products at the Market are always in motion: the mini donut stall shows donuts fried on an automatic conveyor machine, greengrocers are frequently stocking, selling, or sampling produce, and florists persistently assemble bouquets while waiting for a purchase. The authenticity of the Market's historical makeup is negotiated alongside a variety of modern amenities: LED lights, modern plumbing, sellers in contemporary outfits. While much of the Market's happenings resemble a classic sanitary market, some of its features resemble an amusement park. Since the closing of Fun Forest in 2011, Washington state has no true amusement park. The Market, the Waterfront, and the Seattle Center offer alternative spaces for the caricatures and "name written in rice" kinds of souvenirs one would otherwise see at a seaside boardwalk or a Six Flags amusement park. The Market's historic authenticity is thus negotiated between old stuff (cobblestone, rustic

¹⁷⁹ "Limited Vehicle Access on Pike Place," Pike Place Market Preservation & Development Authority, April 28, 2025, https://www.pikeplacemarket.org/press_release/limited-vehicle-access-on-pike-place/.

facades) and the contemporary niceties a tourist audience might expect at an attraction.

One cannot invoke the artificial authenticity (contradiction intended) of the constructed space without mention of French philosopher Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard's landmark essay "The Precession of Simulacra" examines, among other things, the curious existence of Disney as a simulacrum of an otherwise *real* world. A "simulation" of something (like a flight simulator) "is the reflection of a profound reality," referring to something real outside itself.¹⁸⁰ A "simulacrum," on the other hand, "masks the absence of a profound reality" until it eventually "has no relation to any reality whatsoever."¹⁸¹ Baudrillard offers Disneyland as an example: the representations of pirates and the American Frontier does not simulate past realities of actual pirates and American settlers, but masks the very unreal, mythical public imaginary about what these things are. On another level, too, Disneyland presents itself as a false, constructed place "to make us believe that the rest is real," to make us feel that Anaheim, and the U.S., are more than simulations themselves.¹⁸²

Historic "Old-Town" tourist spaces similarly present themselves as fantastical, nigh-incoherent simulations obscuring an absent referent. In Greg Dickinson's analysis of Old Town Pasadena, he argues that historic consumer places are "fragmented." That is, while they "offer to consumers the possibility of coherent identities firmly situated within a warmly remembered past," they simultaneously house modern amenities like plumbing and boutique shopping.¹⁸³ Such a violation does not challenge the authenticity of the simulation of the "Old Town," but enhances its "hyperreality" since tourists do not actually want the unpleasant smells and

¹⁸⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 6.

¹⁸¹ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 6.

¹⁸² Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 12.

¹⁸³ Dickinson, "Memories for Sale," 2.

inconveniences of historical spaces; they just want a feeling of historicity. Communication scholar Melissa McMullen validates this argument through her analysis of Old Town Scottsdale, Arizona. McMullen describes the Old Town as a “visual simulacrum”: a negotiation between past and present that, through its inauthenticity, is more real and special to its tourists. Old Town’s design is “based on commonly held assumptions about what the old West actually looked like,” simultaneously selling “knickknacks and souvenirs,” and heavily prioritizing modern automobile infrastructure.¹⁸⁴ McMullen notes that the “historical” features more closely resemble Western cinema than historically accurate representations of nineteenth century frontier life, and its primary function is more commercial than educational. Rather than compromise the authenticity of the space, McMullen argues that “the lack of connection” between Old Town’s “visual representation and reality. . . has become unimportant to most visitors.”¹⁸⁵ Audiences expect the authenticity of the space to be selective and staged, and for the space to comfortably negotiate audiences’ cravings for an exciting past with their need for an accommodating present.

The rustic, antiquated façade of Pike Place Market is itself a postmodern simulacrum, simultaneously aged and modern in a way that negotiates present desires with nostalgic longings. Although the brick might feel like 1907, the neon sign is from the thirties; the famous “Rachel the Piggy Bank” statue is from 1986; the Original Starbucks is from 1977. The modern A/C and plumbing visible in the ceiling rafters is not “original” in any meaningful sense, many of the wares for sale reflect recent cultural trends, and the sheer variety of produce at the many fresh stands—rainbow carrots, twelve different varieties of locally foraged mushrooms, innumerable

¹⁸⁴ Melissa McMullen, “The Old West of Old Town: Understanding Visual Simulacra as a Means of Staged Authenticity,” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 14, no. 3 (2014): 266, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708614527560>.

¹⁸⁵ McMullen, “The Old West of Old Town,” 267.

stone fruit hybrids like pluots and donut peaches—would have been unimaginable in the U.S. context prior to the nineties. Furthermore, the Market forecloses other histories the space may have: by emphasizing the cobblestone past of Seattle’s 20th century settler history, it marginalizes possibilities for audiences to connect with other narratives of the region’s history, like the Indigenous history of the land around Elliot Bay. By selling current trends in a historic-feeling place, the Market acts as a liminal space negotiating past and present: housing modern offerings inside a nostalgic space.

The Performance of Pike Place

As a public memory place, Pike Place Market is imaginary in a double sense: in the sense that it negotiates contradictory narratives of a far-off past that is still palatable to the present-day tourist; and, in the sense that the place is *performed*. According to Communication scholar Giorgia Aiello, the built environment of an urban landscape “should be broadly considered as a relational and performative construct, rather than being associated with specific physical or material characteristics.”¹⁸⁶ Yes, the physical material of the city—the brick, the concrete, the glass and the greenspace—matters. But it matters most significantly as a stage for “visual-material performances” wherein actors are encouraged to adopt subject positions in service of “tourism, public communication, and commerce.”¹⁸⁷ In the words of Dickinson and Aiello, “Our cities, our bodies, our things, and our selves are performed together, a performance that is

¹⁸⁶ Giorgia Aiello, “From Wound to Enclave: The Visual-Material Performance of Urban Renewal in Bologna’s Manifattura delle Arti,” *Western Journal of Communication* 75, no. 4 (2011): 343, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2011.586971>.

¹⁸⁷ Aiello, “From Wound to Enclave,” 344.

moving (in all the richness of that word).”¹⁸⁸ The built environment is staged and its inhabitants are invited to perform upon it.

To view the city as performance, however, we must attend not only to its symbolic meanings but also to the feelings it evokes as people move through it. How do the various signs, symbols, sense data, and design qualities (in other words, the affect of the city) encourage people to perform? Rather than seeing the built environment exclusively as symbolic or representational in its evocation of public memory, Dickinson and Aiello suggest that one consider the experience of the built environment in its material and affective dimensions. The holistic, embodied experience of acting in the city involves language, which “makes and remakes the brain by restructuring neural pathways,” sensation (sights, smells, sounds), and bodily movement within the environment, which “translates into particular forms of muscular memory and spatial awareness.”¹⁸⁹ The authors offer a pint with friends at the local pub as an example. While beer consumption has a chemical effect on one’s body, it is also tied up in the material condition of the drinker’s body in the moment, as well as the cultural meanings associated with the event. Enjoying a pint with friends after work literally remakes our body in association with discursive concepts like “neighborhood, work, and friendship.”¹⁹⁰ To analyze the material rhetorical performance of the local pub would require not just the symbolic forms of the pub’s physical makeup, but also the subjective embodied reaction in chorus with the times, situations, and practices that accompany the experience of the place.

Similarly, urban landscapes are designed for certain kinds of experiences for certain kinds

¹⁸⁸ Greg Dickinson and Giorgia Aiello, “Being Through There Matters: Materiality, Bodies, and Movement in Urban Communication Research,” *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016): 1296. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/4280>.

¹⁸⁹ Dickinson and Aiello, “Being Through There Matters,” 1296.

¹⁹⁰ Dickinson and Aiello, “Being Through There Matters,” 1298.

of people, at certain periods of the day. Dickinson and Aiello say that

As a key performative dimension of urban space, the urban built environment ought to both “look” and “feel” good for the imagined lifestyle communities of advanced capitalism. It is in this sense that, most often, the material decisions underlying urban development and urban regeneration alike are infused with powerful discourses and overall “visions” regarding how urban space ought to be experienced and lived rather than simply built or renovated.¹⁹¹

The rhetorical critic of urban landscapes should attend to the feel of the built environment, and to imagine for whom these feelings are meant, and to what ends. Attempting to grasp the affective qualities of the urban market—in the words of Communication scholar Mary E. Domenico, the “lasting impact of an accumulation of sensory experiences”—will help the critic observe how certain kinds of shared experiences affect “future attitudes and behaviors.”¹⁹² Material rhetorical criticism of the urban public market requires an understanding of the place’s affect to determine how the space “forms dispositions” and “shapes [the] subjectivities” of its patrons.¹⁹³ The space itself physically orients visitors to experience the city a certain way, and invites visitors to occupy imaginary subject positions while traversing the space. Many visitors at the urban public market are tourists; but they are encouraged to traverse the space as local customers, imagining what it must feel like to be a Seattleite.

Pike Place Market interpellates its laborers and its patrons into a performance of the historic public market. The market’s signage encourages patrons to “meet the producers,” a demand that implies that the customer service clerks at the various stalls are, themselves, producers. Fishmongers and greengrocers are cast as producers who share stories and fun facts

¹⁹¹ Dickinson and Aiello, “Being Through There Matters,” 1302.

¹⁹² Mary E. Domenico, “Civic Identity in Changing Cityscapes: Material Rhetorical Obscurity at Denver’s Lindsey-Flanigan Courthouse,” *Western Journal of Communication*, 84, no. 4 (2020): 460, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2020.1730429>.

¹⁹³ Megan Watkins, “Desiring Recognition, Accumulating Affect,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Duke University Press, 2010), 269.

about their wares to the visitors that pass by, encouraging remembrance of the historic public market as a place where producers would come to sell their wares. Today, of course, the division of labor has rendered it unnecessary for most of the Market staff to participate in end-to-end production. The fishmongers at the Pike Place Fish Market, for example, resemble fishermen and wear the costumes one might associate with fishing, but they themselves do not *do* the fishing. Rather, they act as middlemen between fishers and consumers.¹⁹⁴ The same is true of Sosio's Fruit & Produce, the largest grocer in the Market. The laborers' relationship with the produce is largely imaginary: they are not themselves planters or harvesters but storytellers: people with specialized knowledge about produce who perform as producers, even though their chief relation with the produce is as salespeople. At some of the smaller stalls, of course, the relationship seems clearer: visitors could imagine that the staff at Lee Family Farm's produce stall or Mick's Peppourri ("Handmade by the Mick Family") could be members of the family business. Some stalls feature manual production performances, like the various florist stalls, while the single-staffed craft tables at the northwest end present themselves as sole proprietorships. But everywhere throughout the Market there is a feeling of work being accomplished. We do not watch the fishmongers fish, but we do watch them scoop ice with a shovel and toss fish at one another. We do not see farmhands harvest produce, but we do see greengrocers cut up and hand out produce, and they will (if asked) tell stories, offer recipe ideas, and recall fun facts about the produce. The setting and costumes help visitors imagine production in the same way costumes and setting help us accept the fantasy of a stage play.

The Market presents itself to audiences as a liminal space between production and consumption, a place to meet the producers. "Meet the Producers" is such a repeated textual

¹⁹⁴ "Welcome to Pike Place Fish Market," Pike Place Fish Market, accessed April 3, 2026, <https://www.pikeplacefish.com/>.

mantra throughout the space that it serves as the Market's catchphrase. The repetition of this phrase invites audiences to imagine that the performer-sellers in the space are the "producers" indicated in the signage. The fish throwers, the craft sellers, the greengrocers and cashiers are presumably the "producers" we are invited to meet. At a few places in the Market, we can watch production occur. Beecher's Cheese shop features massive windowpanes where pedestrians can view cheese curds processed in large vats, the "producers" stirring, raking, and shredding mounds of cheese at different stages of the process. Florists bundle bouquets at their displays. A mini donut shop features fresh donuts coming off a conveyor belt, the entire process visible to audiences in line. None of the stands in Pike Place have a backstage area: the restaurant kitchens and staging areas are all in full view to the thousands of passersby. Many stalls invoke production in their signage: "We fillet the fish for free," "Say 'hi' to our bakers on 2nd floor," "Let us do the fishing for you!" "fresh picked daily," "from garden to you," "grown here; made here," and "Handmade by the Mick family" all attest to the production being done by the performer-sellers inhabiting the space. And the various smells the visitor perceives through the space attest to production happening here: the sweet aroma of fresh pastries, the smoke of grilled salmon, the oily umami of Chinese takeout, the pungent scent of Beecher's handmade cheese.

The Market explicitly connects conspicuous displays of production in the present to the imaginary past of the "historic" Market. The following description, found on a sign titled "Meet the Producers" at the Market entrance, implies that the Market was established to ameliorate "souring" feelings between farmers and customers:

As onion prices soared, farmers and customers soured, and the Market was established on August 17, 1907. . . and a handful of farmers gathered at this very corner. Within a week, dozens more farmers joined them. Over time, the Market developed into a diverse community of immigrants and American-born farmers and merchants. . . Today, local farmers and craftspeople fill the Market arcades.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁵ Pike Place Market Preservation & Development Authority, "Meet the Producers."

Through this language, audiences are invited to imagine continuity between past and present. The Market was established, farmers began to flock to it, and it is still filled today with local farmers and craftspeople. The producers you see here are thus cast as inheritors of history. It also invites audiences to understand the exigence of the Market specifically as a response to the alienation between producer and consumer. Tensions arose from a price hike in onions, and the Market offered a place where customers could meet the producers, perhaps to put a face to the prices. The premium prices charged at the Market are justified by the experience patrons get as part of consumption. You pay, not just for the commodities, but also for the producer performances.

Patrons participate in the performance as well. Pike Place Market encourages visitors to engage with the objects and salespeople around them, many signs explicitly asking patrons to participate in a kind of impromptu script. “Ask us about free shipping,” “say ‘hi’ to our bakers on 2nd floor,” “ask us about our special wild mushroom mixed bag,” and “gotta try it!”¹⁹⁶ Clerks hand out free samples, encouraging patrons to stop, taste, and engage in dialogic encounters asking about product origin, production process, and tasting notes. Clerks upsell products by encouraging multiple tastings, allowing customers to critically consider which items they would like to purchase. Some of the food is expressly packaged for on-the-go eating: Beechers’ cheese curds or Rainier cherries in large plastic containers, handheld sandwiches, a plethora of beverages from Rachel’s ginger beer to local hot chocolate served in convenient to-go cups. These to-go options allow pedestrians to snack as they stroll, acting as ad hoc advertisements for

¹⁹⁶ “Ask Us about Free Shipping,” stall sign, Pike Place Fish Market, February 28, 2026; “Pike Place Bakery,” stall sign, Pike Place Bakery, February 28, 2026; “Ask Us about Our Special Wild Mushroom Mixed Bag,” stall sign, Sosio’s Fruit & Produce, February 28, 2026; “Gotta Try It!” stall sign, Mick’s Peppourri, February 28, 2026.

the produce sellers. The fantasy of the Market is thus a cooperative process, re-enacted both by the salespeople, who perform as producers, and by the patrons, who re-enact the twentieth century market consumer by dialoguing with producers and sampling goods before purchase: a common practice in the old sanitary public market, but a social practice that is largely absent in the contemporary supermarket chain.

Materiality of the Urban Environment

The urban environment of any city is constantly in flux, adapting to the changes in economy, culture, and local politics. But rather than representing solely the whims of the city government, urban space reflects the region's democratic politics. The contemporary city is the result of persistent struggles between residents, capital, and local governmental bodies over whose identities and histories the "character" of the city ought to reflect. According to Mary E. Domenico, the "built environment" of a city is itself a "communicative force that expresses abstract values and ideals to city inhabitants."¹⁹⁷ The design of a city is rhetorical in the sense that it communicates attitudes, invites subjective identification, and invokes narratives about the city's identity. It is, according to Domenico, "a location for embodied experience and an imaginative construction that lends coherence to the meanings of self and community."¹⁹⁸ A great deal of this is communicated through architecture. The decision to maintain old-looking historical buildings or, on the other hand, to replace them with current styles, reflects a negotiation of power relations struggling over who the physical contours of the city are meant to represent. Domenico analyzes the interpretive "obscurity" of Denver's Lindsey-Flanigan

¹⁹⁷ Domenico, "Civic Identity in Changing Cityscapes," 458.

¹⁹⁸ Domenico, "Civic Identity in Changing Cityscapes," 458.

Courthouse, which diverges from the neoclassical style of many U.S. government buildings with a more contemporary look. Such a design choice reflects changing desires of new upscale condominium residents and businesses nearby, who might not wish to perceive the uncomfortable realities of crime and punishment that occur in a courthouse.¹⁹⁹ An obscure design choice thus palliates upscale residents' anxieties related to crime and class divides in the changing urban landscape.

The character of any city is represented in the physical diversity of its material makeup, having been constructed, renovated, rebuilt, and expanded over time. The city of Seattle has developed much of its urban landscape to affirmatively embrace the modern, replacing historic neighborhoods and home builds with contemporary styles. Even at the residential level, high tech sustainable box houses are rapidly replacing the twentieth century Craftsman bungalows and brick-faced cottage houses that once dominated the neighborhoods lining the outer circle of the city limits.²⁰⁰ In the urban core, a narrow diagonal strip running from the international district and Pioneer Square to Pike Place Market (briefly reappearing on either end at Georgetown and Ballard) marks the remaining zone where twentieth century architectural style dominates. Surrounding this partition to the north, east, and west is a concentric wall of skyscrapers, mostly built in the past fifty years, while Lumen Field and T-Mobile Park operate as the historical zone's southern border. This small cobblestone corridor represents the place where one can experience old Seattle, can see what the city must have been like before Boeing and big tech.

Pike Place Market offers a competing vision of Seattle against the broader modernity of the city. The Market looks old: it is intentionally low-tech, with human hands manually laboring

¹⁹⁹ Domenico, "Civic Identity in Changing Cityscapes," 470.

²⁰⁰ "Seattle Architecture Trends in 2025: What Local Architects Are Doing Differently to Redefine Design," Coates Design, accessed April 3, 2026, <https://coatesdesign.com/studio/seattle-architecture-trends-2025/>.

over the materials. It is one of the only places in the city that feels like this. In the contemporary cityscape, one is surrounded by modernity; but in the historic neighborhoods, one gets a nostalgic escape from modernity. Seattle tourists can experience a brief respite from modernity in the cobblestone-laden avenues that make up Pike Place, Occidental Square, Hing Hay Park, the University of Washington, and Ballard Avenue. Thanks to recent efforts at pedestrianization, it is also one of the only streets in the city where foot traffic is prioritized over car dominance. But this particular approach to historic design invokes a very narrow vision of a place's history. In the U.S., cobblestone streets evoke remembrance of the country's settler-colonial past, prompting appealing visions of European settlers strolling through town. The historic feeling of Pike Place Market interpellates the tourist-consumer as an inheritor of this white settler subjectivity.

There are many ways to get to the Market: a downtown resident could simply walk, bus, or bike to the Market; the market also has a parking garage with an early bird rate. But the most common entry point is via Seattle's light rail, which connects Seattle's international airport and the suburbs north and south of the city to the urban core. Tourists heading straight to the city from the airport will exit the One Line at Westlake Station, navigating the underground to one of two tourist attractions: take the elevator up, skipping the street level directly to the monorail on the third floor, which whisks tourists yards above the urban rabble to Seattle Center, the retro-futuristic heart of Seattle tourism. The Seattle Center is home to Amazon's sleek eco-friendly Climate Pledge Arena, Frank Gehry's strikingly deconstructed Museum of Popular Culture, the colorful Chihuly Garden and Glass and, of course, the Seattle Space Needle. Seattle Center encourages tourists to pass above the people on the city streets: both literally in the monorail and the Needle, and figuratively in the pricey tickets for all its attractions. Seattle Center signifies the promise of what the city was to become, back when it was first established for the 1962 Seattle

World's Fair: a real-life Tomorrowland.

The path to Pike Place Market offers a stark contrast to the futurism of Seattle Center. Once one advances to the city level, one must navigate three blocks westward, huddled between upscale businesspeople, tourists, public workers, and unhoused residents. The closer one gets to the Market, the steeper the descent down the impressive road grade till, not far in the distance, one spies either of the Market's two large neon signs. The three blocks of the Market stand in stark contrast to the city behind, representing some of the last remnants of "Old Seattle." The physical trek to and through Pike Place Market offers an entirely distinct tourist experience of the city than what one would get from the Space Needle. As a result of so much manual traversal (and a marked deficit of seating areas), the Market can be an exhausting experience. It also places the tourist directly at the level of the Seattleite: the Jehovah's Witnesses and Black Hebrew Israelites evangelizing at the corners, unhoused people seeking shelter in doorways, the Clean Team workers power washing the sidewalks.

The Space Needle ironically offers refuge from the very city it represents by granting tourists a place above the common folk. But Pike Place also offers a kind of refuge from the contemporary city: a separation from the cold, financialized twenty-first century city and a retreat to the warmer, more human, more interconnected imaginary of the past. At the Market, the city feels intimate and reminds one of a time when shopping required human interaction. It prompts visitors to remember Seattle before the dot-com bubble and the rise of big tech. And it answers the question of where the producers are, the producers who are often absent from the contemporary corporate grocery chain.

Conclusion: Did I Meet the Producers?

As a historic place in the heart of a major city, Pike Place Market performs an alternative to the futuristic promise of the Seattle Center, the Space Needle, and the corporate offices of Microsoft and Amazon. The conspicuous production performances throughout the Market also attest to a producer that is, otherwise, absent from the world of the U.S. supermarket. It invites audiences to meet the producers and retain a memory of who makes consumer goods. But these performances are dual components of a simulacrum: by presenting itself as a rustic analog refuge from the modern city, the Market references a fantasy of stepping back into time. The Market is no more or less a real testament to the history of Seattle than the skyscrapers are; on the contrary, the continued preservation of the Market dissimulates the power relations that have forced manual labor to the margins. By allowing a space for the tourist to experience manual production, it offers a comforting palliative for a harsher reality: that manual labor has not merely been displaced but has been transformed by the very same forces that transformed cobblestone to concrete.

The “real” mechanisms of production that bring seafood, produce, and handcrafted goods to the grocery store are not familiar faces tossing fish and handing out free samples, but migrant farmworkers, truck drivers, craftspeople far away whose faces most U.S. consumers will never see. The Market offers an unreality that feels familiar and palatable, one that wards off the anxieties one may experience about the human cost of commodity production. In doing so, the Market’s production performance reveals the character of its intended audience: white collar tourists and local consumers, those with imaginary visions of production but perhaps little personal experience with manual labor. The continued existence of the “Old Town” district in cities, including that of the Pike Place Market, reveals a craving for an authentic feeling of

history and a need to feel good about production. The public market helps visitors feel an attachment to historic Seattle and to local producers by letting visitors see them, watch them, and dialogue with them. Implicitly, then, one can feel good about the process of consumption, because one feels that one is patronizing local laborers who are fairly compensated for their high-quality labor.

And the distinct choices that render Pike Place Market's visual design nostalgic do so through a narrow white settler subjective frame. While Pike Place subjectively frames audiences as bourgeois tourist-consumers inspecting wares at a nostalgic market, its conspicuous producers perform as urbane craftspeople rather than the low wage workers actually laboring in the farmlands and fisheries. Though Hispanic and Latine workers are overrepresented in Washington state's agricultural sector, the "producers" at Sosio's grocery are predominantly non-Hispanic white persons. Pike Place Market does make reference to the ethnic diversity once present in the Market's stalls that is no longer present. Directly above the main entrance, a sign tells of the effects of Japanese internment on the Market's character. "In 1941 approximately two-thirds of the farmers' stalls in the Pike Place Market were occupied by Japanese Americans. Today none."²⁰¹ But this sign is easy to miss.²⁰² Unlike the other interpretive signs in the Market, this sign remains far above eye level. It stands on a black background directly above the main entrance and is easily missed, since the famous fish throwers are just below. Nearby, in the newly renovated waterfront, a souvenir shop titled "Ye Olde Curiosity Shop" features colorful totem poles in the entrance and sells Indigenous crafts alongside shrunken bodies and taxidermied blowfish, but little reference is made to Seattle's Indigenous history within the Market itself. The

²⁰¹ "Untitled," street sign, Pike Place Market Preservation & Development Authority, March 27, 2026.

²⁰² I visited the Market several times prior to this project and hadn't noticed it till my first day of ethnographic field notes.

existence of such a curiosity shop, too, reveals the settler-colonial subjectivity invited in the Market as well. When patrons imagine the past, they are invited to imagine themselves as white Westerners inhabiting a nostalgic cobblestone imaginary.

The Market offers a gratifying performance that accentuates aspects of production audiences might appreciate while avoiding aspects of production that do not contribute to the fantasy. A closer look at the most popular produce stalls reveals a variety of branded cardboard indicating diverse product origin. The greengrocers are not the ones harvesting the produce, and they do not represent a sole local entity: they provide the same function as a supermarket, but with conspicuous production performance of authenticity. Check out the fishmonger and you see the same: local coho sits on ice next to Alaskan crab and Atlantic cod. The division of labor necessitates that many of the workers at the Market are customer service representatives in orange overalls, glorified storytellers working solely at the point of sale. Sourcing and sales are essential tasks in the supply chain, but the performances for sale at the Market invite symbolic connections to other parts of production (baking, fishing, harvesting) while rendering others invisible (logistics and transportation, custodial services, finance, HR). In a paradigm dominated by the service sector, many Market visitors may not know what manual labor looks like: they would not know what questions to ask, and the Market preemptively provides the answers. “Meet the producers” is a comforting slogan, because it lets the audience imagine that the stall clerks are themselves the producers. But in a practical sense, most are not: they are salespeople, dressed in costumes that help the consumer imagine a discrete relationship with manual production. In the next chapter, I move to a very different case study: one that uses conspicuous production to foster a real relationship between the institution and its patrons. We now turn to conspicuous production at a natural history museum.

Chapter 4

Conspicuous Knowledge Production at the Burke Museum

The previous chapters assessed the rhetorical functions of conspicuous production in tourist spaces: first, a contemporary spin on a factory tour experience at the Starbucks Reserve; then, a historic landmark preserved as an urban market at Pike Place. This chapter considers another tourist space, but not one guided by the same consumer logic of the private corporation. I turn to the Burke Museum, a public institution hosted by the University of Washington. Here, we find conspicuous production resolving a different need. Where the conspicuous production of coffee at Starbucks elevates the perceived value of the goods sold, and the conspicuous production of local identity at Pike Place offers fantasies for tourists to remember Seattle, the Burke Museum uses conspicuous production to educate the public about scientific processes. This turn, beyond merely fitting within a university's institutional mission to educate the public, also works to undo the historical problem of the natural history museum.

The natural history museum has long occupied a central role in organizing public knowledge about science. Like the zoo, the aquarium, and the science center, the natural history museum offers streamlined, digestible information that educates the public on scientific understanding. As a place of scientific observation and pre-historical speculation, the natural history museum occupies a liminal space between the empirical and the humanistic, bridging various disciplines of academic thought. And though “natural history” traditionally refers to a method of scientific knowledge production, natural history museums often resemble historical places like monuments, historical sites, and national history museums because they depict narratives about events that passed long before living memory. They are simultaneously sites where geological, anthropological, and biological findings are shared with the public, and where

curated exhibits reflect what museologists imagine the empirical findings tell us about the land before humans.

At first glance, the natural history museum would hardly fit into a dissertation about conspicuous production in “consumer places.” While the previous chapters analyze places where patrons *literally* consume the products for sale, museums are traditionally conceived as places of observation, reflection, and learning. I chose the Burke Museum both because it is an exemplar of conspicuous production in action, and because I view museums as a kind of branded consumer experience. Marketing researcher Jennifer Kim Lian Chan refers to museums as “service experience consumption places,” or places where an experience itself is the product the patrons consume.²⁰³ Kim cites fiscal policy as a prevailing cause of this movement towards an experience consumption model: a reduction in museum budgets requires museums to do more to draw in tourists that will pay for admission. Museums have become both more “visitor-oriented” and more “market oriented,” focusing less on the collections themselves and more on the production of experiences that will leave visitors satisfied.²⁰⁴ The Burke Museum easily fits within the visitor-focused, market oriented turn in museum curation: The Burke responds to market demands with branded merch, logos and slogans, a “brand identity” presented for consumer identification. And its interior design aesthetic emphasizes the audience experience in a variety of ways that will be discussed later. I argue that the Burke *sells* an alternative version of the colonialist natural history museum: one that interpellates the patron as a critical museum consumer.

²⁰³ Jennifer Kim Lian Chan, “The Consumption of Museum Service Experiences: Benefits and Value of Museum Experiences,” *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management* 18 (2009): 176, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19368620802590209>.

²⁰⁴ Chan, “The Consumption of Museum Service Experiences,” 174.

In this chapter, I assess the rhetorical function of conspicuous production at the Burke Museum. Confronted with decades of well-established critiques, of Eurocentric progress narratives that brought natural history to life and the extractive practices that accumulated bodies and objects for public display, twenty-first century natural history museums have landed in a rhetorical situation that requires response. This chapter investigates how conspicuous production, alongside textual materials highlighting historical wrongs and requesting public feedback from patrons, transforms the role of the natural history museum (hereafter abbreviated to *NHM*) in public life. I argue that the Burke rhetorically situates itself as a response to well-established critiques of the natural history museum genre. Specifically, I argue that the Burke's interior design aesthetic is carefully organized to shorten the distance between knower (curators, scientists, and contributors) and knowledge-seeker (patrons); that its use of transparency to transforms scientific knowledge from *object* to *process*, which is meant to further reduce the distance between science and its publics; and that by textually addressing ethical concerns and rendering the knowledge production process conspicuously visible, the Burke creates its own progress narrative that prompts visitors to remember traditional NHMs as *problematic* and the new museums, by contrast, as *ameliorative*. By curating the museum space as a series of responses to past ethical failings wrought by the natural history museum genre, the Burke acts as an restorative site of community enrichment.

This chapter unfolds in four parts: first, I review literature on the rhetoric of museums, arguing for the usefulness of rhetorical theory in understanding natural history museums as objects of public discourse. Second, I discuss the NHM's key features, both as a place of public science education and as a site that invites imaginary narratives about prehistory. Third, I introduce the Burke Museum, attending especially to its use of conspicuous production. Fourth, I

analyze the verbal, visual, and material rhetoric of the Burke Museum to perceive how it situates itself within and against the NHM. Finally, I consider opportunities for future rhetorical inquiry within the changing landscape of NHM curation. In so doing, I hope to demonstrate how contemporary museums use conspicuous production as a rhetorical strategy to rewrite the troubled history between the place, its subjects, and its patrons.

Rhetoric and Museums

Natural history museums, and museums in general, are an important place of rhetorical inquiry. Museums do far more than display historical facts and noteworthy objects to a curious public. Rather, museum visitors get to see results from a series of choices made by several actors over the history of the museum space. According to rhetoric scholars Carole Blair, Greg Dickinson, and Brian L. Ott, rhetorical invention involves “the selectivity and/or creativity implicated in constructing a subject matter in a particular way,” which suggests “that there is no ‘pure’ articulation” of museum artifacts but that their display “are inventional resources available in a culture.”²⁰⁵ When a museum is viewed as a product of deliberative decisions, museum design and curation are acts of rhetorical invention. Curators possess theories, knowledge, and artifacts that they use to engage the public on topics of interest. Dickinson, Ott, and Eric Aoki identify three common rhetorical practices of history museums, for instance: collecting, exhibiting, and (re)presenting.²⁰⁶ Museum designers collect artifacts that bear on topics important to the museum, exhibit these artifacts in physical spaces, and interpret the artifacts to

²⁰⁵ Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott, *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials*, (The University of Alabama Press, 2010), 13.

²⁰⁶ Greg Dickinson, Brian L. Ott, and Eric Aoki, “Memory and Myth at the Buffalo Bill Museum,” *Western Journal of Communication* 69, no. 2 (2005): 89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570310500076684>.

“render them meaningful” for visitors.²⁰⁷

Since the acts of collection, exhibition, and representation are contingent and open to contestation and revision, each of these practices can be assessed through rhetorical criticism. Criticism becomes particularly important where this contingency is concealed. Museum visitors are often invited to perceive museum rhetoric “as objective and authoritative, privileging the museum’s institutionalized telling,” but a rhetorical perspective highlights the contingent and manufactured aspects of institutionalized discourse.²⁰⁸ The rhetorical critic takes on what rhetorical theorist M. Elizabeth Weiser calls a “museological approach” to the criticism of museums. Weiser explains that a museological rhetoric “focuses attention on the ways in which materiality and narrative intertwine as bodies move through crafted space, inventing modified civic experiences out of aesthetic encounters.”²⁰⁹ Rather than asking whether or not a museum is being truthful or biased in its reporting of academic knowledge, Weiser calls on the critic to discuss “how these exhibits craft a version of the past to promote values for the future.”²¹⁰ For Weiser, it is not enough to simply examine how museums shape narratives; the critic must also consider *why* the museum designers chose to shape the narrative in this particular way, in this particular context.

This practice of purposeful meaning-making is complicated by subjective considerations of visitors’ movement through the museum space. While museums teach visitors about the topics on display, they also invite spectators to discover themselves within the narratives presented

²⁰⁷ Dickinson, Ott, and Aoki, “Memory and Myth,” 90-91.

²⁰⁸ Susan Mancino, “A Communicative Review of Museums,” *Review of Communication* 15, no. 3 (2015): 266, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2015.1077988>.

²⁰⁹ M. Elizabeth Weiser, *Museum Rhetoric: Building Civic Identity in National Spaces* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), 6.

²¹⁰ Weiser, *Museum Rhetoric*, 7.

therein. According to rhetorical critic Emma Frances Bloomfield, museums “encourage visitors to occupy different subject positions based on the display of artifacts, trajectory through the space, and interaction with other sites.”²¹¹ Museums certainly communicate information related to their overarching theme, but they also direct visitors to perceive themselves in relationship to the curated displays through a kind of narrative logic. Rhetorical critic John Lynch explains that the “combined material and symbolic text” of the museum space, including its nonverbal aspects, “acts as a constitutive rhetoric that offers visitors an identity through which they perceive not only the museum exhibits but also the larger world outside the museum.”²¹² By studying the rhetoric of a particular museum, one can discover not just what the museum says about its object, but also how the museum constitutes its publics.

Despite the continued significance of natural history museums to public scientific knowledge, their history remains a fraught one. Traditional NHMs are often caught up in the material concerns of colonial extraction and environmental devastation, the ethical quandaries of stolen goods and mutilated bodies, the delegitimizing tendency towards exhibitionism that characterizes the NHM’s execution, and the philosophical problems of Eurocentric progress narratives presumed in long-standing exhibits. As a result, many NHMs have adopted curative strategies to acknowledge, ameliorate, and overcome criticism. The Pitt Rivers Museum in the Oxford Museum of Natural History, for example, features signs and text materials that acknowledge the unethical acquisition of its collections, many of which were stolen from First Nations communities around the globe (including, most egregiously, human remains). The

²¹¹ Emma Frances Bloomfield, “Sensory Engagement with the Rhetoric of Science: Creationist *Copia* at the Discovery Center for Science and Earth History,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 25, no. 4 (2022): 69-70, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/885165>.

²¹² John Lynch, “‘Prepare to Believe’: The Creation Museum as Embodied Conversion Narrative,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 16, no. 1 (2013): 6, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/503514>.

museum website explains that their current curative approach “include[s] work that embraces hope, reconciliation and redress and focuses on co-curatorial approaches to bring new voices into the Museum and ensure public engagement is led by socially engaged work with communities.”²¹³ Other NHMs have taken more eclectic approaches to critical curation. Rather than simply incorporate critiques, some NHMs have reinvented the very process of curation to match a twenty-first century attitude towards scientific knowledge. Communication scholar Gregory Schneider-Bateman explains that this new approach to museum curation participates in an “ongoing dramatic refashioning of the museum as a form of public address” by including “exhibits that are more inclusive of other voices and that do not advance a single message or unified narrative structure” and even work “to embrace and assert their often implicit political dimension.”²¹⁴ The Burke Museum, located on the University of Washington campus in Seattle, Washington, is just such a place. The Burke Museum (hereafter referred to as “The Burke”) sharply diverges from the aesthetic norms and curative tendencies of NHMs by highlighting criticism, democratizing knowledge production, and centering community service as its guiding ethic.

NHMs are frequent sites of rhetorical inquiry. Rhetorical scholars have engaged with NHMs in relation to their persuasive strategies, genres, narratives, and use of spectacle.²¹⁵

²¹³ “Critical Changes to Displays as Part of the Decolonisation Process,” Pitt Rivers Museum, accessed May 4, 2026, <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/critical-changes>.

²¹⁴ Gregory Schneider-Bateman, “From Questions of Fact to Questions of Policy and Beyond: Science Museum Communication and the Possibilities of a Rhetorical Education,” in *Scientific Communication: Practices, Theories, and Pedagogies*, ed. Han Yu and Kathryn M. Northcut (Routledge, 2018), 149.

²¹⁵ Julie Homchick, “Objects and Objectivity: The Evolution Controversy at the American Museum of Natural History, 1915-1928,” *Science & Education* 19 (2010): 485, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11191-009-9208-4>; Emma Frances Bloomfield, “Ark Encounter as Material Apocalyptic Rhetoric: Contemporary Creationist Strategies On Board Noah’s Ark,” *Southern Communication Journal* 82, no. 5 (2017): 263, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1041794X.2017.1360384>; Lynch, “Prepare to Believe,” 1; Joanna Ploeger, “Techno-Scientific Spectacle: The Rhetoric of IMAX in the Contemporary Science Museum,” *Poroi* 3, no. 2 (2004): 73, <https://doi.org/10.13008/2151-2957.1038>.

Communication scholar Julie Homchick, for example, used the Evolution controversy at the American Museum of Natural History to discuss how the NHM can persuade hostile audiences to accept scientific theory through appeals to objectivity (and how such objectivity can be appropriated by its opponents).²¹⁶ Insofar as rhetoric is “both a theory capable of analyzing public understanding and an activity capable of creating it,” rhetorical criticism allows the critic to assess the range of decisions that led to a museum’s particular existence while also offering alternatives for improved communicative effectiveness.²¹⁷ When a museum is viewed rhetorically, it is conceived as “a space where controversies themselves can come alive and where the public can grapple with the meaning of events” to co-shape memory with the public.²¹⁸ When one interprets the NHM as a place of deliberation and collaborative meaning-making, the museum becomes a rhetorical artifact that reflects national consciousness, public memory, and prevailing attitudes towards scientific inquiry.

The Natural History Museum

Since natural history museums organize scientific knowledge, they are a kind of science museum. After all, the phrase “natural history” traditionally refers to the observational method of scientific knowledge production rather than a kind of “history” per se.²¹⁹ In this sense, a NHM could be considered an antiquated counterpart to the twenty-first century science center, an all-ages space where visitors learn science through interactive exhibits. The Pacific Science Center

²¹⁶ Homchick, “Objects and Objectivity,” 485.

²¹⁷ Alan G. Gross, “The Roles of Rhetoric in the Public Understanding of Science,” *Public Understanding of Science* 3 (1994): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1088/0963-6625/3/1/001>.

²¹⁸ Gregory J. Schneider-Bateman, “Why the Museum? The Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Value of Gross’s Exhibit Analyses,” *Poroi* 10, no. 2 (2014): 4, <https://doi.org/10.13008/2151-2957.1190>.

²¹⁹ “Natural History,” The Huntington, accessed May 4, 2026, <https://www.huntington.org/natural-history>.

in downtown Seattle, just three light rail stops from the Burke Museum, provides a helpful contrast. Whereas NHMs typically house animal taxidermy and skeletons, the Science Center features a butterfly house and a saltwater tide pool, both with live animals. The Science Center also includes experimental exhibits like “Maker Spaces” and reactive machinery that teaches physics concepts through experimentation and interaction. This interactive approach is precisely what distinguishes contemporary science centers from traditional natural history museums: NHMs display knowledge produced through observational methods, and science centers encourage education through visitor experimentation.

To put it another way, the NHM is a “museum,” and the Science Center is a *post-museum*. A post-museum is, according to Communication scholar Davi Johnson, a recent innovation in museum curation that combines interactive content with business sense, “assimilating marketing, consumer focus, and corporate sponsorship into their agendas.”²²⁰ The post-museum works, from an educational standpoint, by combining interactive learning with enjoyment: one can explore the planetarium, interact with crustaceans at the tide pool, and catch a science flick at the IMAX theatre, all inside of the newfangled science center. Moving in tandem with the neoliberalization of higher education, the post-museum approach to public science education resembles, in the words of sociologist Richard Watermayer, the “Disneyfication of the museum sector.”²²¹ Against the thrills of the science center, the NHM can hardly compete. Corporatized edutainment is unburdened with the settler-colonial baggage of the NHM, and children are more likely to prefer it.

²²⁰ Davi Johnson, “Psychiatric Power: The Post-Museum as a Site of Rhetorical Alignment,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 5, no. 4 (2008): 348, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420802412423>.

²²¹ Richard Watermayer, “A Conceptualisation of the Post-Museum as Pedagogical Space,” *Journal of Science Communication* 11, no. 1 (2012): 3, <https://doi.org/10.22323/2.11010202>.

Still, the quality of NHM “science” is largely of a different nature (pun intended) than the science center. Science centers engage visitors through the process of scientific discovery and processual experimentation. Indeed, the Pacific Science Center in Seattle describes “science” as “a boundless and timeless process of inquiry, discovery, and problem solving” on its website.²²² The science center implicates visitors as fellow scientists, engaged in the process of encountering timeless scientific truths. The NHM, on the other hand, frames its audience entirely differently. The NHM interpellates visitors as the audience of a story, embarking on a journey through the vast reaches of our planet’s history. The generic components of NHM display—their artifacts, dioramas, artistic renderings, and long-winded interpretive signs—engage audiences through narrative rather than interactive learning.

The NHM’s emphasis on paleontology and anthropology (as opposed to the science center’s STEM-forward approach) invites audiences to conceptualize scientific knowledge as a narrative about our world’s past, present, and future. Rather than engage audiences through interactivity, NHMs display precious artifacts behind glass or security ropes, opting for narrative engagement on interpretive plaques. These narratives tell visitors about the time of the dinosaurs, the cause of their downfall, and the history of humanity, presented through diorama, taxidermy, and artistic interpretations that make nature come to life.²²³ Though NHMs house knowledge produced through scientific methods, the arrangement and framing of such knowledge is narrative oriented. To see the NHM cleanly as a *science* museum rather than a *history* museum is to miss out on the many visual and narrative cues that render scientific discovery historical. So while “natural history” refers to the scientific observation of nature, natural history museums

²²² “About PACSCI,” Pacific Science Center, accessed May 4, 2026, <https://pacificsciencecenter.org/about/>.

²²³ Mitchell Kiefer, “Re-basing Scientific Authority: Anthropocene Narratives in the Carnegie Natural History Museum,” *Science as Culture* 30, no. 1 (2021): 119, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09505431.2020.1766010>.

organize these observations to, in the words of political scientist Timothy W. Luke, “define and popularize the nature of humanity's place in Nature.”²²⁴ They are also history museums.

NHMs are noteworthy because they act as mediating spaces between historical narration and scientific study. Typical history museums act as “intermediaries between history and the present” that translate the knowledge of historians to a wider public.²²⁵ History museums do not simply recount facts to the visitor but arrange historical findings into narratives that patrons will find personally meaningful. Science centers, on the other hand, negotiate the various meanings of *science* to immerse patrons in the complex processes of observation, experimentation, and analysis that is the very process of scientific inquiry. Communication scholar Joanna Ploeger contended that the experiential variety found in science museums creates ambiguity in the space, since “commonly understood categories of ‘scientific’ knowledge are defined, exploded, and redefined” when scientific knowledge is translated to the public.²²⁶ NHMs combine these tendencies—the narrative urge to connect the past with the present, and the ambiguous process of simulating science—into a single place. Communication scholar Aaron T. Phillips contended that the contradictory practices of presenting “the vast spatial sweep of deep time” and the “micro-temporality of human activity” were best evidenced in NHMs, since they are “product[s] of the present designed to house the past, built at the miniscule pinpoint in space–time that is the present moment.”²²⁷ NHMs share the daunting task to collapse a narrative spanning four billion

²²⁴ Timothy W. Luke, “Museum Pieces: Politics and Knowledge at the American Museum of Natural History,” *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 16, no. 2 (1997): 1, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41416329>.

²²⁵ Emma Frances Bloomfield, “The Rhetorical Impact of the Scopes Trial’s Interconnected Public Memory Places,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 65, no. 13 (2021): 1861, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642211003158>.

²²⁶ Ploeger, “Techno-Scientific Spectacle,” 75.

²²⁷ Aaron T. Phillips, “Eliding Extraction, Embracing Novelty: The Spatio-Temporal Configuration of Natural History,” *Environmental Communication* 8, no. 4 (2014): 453, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2014.919331>.

years developed through a variety of observational practices into something that is meaningful to visitors in the present and has some bearing on a public understanding of humanity's future.

The history of NHMs can tell us more about their curious execution as halls of science, culture, and historical speculation. Communication scholars Victoria Cain and Karen A. Rader's entry in the *Oxford Handbook of the Science of Science Communication* provides a helpful overview of the NHM's history. According to Cain and Rader, the genesis of the NHM is typically conceived in Renaissance Europe when "Cabinets of Curiosity," traveling public exhibits that displayed objects of natural history, hailed curious patrons.²²⁸ For a time, objects like taxidermized animals, cultural artifacts, and fossils traveled in these Cabinets or were held in the private troves of wealthy collectors. Later on, those collections came to be safeguarded in public museums that maintained several functions: hosting "colonial expeditions" and "scientific societies' meetings," as well as "entertain[ing] and educat[ing] broader publics about science."²²⁹ While public museums often provided a public benefit through "object-based 'nature study'," private organizations like P. T. Barnum's American Museum approached natural science objects through spectacle and entertainment.²³⁰ As NHMs grew in public prominence as places of both entertainment and public education, they "became paradigmatic modern spaces for the communication of authoritative natural knowledge to various lay and scientific publics."²³¹ The establishment of the NHM and its reproduction across the world is thus an eclectic combination of public science communication and exhibitionism realized through the intersecting and

²²⁸ Victoria Cain and Karen A. Rader, "Science Communication and Museums' Changing Roles," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Science of Science Communication*, ed. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Dan Kahan, and Dietram A. Scheufele (Oxford University Press, 2017), 206.

²²⁹ Cain and Rader, "Science Communication," 206.

²³⁰ Cain and Rader, "Science Communication," 206.

²³¹ Cain and Rader, "Science Communication," 207.

conflicting designs of scientists, wealthy collectors, corporate benefactors, and colonial explorers.

The NHM's genesis as a collection of exotic artifacts extracted round the world for Western European entertainment implicates it in anti-Indigenous colonial exploitation.²³² NHMs ascended to prominence during the era of European Enlightenment and participated in the "boundary work" that fosters an imaginary divide between white Western society and nature.²³³ Throughout their history, NHMs have treated Indigenous people and cultures as anthropological specimens residing within nature, as opposed to modern man whose existence is separated from nature. According to sociologist Mitchell Kiefer, Indigenous people in the anthropology exhibits of NHMs "are often shown as part of an external nature without genuine cultural histories."²³⁴ Even worse, NHMs have treated human remains as "natural history objects" that gave evidence to racist theories of human difference.²³⁵ As late as the nineties, cultural theorist Mieke Bal argued that the narratives present at the American Museum of Natural History "convinces the viewer of the superiority of Anglo-Saxon, largely Christian culture" that places the implied visitors "at the end of the evolutionary ladder."²³⁶ Performance scholar Scott Magelssen argued that NHM dinosaur exhibits participate in white supremacist historiographic framings of natural history, by "centering. . . the white subject as protagonist" and "performatively link[ing]

²³² Josh Davis, "Are Natural History Museums Inherently Racist?" Natural History Museum, accessed May 4, 2026, <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/are-natural-history-museums-inherently-racist.html>.

²³³ Kiefer, "Re-Basing Scientific Authority," 120.

²³⁴ Kiefer, "Re-Basing Scientific Authority," 120.

²³⁵ Carsten Stahn, *Confronting Colonial Objects: Histories, Legacies, and Access to Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 44, 266.

²³⁶ Mieke Bal, *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis* (Routledge, 1996), 53.

dinosaurs” to “exotic non-white locales.”²³⁷ NHMs—including the Burke Museum—have historically housed human remains, Indigenous cultural objects, and dinosaur bones in the same space, implying a narrative of time that begins with dinosaurs and ends with the museum patron.²³⁸ That human bodies were held in museum collections is not incidental to the NHM but embedded in their fabrication of who gets to live in the present, and who is relegated to the past.

In the twenty-first century, facing decades of academic scrutiny and public pressure, Natural History Museums are reckoning with their violent, imperial past. As mentioned in the introduction, NHMs all over the world are making curation decisions to respond to criticism and change the narrative. But the very existence of a place of science that simultaneously houses rare minerals, dinosaur fossils, animal taxidermy, and Indigenous human cultural objects renders it problematic. How can NHM curators maintain such collections without reifying the Eurocentric boundary that places visitors within society and Indigenous peoples alongside “nature?” I chose to analyze the textual, visual, and material messages of the Burke Museum, a former Natural History Museum, to investigate how it approaches this rhetorical situation.

The Burke Museum

The Burke Museum (formerly the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture) is located on the University of Washington campus in Seattle, Washington. Founded in 1879 as the collection of the university’s Young Naturalist Society, the state legislature designated it as the Washington State Museum in 1899. From 1895 to 1927, the collection moved around several

²³⁷ Scott Magelssen, “Dinosaurs, Racial Anxiety, and Curatorial Intervention: Whiteness and Performative Historiography in the Museum,” *Pamiętnik Teatralny* 70, no. 4 (2021): 102, <https://doi.org/10.36744/pt.984>.

²³⁸ “The Ancient One, Kennewick Man,” Burke Museum, February 20, 2017, <https://www.burkemuseum.org/news/ancient-one-kennewick-man>.

UW locations, including Denny Hall and the Forestry Building, until it eventually found a permanent home in the Washington State Building.²³⁹ The Washington State Building was closed for structural issues in 1957 and the collection remained in storage for several years.²⁴⁰

Following a bequest of Judge Thomas Burke's private collection in 1962, the university erected a new museum building and added the "Burke" name to the museum title: the Thomas Burke Memorial Washington State Museum.²⁴¹ The current home of the Burke Museum opened in 2019 as the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, and has since been truncated to simply "The Burke Museum."²⁴²

The museum's architecture merges twenty-first century simplicity with Pacific Northwest symbolism. The building itself is a massive cube, its faces striped with narrow multistory windows and unvarnished wood panels. The museum has three main floors: the first, titled "Arts and Cultures," displays tools and craftwork from global cultures past and present; the second, titled "Biology," displays taxidermized animals and a rotating temporary exhibit; and the third, split between "Paleontology" and "Archaeology," has dinosaur bones on one side and depictions of the material environment on the other. The main floor also includes Native Indigenous-owned café *Off the Rez* and a gift shop with pieces from local artists, while the second and third floors house classrooms and administrative offices in the non-exhibit space. Architect Tom Kundig

²³⁹ Alan J. Stein, "Burke Museum (Seattle)," *History Link*, January 30, 2008, <https://www.historylink.org/file/8468>; Jean R. Sherrard, "Seattle Now & Then: The Washington State Building of the AYPE," *Seattle Now & Then*, October 5, 2013, <https://pauldorpat.com/2013/10/05/seattle-now-then-the-washington-state-building-of-the-aype/>.

²⁴⁰ Stein, "Burke Museum (Seattle)."

²⁴¹ Stein, "Burke Museum (Seattle)"; "History," Burke Museum, accessed May 4, 2026, <https://www.burkemuseum.org/about/history>.

²⁴² "Burke Museum of Natural History & Culture," *GGN*, accessed May 4, 2026, <https://www.ggnltd.com/the-new-burke>.

describes the Burke's design approach as "inside-out," breaking down "traditional museum barriers between public and 'back-of-house' spaces."²⁴³ The design bridges the "natural" with the "rational," serving utility through climate control and space maximization while invoking PNW craftsmanship, native Coast Salish architecture, and Seattle sustainability in its design materials.²⁴⁴ Both the materials and shape of the Burke's exterior evoke a traditional Coast Salish plank house, a choice which disrupts the Western heritage invoked in neoclassical NHM designs.²⁴⁵

Perhaps what is most obvious upon entry is the feel of the museum space. Bereft of the marble historicity and yellow incandescence of a twentieth century museum, The Burke's modern interior is marked with a distinct sterility. The interior is a dark gray set on a concrete surface, fluorescent overhead lights allowing for few shadows. The black ceiling reveals exposed pipes and lights, like an unadorned warehouse displaying its bowels. The objects on display have a striking visual dissimilarity from the interior design of the building itself. The rooms feel very open; the floor, walls, and ceiling appear a vast black box. But the objects on display are dynamic, sporting numerous textures, shapes, and colors. Each object stands behind glass in an empty glass case, well-lit for audience observation. While the space is perfect hollowness, the pieces on display have distinct smooth, rough, soft features, imperfections, textures, and colors. In other words, the Burke feels more akin to a modern art museum, or even a working science lab, than a 20th century museum. The interior design is minimalist to direct audiences to the objects on display rather than to the 20th century feelings of grandeur invoked in neoclassical

²⁴³ Tom Kundig, "The Burke Museum," Olson Kundig, accessed May 4, 2026, <https://olsonkundig.com/projects/burke-museum-of-natural-history-and-culture/>.

²⁴⁴ Kundig, "The Burke Museum," Olson Kundig.

²⁴⁵ "Traditional Coast Salish Plank Houses," Vancouver Heritage Foundation, accessed June 5, 2026, <https://www.vancouverheritagefoundation.org/house-styles/traditional-coast-salish-plank-houses/>.

architecture.

The Culture exhibit on the first floor interprets various artifacts from Indigenous peoples. Pieces from Northwest American peoples are most heavily featured, but there are artifacts from East Asia, Oceania, and Latin America as well. The first exhibit invites the observer with several interpretive signs describing the dynamic and evolving nature of human culture. A video screen encourages audiences to learn Indigenous words for everyday objects: a canoe or a raccoon, say, including both a picture of the object and the pronunciation of the word. Many of the displays include interactive “please touch” segments for children, such as a display with Indigenous toys and games like mancala. Just beyond the Culture exhibit is a spotlight on Northwest Native objects, along with signs explaining how the museum partners with local Indigenous experts to interpret the objects, their symbols and functions.

The upper floors turn away from human craftwork and toward flora, fauna, and land. The biology exhibit is structured similarly to the first, with large walk-around displays stationed alongside a variety of interpretive signs. The southern end of this floor highlights the evolutionary process: taxidermized animals are arranged in a vast assemblage depicting the haphazard branching out of complex life from single-celled organisms. The temporary exhibit lies on the opposite end of this floor: during several of my visits, it showcased the orca; for later visits I observed colorful illustrations of local avifauna. The paleontology exhibit includes a variety of fossils and dinosaur bones on display, with interpretive signs about prehistoric life. Many of the fossils on display are still encased in the dust and dirt in which they were found, while the dinosaur bones float freely in the ceiling, and along the edges of the space. The archaeology exhibit shows the development and changes in local ecosystems (land, waterways) over the past hundred and fifty years of human industrial development. One display shows a

cross-section of earth, showing how different kinds of commodities make up the litter that accumulates in the ground over time. Another exhibit is about commonplace belongings and their relation to human meaning-making. This exhibit has everyday items such as sandals, a Swiss Army knife, and some dice, indicating that these too will one day become objects of scientific inquiry.

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the Burke Museum—the design choice that most clearly distinguishes it from other museums—is the conspicuous production displays within every exhibit. Research rooms are rendered conspicuously visible within and between each major exhibit. These research displays are repeated on every floor throughout the museum. The first-floor research room contains tall stacks of arts and crafts, objects of human craftwork. The second-floor research exhibit is lined with cabinets (presumably containing animal remains) and taxidermized animals standing above. The top floor's exhibits contain similar animal remains, along with a variety of skeletons, complex photography equipment, and several researchers. During a regular working day, you can observe students and research faculty working on the artifacts used for the museum displays.

These conspicuous production displays are at least as rich and spectacular as the curated exhibits. Consider the first-floor research area: right after you exit the Culture exhibit, you observe a room behind large panes of glass. On the other side of the glass, anthropology students and faculty work on artifacts similar to the ones in the previous exhibit. On my first visit, I observed four people in this research lab: one washing her hands at the sink; one using plastic wrap to package an artifact; and two others boxing artifacts for storage or shipping. The room was littered with wheeled racks holding innumerable cultural artifacts. There are some computers and a photography area with a backdrop and two studio strobes. In the foreground near the glass

is a handful of artifacts on display for visitors, placed alongside a whiteboard with rough descriptions of what the researchers do with the objects. A nearby sign explains that “this work room provides a place where people can study and visit cultural belongings in person.” On many visits, I often observed people on the other side of the glass performing nondescript tasks: typing away on a laptop, reading a volume, or writing some notes on a whiteboard. In contrast to the sumptuous production fantasy of the Roastery or the dynamic bustle of the Market, the Burke’s conspicuous producers were mostly engaged in the quotidian manual labor that makes up a lot of the scientific research the public rarely gets to see: brushing dust off clay figures, cutting the pelt from a weasel carcass, or prepping a microphotography station to retrieve enhanced images of a very small hummingbird. Sometimes, workers would move carts around or clean surfaces. On the weekends, most of the display windows were empty.

Genre Subversion at the Burke Museum

The Burke Museum no longer identifies itself as a museum of natural history. Instead, it has joined the ranks of other critical interventions into museum curation to become something else. That something else, I argue, is a critique of its antecedent genre (the NHM). It is, in many ways, a “deconstruction” of the NHM as a genre of museum, and its conspicuous production practices are a core component of this deconstructive act. Considerations of genre help rhetorical critics understand the exigencies of such critiques. Every rhetorical act can be conceived within a broader rhetorical situation; the success of such an act can be determined according to its response to an exigence and the rhetor’s attendance to their audience.²⁴⁶ The genre of a rhetorical act is both a set of expectations carried by audience members and a constraining discourse within

²⁴⁶ Lloyd F. Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 1, no. 1 (1968): 1–14, [jstor.org/stable/40236733](https://www.jstor.org/stable/40236733).

or against which the act must constitute itself. For rhetorical theorist Walter Fisher, genres are “inductive generalizations” that “classify” a particular thing into its proper category.²⁴⁷ Genres are not created but are derived from shared commonalities across cases that are then enumerated and reduced into imagined categories by critics and communities. Communication scholar Thomas M. Conley argued that rhetorical genres amount to “congeries of expectations which the audience brings to the occasion,” indicating a genre’s materialization through audience interpretation.²⁴⁸ Rather than existing in the work itself, genre “is a function of the conditions of the reception of the work.”²⁴⁹ The reception of a rhetoric depends not only on its successful appeal to audience values, but also on its effective play on the audience’s generic expectations.

Generic considerations are important even when a rhetor wishes to demarcate himself from a genre. When rhetors attempt to speak into a novel discursive scenario, they are nevertheless implicated by the generic expectations their audience brings to the event. According to Communication scholar Kathleen M. Jamieson, attempts to speak novel rhetorics into being are constrained by their implied “antecedent genres.”²⁵⁰ For instance, Jamieson cites George Washington’s state of the union address as a novel rhetorical situation that was interpreted by its critics in comparison to the antecedent genre of the “King’s speech.” Though it was essentially a new kind of speech act, the first U.S. president’s state of the union address was rendered legible according to its relation within and against preceding generic expectations. Jamieson “suggests

²⁴⁷ Walter R. Fisher, “Genre: Concepts and Applications in Rhetorical Criticism,” *The Western Journal of Speech Communication* 44, no. 4 (1980): 291, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570318009374015>.

²⁴⁸ Thomas M. Conley, “Ancient Rhetoric and Modern Genre Criticism,” *Communication Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (1979): 47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463377909369350>.

²⁴⁹ Conley, “Ancient Rhetoric,” 47-48.

²⁵⁰ Kathleen M. Jamieson, “Antecedent Genre as Rhetorical Constraint,” *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 61, no. 4 (1975): 406, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335637509383303>.

that rhetors do perceive unprecedented situations through antecedent genres.”²⁵¹ However, Communication scholar Stephen E. Lucas argues that antecedent genres could only be considered to be constraining a rhetorical act insofar as the “motives, knowledge, and perceptions of the rhetor” can be connected to that antecedent genre.²⁵² While Jamieson makes striking comparisons between Washington’s rhetoric and the generic conventions that preceded him, Lucas would only consider the antecedent genre a true constraint if it could be demonstrated that Washington felt constrained by the antecedent genre.

To analyze the Burke Museum’s critical approaches to curation, I considered the Burke’s design within a rhetorical situation constrained by its antecedent genre. To do this, I first developed a taxonomy of the NHM genre, enumerating its common themes, motifs, and execution by considering the expectations audiences are likely to have upon visiting the Burke. For instance, many of the most popular NHMs around the world are housed in neoclassical architecture, feature towering T-Rex skeletons in terrifying action poses near the entrance, and narratively frame patrons at the end of a vast, terrifying history of violence and natural disaster, and on the brink of an exciting, possibility-laden future.²⁵³ Though NHMs house knowledge produced through scientific methods, the arrangement and framing such knowledge is narrative oriented. According to Geography scholar Rebecca A. Johns, NHMs “are often expected to tell

²⁵¹ Jamieson, “Antecedent Genre,” 414.

²⁵² Stephen E. Lucas, “Genre Criticism and Historical Context: The Case of George Washington’s First Inaugural Address,” in *Landmark Essays on Rhetorical Criticism*, ed. Thomas W. Benson (Hermagoras Press, 1993), 202.

²⁵³ U.S. NHMs in neoclassical architecture include the American Museum of Natural History, the Smithsonian, the Carnegie, and the Los Angeles NHM; outside the U.S., neoclassical NHMs include those in Beijing, Oxford, Paris, and Vienna. A quick Google Search of these NHMs reveals imposing dinosaur skeletons in prominent locations, and several of their websites talk vividly of both past and future.

the story of human origins.”²⁵⁴ Mark Carnall describes this origin story well: “human order has been brought to the wild chaos of the rest of nature, as demonstrated by the vignette slices that have been deposited for your viewing pleasure.”²⁵⁵ The generic narrative qualities common to NHMs could animate audience memory, whereas the Burke defies those tropes or explicitly critiques other “museums” in interpretive signage.

I then compared the Burke’s rhetorical execution to those generic expectations, demonstrating how the Burke argues for itself as a critique of museums. The Burke Museum invites comparison to other museums in its persistent efforts at demarcation: the Burke is laden with texts identifying the faults “museums” are likely to perpetuate. These signs then explain how the Burke accounts for, subverts, and resolves those problematic tendencies. In response to criticisms leveled at the NHM genre, the Burke Museum communicates a rhetoric of responsible co-creation. Rather than offering a Eurocentric imaginary of a dark and violent past and a utopian future, the Burke instead roots knowledge in present action. While traditional NHMs center natural history artifacts to expound on the stories they presumably tell, the Burke centers the knowledge production process itself to demonstrate how museums come into being. *Transparency* is a key theme of their curative approach: demonstrating, through conspicuous production and self-reflexive textual content, a clear orientation towards disclosing the contingent nature of the space to its public. For instance, explanatory signs are placed throughout the museum that bring the visitors into curation and design decisions, with such titles as “Who Curates?” “Who are we reaching?” “Who controls fossil data?” and “Who names museum

²⁵⁴ Rebecca A. Johns, “Representing the Anthropocene: The Story of Us at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History,” *Material Culture* 56, no. 1 (2024): 3.

²⁵⁵ Mark Carnall, “Science Fiction at the Natural History Museum,” *Configurations* 30, no. 3 (2022): 341, <https://doi.org/10.1353/con.2022.0020>.

spaces?” Such texts highlight the contingent nature of the museum itself and, by extension, the stories it narrates. Furthermore, the presentation of science workers behind glass walls provides a visual motif that reinforces this transparency.

A Critical Space: The Burke vs. Other “Museums”

The Burke explicitly states its departure from other museums by acknowledging and making reparation for past errors, through both prescriptive rhetoric explaining (im)proper museum practices and narrative rhetoric of theft and repatriation. A prominent sign on the first floor says that “The Burke acknowledges the violent legacies of colonialism” and that they “strive to identify and stop the cycle of objectifying, exotifying and discriminating against communities and cultures.”²⁵⁶ This sign identifies the extractive conditions of collecting practices, the undervaluing of community involvement, and the violence of colonialism as three problems intrinsic to museums that ought to be challenged. The Burke’s Northwest Native Art Gallery includes an exhibit which narrates an instance where the Burke returned stolen artifacts from its collection. According to the sign, the Burke held house posts stolen from Tlingit villages on an Alaska Expedition for over one hundred years before returning them to the Tlingit people, at which time a “healing ceremony” was held to “acknowledge the wrong had been done.”²⁵⁷ The Burke then commissioned Tlingit artists for a new piece that “allows the museum to. . . [address] the historical wrongs represented by the stolen monuments while displaying new pieces by contemporary artists who address difficult and traumatic histories.”²⁵⁸ The archaeology section

²⁵⁶ “The Burke Museum Acknowledges the Violent Legacies of Colonialism,” museum sign, Burke Museum, May 2, 2024.

²⁵⁷ “A Tale of Theft and Repatriation,” museum sign, Burke Museum, May 2, 2024.

²⁵⁸ Burke Museum, “A Tale of Theft and Repatriation.”

features a sign that narrates the return of an important artifact to the Nooksack Tribe in Washington State, saying that “the Burke Museum works closely with. . . Indigenous communities worldwide to address and reconcile past deeds—reuniting treasured objects with their communities and consulting with them about the appropriate care and display of these precious items.”²⁵⁹ In these examples, the Burke identifies objectionable past behavior, narrates strategies for reparation, and indicates commitment for more commendable future behavior.

However, the Burke lays much more criticism at “museums” in general than it does at its own perceived misbehavior. The Burke gestures towards museums as problematic places through language such as “museums reflect a history of colonialism, a form of cultural dominance, that alienates and misrepresents many communities,” “museums often undervalue the involvement of communities by imposing their own authority when deciding how to collect,” “Museum collections of traditional boats and canoes began as a curiosity about ‘exotic’ cultures,” and “Museums and their role in society. . . is often undermined by the common practice of naming public museum spaces like galleries and auditoriums after donors.”²⁶⁰ The Burke is partially correct in these signs, but they do not go nearly far enough. The colonial history reflected in many U.S. museums does not merely alienate, misrepresent, and undervalue Indigenous American communities: it functioned, for centuries, as a legitimating ideological force in the continued settler expansion of the Americas. By exotifying Indigenous peoples and placing them alongside nature, NHMs implicitly justified Indigenous Americans’ expulsion from the land: like any other “natural” resource, *people* can be seen as part of a landscape in need of

²⁵⁹ “Live in a Good Way,” museum sign, Burke Museum, May 2, 2024.

²⁶⁰ Burke Museum, “The Burke Museum Acknowledges the Violent Legacies of Colonialism;” “How Did These Vessels Get Here?” Museum sign, Burke Museum, May 2, 2024; “Who Names Museum Spaces?” museum sign, Burke Museum, May 2, 2024.

cultivation. The Burke is also conveniently non-specific about which museums are worthy of such critiques. Instead, it is the very genre of the *museum* that deserves blame for such misdeeds.

On the other hand, the Burke champions “museums” for providing important social functions. The Burke extols the social function of museums with language such as “Museum collections serve a vital role in ensuring the next generation has access to learn, apply and maintain traditional knowledge,” “Museums provide opportunities for healing,” “Museum collections serve as catalysts for transferring knowledge across generations,” and “Museums care for excavated objects, preserving them as an important resource for researchers and descendant communities.”²⁶¹ In these examples, the Burke prescribes actions that provide museums with social utility. The Burke provides specific examples of reparative museum practices through stories of repatriation and remembrance. A display with a Māori bust explains how the original was repatriated to New Zealand and a plaster cast was made from the original so the Burke would still have an object to display. The accompanying sign explains that repatriation efforts “have begun to repair museum relationships” with Indigenous peoples.²⁶² Elsewhere, a sign narrating the devastation of the Bikini Atoll nuclear weapons tests explains how “Marshallese community members gather at the Burke” annually to “reconnect” with objects whose materials are no longer available due to nuclear destruction.²⁶³ In this example, the Burke takes on the responsibility of national colonialism, rather than simply answering for its own crimes.

The Burke’s reparative language parallels the transparency of their curation approach,

²⁶¹ “Renewed Journeys,” museum sign, Burke Museum, May 2, 2024; “Museums Provide Opportunities for Healing,” museum sign, Burke Museum, May 2, 2024; “Northwest Native Art Gallery,” museum sign, Burke Museum, May 2, 2024; “Many People Have a Say in What Happens to Sites,” museum sign, Burke Museum, May 2, 2024.

²⁶² “Nicola Andrews, Ngāti Paoa, Generations in Dialogue,” museum sign, Burke Museum, May 2, 2024.

²⁶³ Burke Museum, “Museums Provide Opportunities for Healing.”

which includes working alongside community members to co-create knowledge and right past wrongs. In one sign, the Burke commits to “building a future grounded in respect” by fostering “relationships between communities and the Burke Museum,” “promis[ing] to change” by addressing “patterns of cultural dominance” and “involving communities in every aspect of [their] work.”²⁶⁴ Elsewhere, the Burke demonstrates alternative methods of museum production by “prioritiz[ing] Native languages” over English, “reconnecting. . . broken ties,” “build[ing] collaborative, respectful, long-term relationships with all communities,” and “collaborat[ing] with Indigenous scholars [and] descent communities” to “best understand the collections” held within the Burke.²⁶⁵ The museum tells its audience what is wrong about museums: stolen collections, exotifying narratives of Indigenous cultures, and Eurocentric bias in knowledge production. In response, the Burke demonstrates how museums could do better: by acting as a community repository where problematic objects are repatriated, exhibits are collaboratively designed with community members, multiple perspectives are considered in knowledge production, and healing rituals help affected communities manage trauma. Still, the museum does not reveal to visitors the process whereby the museum negotiates these collaborative efforts. It remains unclear, then, to what extent Indigenous communities exert control over exhibit design and interpretive language.

Collaborative Knowledge Production

Traditional NHMs rendered the producers of scientific knowledge invisible and presented

²⁶⁴ Burke Museum, “The Burke Museum Acknowledges the Violent Legacies of Colonialism.”

²⁶⁵ “Languages Hold Power,” museum sign, Burke Museum, May 2, 2024; Burke Museum, “How did these vessels get here?”; “Tang’reiqamken,” museum sign, Burke Museum, May 2, 2024; “Sharing and Caring for Knowledge,” museum sign, Burke Museum, May 2, 2024.

such knowledge as settled science, maintaining a one-way flow of knowledge from authoritative knower to humble visitor. Rather than exhibiting facts as pre-given and incontestable, the Burke invites audiences to understand that knowledge is a process of production and that exhibition is a contingent result of human-directed choices. For instance, the display on bat species diversity teaches visitors the process of investigating species diversity, rather than merely presenting findings. The display features a “meet the researcher” bio that describes how the Burke’s bat biologist, Dr. Sharlene Santana, first became curious about bat biology.²⁶⁶ Another side of the display explains what Santana’s research team does to investigate bat diversity (micro-CT scans, field data, and review of previous literature) and concludes with the team’s current findings.²⁶⁷ The final panel of the display encourages the visitor to act as the scientist by interacting with a screen that simulates a CT scan imaging machine.²⁶⁸ Throughout the museum, visitors are also encouraged to spectate on the knowledge production process by watching researchers at work on animal remains and cultural artifacts. Every exhibit features transparent glass walls that allow visitors to examine university lab spaces and watch researchers inspect, clean, and catalog the museum’s growing physical archive. By presenting scientific knowledge as the result of ongoing processes and situating the visitor as a fellow scientist, the Burke’s science communication adopts postmodern critique into its very style: scientific knowledge isn’t “out there,” waiting to be discovered by scientist-explorers, but is the product of human methods of inquiry.

The Burke also subverts NHM norms by adopting an expansive approach to knowledge production. The Burke’s displays cite scientists, students, Indigenous experts, community

²⁶⁶ “Meet the Burke Museum’s Bat Biologist!” Museum sign, Burke Museum, May 2, 2024.

²⁶⁷ “Here’s What They Have Found So Far,” museum sign, Burke Museum, May 2, 2024.

²⁶⁸ “You Are the Scientist!” Museum sign, Burke Museum, May 2, 2024.

members, and museum visitors as legitimate voices whose perspectives are valuable to museum curation. The museum's exterior garden, for instance, features native flora and descriptive plaques that privilege traditional ecological knowledge about the plants. Each plaque begins by identifying the Indigenous name of the plant, followed by its common and Latin names, and features a quote from a local tribe member explaining the plant's significance in tribal cuisine.²⁶⁹ The introductory plaque at the Culture section of the Burke states that "Community members are the experts in these areas" and that the museum is dedicated to "learning from communities and building a more ethical and collaborative future together," inverting the museum-to-community dynamic from one of museum authority to one of community authority over the museum.²⁷⁰ Another sign directly implicates visitors in museum knowledge production, stating "We need your help" and asking readers to "connect with the nearest Burke staff member" if they can share knowledge about the museum's exhibits.²⁷¹ By rendering knowledge production transparent and extending production to a broad set of voices, the Burke provides a variety of rhetorical engagements with the troubled history of the NHM and demonstrates a potential reframing of the museum's mission: to provide a "public resource" where "all people" can "learn" and "generate knowledge" through "collaboration" and "responsible interpretation" to "remain relevant and serve our communities with integrity."²⁷²

²⁶⁹ "iāqa," museum sign, Burke Museum, May 2, 2024; "wák'amu," Museum sign, Burke Museum, May 2, 2024.

²⁷⁰ Burke Museum, "The Burke Museum Acknowledges the Violent Legacies of Colonialism."

²⁷¹ "We Need Your Help," museum sign, Burke Museum, May 2, 2024.

²⁷² "About," Burke Museum, accessed May 4, 2026, <https://www.burkemuseum.org/about>.

Visual Transparency

While the above analysis can be demonstrated through the museum's textual elements, the Burke also situates itself against the NHM genre through its visual aesthetic. As soon as an audience passes through enormous Roman columns and into the cavernous expanse of a neoclassical NHM building—as soon as they become interpellated as the humble prey of the towering T Rex—visitors are rendered inferior to the museum space itself. Today's audience is but a blip on the grand scale of “natural history,” these aesthetic signifiers imply. The Burke, on the other hand, delivers a visual design of transparency that compliments its self-reflexive, egalitarian textual messages. The building itself is a drab modernist box paneled with weather-stained wood planks. The interior features gray concrete floors, black and white walls, and exposed ceilings littered with wires, pipes, and light fixtures. There is no imposing dinosaur skeleton at the entrance, but rather a modest café that serves coffee and Navajo frybread. The largest skeletons in the museum are stowed away at opposite corners of the Burke: a massive woolly mammoth inconspicuously hidden by the basement's alternate exit, and a mammoth and giant sloth stand in the far corner of the top floor's paleontology exhibit. Taxidermized animals in the biology exhibit are not given action poses in theatrical dioramas but are instead arranged systematically in a floor-to-ceiling evolutionary tree. Where the dioramas of taxidermized animals at the Los Angeles Natural History Museum and the American Natural History Museum transport visitors to the Arctic tundra and the African savannah, the Burke's displaced, floating taxidermy is bereft of dramatized artifice.

The Burke's various researcher exhibits are the most prominent feature of this transparent approach. Where the grand marble and brick of the traditional NHM conveys nothing of the processes that lead to scientific knowledge production, the Burke demonstrates these very

processes by showing audiences the “behind the scenes” work that makes up museum production. Sure, the major exhibits are the reason visitors patronize the museum, but between each exhibit stands a conspicuous reminder of the labor involved in curation. Conspicuous production is doing two things here: first, it invites the audience to experience scientific knowledge production. One can view science in action for hours on end, watching researchers gaze patiently at the meticulous work of artifact restoration, taxidermy, and animal imaging that is required for museums to exist in the first place. Second, conspicuous production acts as a visual argument, implying a transparent relationship between the museum and its patrons through the very decision to show that “behind the scenes” work. The audience member that has visited a traditional NHM can experience the Burke’s conspicuous production displays as a subversive act, indicating how different it is from its predecessors.

The significance of this choice must not be understated. By creating a window into the work of science, in real time, the Burke can transform public imaginaries about how knowledge production works in contemporary academia. The Burke’s transparent displays show audiences what “doing science” actually looks like: the quotidian humdrum and tedious precision of dusting, clipping, stuffing, and cataloging artifacts, the tiresome labor of inputting data on laptops and comparing specimens under microscopes. Such displays also foster identification between visitors and researchers, since the visitors can see that the knowledge producers are not withered men in corduroy blazers and penny loafers, but an international academic workforce performing daily tasks.

The motif of transparency is a holistic feature of the museum’s curation style. Not only does it extend to the interior design and the “behind the scenes” curation, but it appears in unlikely places as well. If you turn down the central corridors on the upper floors, you may spy

the museum director's office, featuring a door with a tall glass window. Should you visit during regular working hours, perhaps you could even stop and observe administrative leadership doing their work. Or if you happen to get caught in the museum after hours, perhaps you can spy the cleaning crew doing their work. The janitorial closet, after all, is also transparent.

The Burke Museum thus organizes its rhetoric as genre subversion, inverting the NHM's aesthetic tendencies, peeling away the artifice of museum curation, and advocating for a collaborative approach to scientific knowledge production. The Burke delivers a visual design rhetoric of transparency which compliments its self-reflexive, egalitarian textual messages. It diverges from NHMs in its very name, which was once the "Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture" but was shortened to simply the "Burke Museum" after its 2019 redesign. The museum is thus a critique of museums and an argument for what museums ought to be: a place for community knowledge production and enrichment to foster a more ethical, more equitable present.

Conclusion: Curation After Criticism

In analyzing a contemporary museum like the Burke, we can see how conspicuous production can offer a rhetoric of transparency as a counterargument to past criticism. With so many decades of robust critique and activism demanding a change in approaches to curation, museums like the Burke are rethinking how to engage the public in collaborative institutional knowledge. Who gets to decide the meaning that accompanies displayed objects is changing. Museums curators are actively considering how to return stolen objects in their collections. The naming practices that determine what the museum even is, is changing. And visually savvy curators are considering architecture and interior design as part of that change, using

transparency to argue for a different present.

Because of its history—its collection practices, its participation in racist and dehumanizing narratives, its function as a support mechanism for colonial expansion—the natural history museum (as a genre of public museum) will remain “problematic” for as long as it exists. In one sense, I think the Burke Museum should be applauded for executing a refreshing demonstration of transparent and collaborative science communication. Rather than positioning the scientist as the knower and the public as the unknowing *hoi polloi*, the Burke renders science practice transparent and creates opportunities for visitors to practice science themselves. Rather than entangling Indigenous Others within “nature” to reify a Eurocentric nature/society boundary, the Burke frames its perspective in the present, amplifies visitor agency, and encourages audience identification with global culture. It also demonstrates a wide range of genre subversion practices, from visual transformation to textual differentiation. In so many ways, the Burke visually communicates that it is “not like the other NHMs” and that it is willing to participate in critical self-reflexive curation.

The Burke’s rhetorical approach demonstrates a particular set of choices that navigate the institutional and public pressures a museum faces. It engages in good faith with critiques of museums by incorporating critique into its curation and inviting community collaboration in knowledge production. It manages the potentially dubious extractive nature of its collection through community collaboration and careful framing of its objects on display. Finally, it demonstrates some commitment to righting past wrongs by repatriating stolen objects and remunerating Indigenous artists for replacement pieces. Some might find its current setup puzzling or ad hoc: uncertain where natural history and culture meet, it has removed both descriptors from its name and produced a museum that houses it all. Still, it represents one way

to disentangle indigeneity from colonial progress narratives and display academically distinct objects (Indigenous art, paleontological artifacts, and animal taxidermy) in a satisfying manner.

But the Burke's self-reflective curation decisions leave it in a seemingly untenable spot long-term. Positioning itself, both visually and substantively, as a departure from harmful "museums" requires public memory of the bad, earlier museums. The Burke's critical signage notes persistent issues with museum collection and curation but avoids identifying a specific target as an example (and rarely offers its own history) to demonstrate its point. As a result, audiences are required to fill in the interpretive gap invoked by "museums" in their signage. In other words, the Burke's self-reflexive signage needs audiences to imagine a bad museum that, in contrast, makes the Burke one of the good ones. The framing, then, requires public memory of the bad museums which, one would hope, would fade over time.

The Burke offers an excellent example of the ways scientific knowledge curation can be transformed through collaboration across local communities and Indigenous scholarship. Its framing of scientific and cultural knowledge in the present allows audiences to see themselves inside of, rather than apart from, the nature and culture on display. But in its present articulation, it leans a bit too heavily on negative enunciation to construct its own museum identity. What kind of museum the Burke becomes, and how that eventually moves beyond negation of "museums," is a valuable consideration for curators and the local community.

Chapter 5

Conclusion: Sincerity, Transparency, and the Illusion of Production Knowledge

Periodizing is a beloved pastime of historians, economists, and critical theorists alike. By giving name to a particular range of time, it helps us objectify time itself, create explanations and narratives about its meaning, and develop a sense of closure towards fragmented and contradictory collective memory. In my introductory chapter, I attempted to do just this: to explain conspicuous production in 2026 as a kind of localized and analog response to the automation and globalization of the work force. My narrative began with the suppressed misery of the factory town, continued with the consequences of muckraking and corporate attempts to romanticize labor processes until, crucially, the U.S. transition to post-Fordism saw manual production retreat southward and eastward. Two key factors in the late twentieth century—the transition to a service and knowledge economy, and the dawn of the digital age—fostered the conditions that would necessitate what David Sax has called the “revenge of analog”: not just analog commodities, but manual production itself.²⁷³ The domination of service and finance sectors in the U.S. requires a consumer culture that reconnects white collar workers to knowable, human-scale manual production. This reconnection is necessary to remediate the alienation and lack of agency white collar workers experience in their material environment. And this apparent contradiction, this return of small-scale production visibility during an era characterized by AI technology, can be clearly perceived in the city of Seattle, a place negotiating its identity alongside and against its booming tech sector.

The consumer goods most Americans purchase are produced far away, out of sight from the consumer. Americans possess incredible access to affordable consumer goods, in part

²⁷³ David Sax, *The Revenge of Analog: Real Things and Why They Matter* (PublicAffairs, 2016), 1.

because production has moved to places where overhead costs are cheaper. Goods production in the U.S., like factory farming and animal agriculture, is similarly out of sight for the vast majority of Americans, relegated to so-called “fly-over states” and the rural periphery of coastal states.²⁷⁴ Both the class divide and the geographical divide in the U.S. make it uncommon for white collar workers to regularly interact with manual laborers, and vice versa. At the same time, Americans have greater access than ever to goods produced by humans all around the globe. We are all connected to one another through the globalized economy: through production, trade, and consumption. Yet we continue to grow further apart from those on different links of the global economic chain. The focus of this dissertation was not mass production under global capitalism, which all Americans experience in some fashion. Instead, I was intrigued by a kind of production performance growing in popularity in places of luxury and tourist consumption. Conspicuous production, as a design choice, abounds in urban environments where consumers pay premium prices for craft consumption experiences; and in popular tourist places, where vacationers away from home use leisure time to see how others live, and work, and make the things those vacationers consume.

There are two periods that, in my opinion, can help us understand the broader implications of conspicuous production in 2026. The first is *metamodernism*. Cultural critics Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen define metamodernism as a “structure of feeling that emerged in the 2000s” as a reaction to late twentieth century postmodernism.²⁷⁵ Where postmodernism often refers to expressions of deconstruction, disaffection, cynicism, and irony

²⁷⁴ The previous U.S. census determined that urban areas “now account for 80.0% of the U.S. population.” “Nation’s Urban and Rural Populations Shift Following 2020 Census,” United States Census Bureau, accessed May 4, 2026, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2022/urban-rural-populations.html>.

²⁷⁵ Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen, “Periodising the 2000s, or, the Emergence of Metamodernism,” in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth after Postmodernism*, ed. Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 4-5.

during the détente period of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, metamodernism marks a return to Romanticism, sincerity, and quirky humanism in art, entertainment, and culture.²⁷⁶ But rather than forming a rigid boundary between itself and the earlier postmodern, metamodernism is characterized by “oscillation” between its own thematic/aesthetic approach and its postmodernist forbear.²⁷⁷ The contemporary world forms the reality to which the public subscribe while remnants of the spectacular, fantastical, and antiquated abound as “enchanted” experiences to ameliorate the discomfort, dislocation, and alienation attendant to contemporary public life.²⁷⁸

In other words, sincerity and romanticism, in the twenty-first century, flourish alongside postmodern irony and cynicism rather than reaching dialectical synthesis. The metamodern cinema of Wes Anderson, for instance, is characterized by ironic façade and human sincerity intertwined with one another. Ultimately, Anderson’s films seem to imply that the audience should accept the sincerity alongside the visual artifice. They lack the realism to be taken seriously but carry emotional truths audiences are meant to accept anyway. And this is, ultimately, a similar rhetorical move to the one being made in conspicuous production. Certainly, some consumers will interpret conspicuous production performances as genuine: some patrons will imagine that they actually do occupy a privileged viewpoint from which to view production happening the same way it does behind closed doors. Many others, however, will identify that these production moments are staged and performed as part of the consumer experience. The crucial bid here is to expect audiences to validate the sincerity of the performance despite its

²⁷⁶ Van den Akker and Vermeulen, “Periodising the 2000s,” 2-3.

²⁷⁷ Van den Akker and Vermeulen, “Periodising the 2000s,” 6.

²⁷⁸ Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 3.

artificiality.

Existing alongside the post-ironic sincerity of the metamodern period is the rise of *technofeudalism*. According to economist Yanis Varoufakis, technofeudalism refers to the economic paradigm of the twenty-first century, both alongside and following the capitalist period. Where capitalism involves the exploitation of wage-laborers through the oversight of middle managers, Technofeudalism disciplines labor through sophisticated algorithms and cloud-based services.²⁷⁹ Technofeudal consumers provide free labor as “cloud serfs” through content creation and engagement on digital platforms.²⁸⁰ The burgeoning digital culture in the U.S. encourages millions of people to produce endless content for free, while platforms sell consumers’ personal data to surveillance and marketing platforms. Meanwhile, laborers’ lives are subject to greater scrutiny through AI and algorithms, which screen out job applicants, monitor productivity, and automate once-necessary jobs. In a technological paradigm where nothing seems real and everything is online, conspicuous production offers a comforting reminder of manual craft: a return to analog, when production processes were knowable and functioning at a human scale.

The cases examined in this dissertation all demonstrate a kind of value added to consumer experience through conspicuous production. By showing consumers how something is made, brands increase the perceived value of their offerings, communicate gratifying images of producers and products, and preempt critique through a fiction of transparency. In the example of the Seattle Reserve Roastery, the value added is immediately felt through premium prices. One spends nine dollars on a latte because the money also pays for the experience. Coffee indulgence

²⁷⁹ Yanis Varoufakis, *Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism* (Melville House Publishing, 2023), 236.

²⁸⁰ Varoufakis, *Technofeudalism*, 234.

at the Roastery includes both literal consumption and the experience of a kind of knowledge about the good consumed. One feels that Starbucks Reserve coffee is more valuable because one is granted sensuous knowledge of the production process. At Pike Place Market, some of the goods also come at a higher cost. But the value produced at the Market is primarily that of one's experience of place: a feeling that one is re-enacting a social relationship between producer and consumer that intensifies one's attachment to the city of Seattle. And at the Burke Museum, conspicuous production adds value to scientific discovery, revealing to patrons more about the effort and collaboration expended in service of knowledge production and how the patron, too, can practice science. By experiencing the production of science, one feels a closer connection to those supposed to have knowledge, and one can imagine being on the other side of the glass. Conspicuous production is, in each of these cases, not a remnant of earlier production paradigms, but an artifact of an era that is thoroughly implicated in automation and the global division of labor.

The conspicuous presence of manual production gains its power in contrast to the supposed absence to which it responds. Were audiences not keenly aware of the absence of manual production in U.S. public life, these production experiences would lack the novel and gratifying feelings that render them successful. In the cases I observed, Starbucks Reserve beans are more valuable because you can see them roasted, ground, and brewed; Pike Place's market goods are more authentic because you can meet the producers; and the Burke's curation is more ethical because you can look behind the scenes. The audience is meant to understand that conspicuous production responds to an absence: it becomes special because consumers know not to expect it. Conspicuous production fills in gaps consumers have between themselves and a concrete, material world just out of grasp: the world of manual production, reflected in the jobs

one chooses during career day in elementary school, or the ones depicted on TV. In a country where most workers are in the service and finance sectors, many want to know what it feels like to make things: to feel the imaginary agency intertwined in manual production by identifying with manual laborers.

The return of analog products also reflects this need for agency and material interaction. So much music is available at the touch of a button on one's smartphone, but one reclaims a feeling of agency through the physical actions of selecting and unsheathing a vinyl record, blowing off the dust, engaging the turntable, and dropping the needle. An unfathomably large library is accessible in every e-reader, but one reclaims agency by perusing the local bookstore and leafing through a physical volume. Laptops and smartphones are certainly more convenient for notetaking, but Moleskine notebooks feel more permanent. This permanence, along with the physical actions of engaging analog products and choosing to do things "the old way," connects one to a knowable, human-scale past. These simple preferences may be particularly important for those in the Global North who spend their work week staring at screens, several steps removed from the practical value provided by their labor. One reclaims the agency lost at a desk job through analog habits and pastimes.

Conspicuous production performances also offer an illusion of transparency that seeks to preempt criticism. The transparency of conspicuous production allows organizations to proactively respond to critique before it even occurs. If customers can see laborers at work because there is no backstage of production, then they can feel good about their consumer choices. If I can see laborers working and they do not seem burdened or desperate, I need not wonder whether they are being exploited. As a rhetorical strategy, transparency carries a lot of cache in social life. U.S. President Donald Trump is historically accessible to the press and offers

unfiltered, expletive-laden posts on his social media site. Though Trump appears more brash and uncouth than the past several presidents, his apparent emotional transparency acts as a kind of authenticity other U.S. politicians tend to lack. The off-script asides and aimless, long-winded anecdotes at Trump's rallies and his late-night social media rants *feel* as if one is accessing the real Trump. In a cultural environment where so much communication is calculated and audience tested, where politicians are driven more by message discipline than reflecting values they share with their public, some audiences can see an unscripted aside, a faux pas, or a break in decorum as a mark of authenticity.

The significance of transparency in contemporary discourse is intertwined with people's unprecedented access to one another on the internet. In an era of anti-elitism and alternative facts, conspicuous production invites people into the production process to see imaginary views behind the veil. It offers a fiction of transparency that allows audiences to have some semblance of closure, and to believe that production knowledge is directly accessible. Transparency is a powerful tool in popular culture as well, allowing audiences an imaginary view of the interiority of a celebrity, industry, or process. When influencers make apology videos online in response to misbehavior and public callouts, the videos tend to feature reduced production quality, plain lighting, and the influencer breaking character or the fourth wall. Such gestures indicate to the audience that they are receiving the real, unfiltered version of the influencer. Transparency is a powerful tool for rhetorical engagement, inviting audiences to interpret certain aesthetic cues or unfiltered communication as sincere or true. And by crafting a perception that something is transparent, one invites audiences to imagine that one is beyond criticism.

What I wanted to convey in this dissertation is that this transparency is manufactured. Conspicuous production performances are not regulated by some governing body and awarded

certificates of authenticity, and they are not designed primarily to be viewed by experts working in the same industry. These windows into production represent careful design choices meant to orient consumers towards the host of the performance. The rhetorical performance of production allows consumers to project their own needs, desires, and feelings onto these visions of production and deepen their relationship with the brand. But by highlighting conspicuous production as a performance, a brand ironically creates more distance between the consumer and all those producers absent from whatever is rendered visible. One may feel that one is seeing production when watching beans roast at the Seattle Roastery, but this is only one small portion of the production process. The consumer is rarely granted access to view agrarian planting and harvesting in the Global South and is never granted access to the humdrum labor of procurement, sales, logistics, and marketing. By seeing one component of production, audiences' attentions are drawn away from the other kinds of labor that were also necessary to produce the commodity. Conspicuous production, providing a vivid fantasy for its audience, circumscribes the kinds of thoughts audiences can have about production. By showing us how coffee is made, how manual laborers deliver commodities, and how scientific knowledge is produced, the brand preemptively answers questions for the consumer and forecloses possibilities they could otherwise have imagined.

While conspicuous production adds value to consumer experience, it comes at a cost. It forecloses other ways we could imagine production to happen: ways that could lead audiences to a better understanding of the true cost of consumer society. The supposed transparency of manual labor does little to improve the conditions of labor and collapses the complex global networks of industry into a range of practices deemed worthy of watching. In the U.S., the roasting of coffee beans is often highlighted as the chief component of artisanship, and little attention is paid to the

cultivation, harvesting, and transportation of coffee beans apart from the tourism-laden images of African and South Asian single origin beans (as well as the token feeling of patronage one gets in Fair Trade symbology). A troubling dichotomy emerges where certain kinds of labor receive craft designation, while other kinds remain out of sight.

Conspicuous production affords an imaginary feeling of human-scale production in a globalized world, one too vast and complex for humans to adequately grasp. In doing so, it discourages imagination about the interconnectedness of all laborers around the globe, who participate in different links of the economy. While it adds experience value to the products themselves and provides a gratifying image of certain kinds of labor, it obscures our reliance on those millions of others around the world whose jobs are not interesting or sensuous enough (or close enough) to watch. Consumers are thus invited to a selective imagination of production that leaves them ignorant of the true human cost. Since conspicuous production is pleasant and comforting, it placates anxieties about the extraction, violence, and suppression that characterizes global trade. And by placating consumers' potential anxieties about the cost of production, it diminishes opportunities for international solidarity between workers at different points of the production chain. Seeing performances of production can thus make consumers more misinformed of production, through its partial, placating fantasy of artisanship and transparency.

What I hope I have demonstrated to my reader is that conspicuous production can foreclose the imagination of alternate realities. Yet the prevalence of conspicuous production also offers a tantalizing possibility. It may, perhaps, lead audiences to identify with workers: to see themselves reflected in the faces of manual labor and appreciate a feeling of solidarity. But more likely, the humans present in conspicuous production are conveniently exploited, their very bodies a testament to the authenticity of the goods for sale. Conspicuous production succeeds

because its target demographic has little relation to manual production. Furthermore, conspicuous production performances quell anxieties audiences may have about their own tenuous relation to production of their most beloved commodities. These anxieties, while unpleasant, could lead to a change in consciousness. By alleviating anxieties through production performance, critical imaginations about global production networks are discouraged.

One way we can imagine different relationships to production is to think critically about which parts of the process are revealed to us, and to ask why *this* part of production is freely offered to consumers. Why does Din Tai Fung's observation window reveal cooks shaping bao and gyoza, rather than washers operating the dish station? From a consumer perspective, the vision of gyoza prep primes the hungry visitor for their upcoming meal and invites them to begin imagining the flavors and textures of their food. But it simultaneously creates a hierarchy of labor: that worthy of being seen, and that best left hidden. It invites audiences to appreciate the human labor that goes into a product, but only those kinds of labor that are pleasant or gratifying.

Such a rethinking of production could help develop political perspectives on production and consumption. By asking what it takes for us to get the products we want, we could imagine our own role in the production process and develop a more supportive consciousness towards diverse kinds of laborers. One may, perhaps, develop a perspective that is less extractive and more cooperative: rather than fetishize craft while ignoring labor, to develop a sense of shared responsibility with all stakeholders, from agrarian laborers and urban manufacturers to artisans and designers, and to develop the kinds of political commitments necessary to unburden those at the harshest, most precarious steps of that process.

Analyses like the ones made in this dissertation can provide conscientious consumers with opportunities to think differently. Rhetorical criticism, as a philosophy of human

communicative choice, identifies the contingent nature of the material world around us and encourages reflection on the nature of choice. By identifying that conspicuous production is but one choice among many, the critic can imagine other choices that could have been made: to highlight a different segment of the production process, for instance; or to render all aspects of production invisible; or to negotiate production visibility with those laborers who are put on show for the consumer audience. When the critic perceives the built environment around them as moving them towards certain identities, stories, and actions, they can assess the effect of the built environment and, if necessary, work to change public understanding. In an era where we are constantly interpellated as consumers, the very act of *noticing* the interpellation can open consumers to different possibilities. Because once we can see something as fabricated, as rhetorical, as the result of a contingent choice when other choices are available, we are then granted the imagination to consider other possibilities. If this could have been otherwise, then *how* could we make it otherwise?

In closing, I offer three places where I see conspicuous production used to pursue reparative, community-oriented, and radical outcomes. The first lies in the Burke Museum's curative approach, explicated in chapter 4. While I gestured towards the Burke's negative identity qua "other museums" as a space for critique, its progressive efforts to invite local communities into knowledge production and collaborate with global communities to restore ill-gotten objects is worthy of considerable praise. Publicly maintained institutions should foster community agency to reignite collective efforts at building the world around us. Such collaboration allows for diverse approaches to knowing and could reduce audience skepticism towards a division of labor that traditionally positions the experts as out of sight.

Another avenue involves lending visibility to important, necessary work that is usually

ignored as mundane or insignificant. Conspicuous production is, after all, a framing device for audiences: it tells audiences what is worth attending to and directing their vision towards that work. As a result, certain kinds of labor are rendered visible while others are left unseen. In the case of Starbucks' Seattle Reserve Roastery, the work of the roaster and barista are emphasized, while the back office and logistics work is hidden from view. One could imagine, then, a countercultural effort to render both visible and gratifying that work which is typically hidden from view. New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani's social media team offers a potential step in this direction. The mayor's Instagram and YouTube accounts, for instance, are replete with entertaining, well-produced videos that direct viewers to mundane and forgotten public sector work, like a video on the mayor's Instagram account that shows a pothole being filled.²⁸¹ On the mayor's YouTube channel, one video depicts the mayor participating in the city's non-emergency call center, while another explains how the city government makes "thousands of tiny fixes" like public basketball court rim repairs every year.²⁸² While such posts are no doubt calculated to maintain positive visibility and shore up positive sentiment for re-election, they also indicate a kind of civic approach that increases awareness of underappreciated labor and could increase interest in urban renewal. When designed well, they may also add an enchanting aura to mundane and forgotten labor that fosters audience identification with public servants.

The advent of *slow cinema* offers a final example of the rhetorical possibilities of conspicuous production. Slow cinema refers to a loose trend in twenty-first century global cinema characterized by the incorporation of slow time into cinematic experiences. Media

²⁸¹ Zohran Mamdani (@nycmayor), "Beautiful day to fill the 100,000th pothole of the year," Instagram photo, April 6, 2026, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DWz680uEUNN/>.

²⁸² Zohran Mamdani, "Mayor Mamdani Answers 311 Calls," *NYC Mayor's Office*, YouTube video, April 6, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p1vbAdFkVvA>; Zohran Mamdani, "Welcome to the Mayor's Municipal Madness," *NYC Mayor's Office*, YouTube video, March 27, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yhNbDB8esLU>.

scholars Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge assert that

Slow time is made manifest and felt in those instances in which one is confronted with the impossibility of shaping temporal rhythms according to one's will, such as when we find ourselves stuck in a long queue or waiting for the next train.²⁸³

Slow cinema includes films that deliberately expand the length of a single composition, usually focusing on a still moment or a mundane task in the life of a working-class individual. Taiwanese director Tsai Ming-Liang's 2013 film *Stray Dogs* offers a typical example. In *Stray Dogs*, a homeless man in Taipei earns a wage by holding a real estate sign on a busy highway.²⁸⁴ One of the film's shots, lasting nearly four minutes, flatly focuses on the man's face as the wind whips his plastic poncho. Other long takes include the man relieving himself and taking a smoke break by the highway, each lasting the full, uncompressed duration of the acts. Such moments in cinema are deliberately unpleasant and are meant to reproduce the same kind of boredom and exasperation experienced by real people who perform low-wage work. The tiresome and discomforting experiences evoked in slow cinema subvert the rhetorical goals of conspicuous production experiences in consumer spaces. Rather than alleviating anxieties and preemptively answering questions consumers may have about the labor process, slow cinema prompts viewers to ask themselves why, in an era defined by abundance and automation, workers in all parts of the world are still forced to subsist on such demeaning and painful tasks. It prompts viewers to consider how we could imagine—and perhaps begin to create—a more efficient, equitable, and dignified global society.

²⁸³ Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge, *Slow Cinema* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 4.

²⁸⁴ Tsai Ming-Liang, director, *Stray Dogs*, Homegreen Films, 2013.

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