

# ARTIFICIALIZATION

*Russell Belk*

Apart from a small wealthy elite segment of the world that craves natural foods, natural fibers, natural childbirth, organic gardening, feng shui, human powered sports, environmentalism, deep ecology, natural death, and preserves for nature, wildlife, nudity, and aboriginal peoples, what the mass of humanity clearly prefers is an artificial, sanitized, synthetic environment. Through our consumption choices we clearly signal a preference for synthetic foods, artificial additives, genetic modification, pesticides, herbicides, atomic energy, surrogate motherhood, artificial intelligence, Disneyfication, and McDonaldization. This is not mere passive acceptance of conditions foisted upon us by conniving marketers or totalitarian governments. Rather it reveals an active desire for the artificial over the natural, the “real.” Consider the popular computer game *The Sims* and its many spin-offs. In these games, players acquire artificial houses, artificial furnishings, artificial bodies, artificial partners, artificial children, artificial pets, and artificial lives. What is more, dedicated Sims players delight in and obsess over these surrogate objects in a way that seldom attends the consumption of their real counterparts. We delight in the artificial, even when it simulates a real world to which we seem to have become alienated, jaded, or indifferent.

Admittedly, the distinction between the real and the artificial is often a somewhat arbitrary one. As Zerubavel reminds us, “The proverbial Martian cannot see the mental partitions separating Catholics from Protestants, classical from popular music, or

the funny from the crude” (1991: 80). But the fact that boundary between the artificial and the real is itself artificial does not mean that it doesn’t exist; merely that it is socially constructed. What is of most concern here is why it is that we seem to increasingly prefer things on the “artificial” side of this divide rather than where precisely we draw this line.

For all intents and purposes humankind mastered the real by the mid-twentieth century. We can transform, build, or destroy our landscape at will, rapidly transport people and things to new locations, build dizzyingly tall skyscrapers, and alter the human body so that even death is cheated. In the modern account, such mastery of the real along with increasingly scientized explanations of the once inexplicable represents progress. But the postmodern account has a much more playful take on the real and unreal. In this view Marx’s complaint that “All that is solid melts into air,” should have been intoned in a much more celebratory voice. For the real is too much with us. What we crave, and increasingly what we get, is more artificialization.

Although Walter Benjamin lamented the loss of the aura of the artist and the fate of “The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” it is more the current situation that the mastery of the real and the over-rationalization of our existence threaten the sacred aura of the wondrous. Rather than further elitist rationalist criticisms of Disney, computer games, Las Vegas, plastic surgery, McDonald’s, cybersex, and megachurches (of the sort offered by Baudrillard and Eco in their critiques of hyperreal-

ity), we need a greater appreciation of the attractive side of such artificialization.

Let us take as examples three related artificial sources of pleasure: *pachinko* parlors, gambling, and that Mecca of the artificial, Las Vegas. Each offers a seemingly mind-numbing artificial world that is all too easy and tempting to ridicule. Yet each of these artificial enclaves offers a haven from the even more mind-numbing reality of the world outside its confines.

It is estimated that one out of every four Japanese people plays *pachinko* regularly. The steel balls placed into these vertical pinball-like machines garner an expenditure of \$300 billion a year, or considerably more than the annual Japanese defense budget. Despite rumored ties to the Mafia-like *Yakuza*, playing *pachinko* is a legal form of gambling. But more than this, *pachinko* offers an escape from purposefulness, an escape from self. As Richie (2003: 121) observes:

The various pressures of city life are ... felt strongly in Japan, and *pachinko* is a big city phenomenon... Although originally the patrons may have been the jobless and the hopeless, now it is those for whom the job is not enough. These repair to the *pachinko* parlour as do others to further areas of addiction – bars for example. Like people in bars, those in the *pachinko* halls feel no pain. Instead, it might be argued, they are experiencing a sort of bliss. This is because they are in the pleasant state of being occupied, with none of the consequences of thinking about what they are doing or considering what any of it means. They have learned the art of turning off. In this attainment boredom is requisite. Yet some kind of activity – the droning of prayers or the clicking of the balls – is also necessary. The ritual may seem empty but it is not. It is filled with nothing. Oblivion is achieved.

We begin to see in this analysis a willing absorption by the artificial. If this seems irrational, this is a distanced judgment that misses the phenomenological point of such activity.

Allen's (1995) observations of the irrationality of

his own gambling addiction may offer the missing phenomenological perspective on the pursuit of the non-self through mindless absorption in an artificial world:

Gambling invites me to take an hour's recess from adulthood, to play in a well-demarcated sandbox of irrationality and to look at the world as a magical place, which of course it is when the light hits it at the right angle. Those people who stubbornly remain adults and who look upon gambling's happy meaninglessness from within will see a phalanx of games that from an adult's wintry perspective you cannot hope to master. Those adults will see me, and the people sitting next to me, giving our money away week after week to people who do not love us (1995: 315).

But we must go further into the belly of the gambling beast – to Las Vegas – in order to more fully appreciate what is going with such artificial and “irrational” pursuits.

Calling Las Vegas the place “...where the death of God is staged as the spectacle of the Kingdom of God on Earth” (1999: 170), Taylor (1999) observes the pleasurable nothingness of the city:

In the hot sands of Vegas's silicon lights, the transcendence of the real vanishes, leaving nothing in its wake. In the dark light of this nothingness, it appears that what is is what ought to be. When this word of acceptance is actively embraced, the Holy Land ceases to be a distant dream and the Kingdom becomes virtually real (1999: 201).

In other words, nothingness comes to be realized as the utopia we seek.

We see a similar celebration of artificiality and nothingness in such diverse contexts as Andy Warhol's brand art, Disneyland (e.g. Doctorow 2003), and Disneyfied religion (Lyon 2000). Warhol called his atelier “The Factory” and proclaimed that everyone should be a machine. He also said, “Some critics called me Nothingness Himself and that didn't really help my sense of existence any. Then I

realized that existence itself is nothing and I felt better” (Warhol 1975: 7).

Here too we see the annihilation of self as a kind of freedom, but a freedom obtained without any of the dedicated meditation of the Buddhist monk, the self abnegation of Hindu or Muslim fakir, or the discipline of the cross-legged *zazen* practitioner. And while Warhol’s art may seem to celebrate the real thing (whether Brillo pads, Campbell’s Soup cans, or celebrities), it only produced an *image* of these things and ultimately, through repetition, it desensitizes and anesthetizes us to reality.

That Disneyland is quintessentially artificial is hardly a surprise. It was, after all, the primary target of both Baudrillard and Eco in their critiques of the hyperreal – the more than real, better than real, hyped reality. But while its production may be hyperreal, Disneyland’s consumption is instead hyporeal – less than real. To the people queuing to glide through “It’s a Small World,” this is less of an engaging magic kingdom than a small passive world whose consumption by park visitors barely differs from that of couch potatoes watching television or zombie-like denizens milling through the shopping mall. And in each of these hyporeal cases of consumption, these are our choices rather than something imposed upon us. We choose to veg-out or zone-out in these places, much as we choose to “get stupid” or “get wasted” on mind-numbing drugs. We do so to seek a non-self not all that different from the non-self of Buddhism.

Disneyfied religion should not be surprising either. As Lyon (2000) points out, by any account religion is all about transcending mundane reality. It’s just that in this purportedly postmodern age, people want from religion what Henry Maier called “an easier, faster, no-fuss, microwaveable God” (Lyon 2000: 136). What is striking about both Disneyland and Disneyfied religion is the easy pleasure found in the empty rituals of participating in the nothingness of their artificiality. They offer predictability, reassurance, and thus the chance to detach the self from the demands of what we take to be reality. While producing Disneyland or McDonald’s may require active employee management of emotions

(e.g. Hochschild 1983; Van Maanen & Kunda 1989; Ritzer 1993), consuming them is a much easier and less thoughtful experience.

In the *pachinko* parlor, gambling, Las Vegas, Warhol, Disney, Disneyfied religion, television watching, mall shopping, and McDonald’s patronage, we can sense the exquisite contradiction of the artificial. By providing an alternative to the all too real world (RW for short in VR [Virtual Reality] parlance), what remains is nothing, or as Boyle described it, “There’s nothing there. Nothing contained in nothing. Nothing at all” (1998: 691). At the same time, this nothingness can provide a pleasing escape from somethingness; from, in paraphrase of William Wordsworth, the world that is too much with us. To be sure, this is not the intense pleasure of ecstasy or the transcendence of epiphany. Nor is it the non-materialistic existence that Wordsworth had in mind. But on the other hand, neither is it the nothingness of hopelessness, despondency, nihilism, cynicism, or numbness that Ritzer (2004) sees in imposed corporate globalization or that Postman (1993) sees in the march of “technopoly.” It is rather a small state of mindless bliss that we freely choose and that acts as an interlude between harsh acts of reality.

Two novels that best capture this state of mild pleasure and mindless bliss are Julian Barnes’ (1990) *History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* and Haruki Murakami’s (1993) *Hardboiled Wonderland and the End of the World*. The two books offer different scenarios in which the lead character opts for nothingness or artificiality over a real world with real pleasures. In the last half chapter of Barnes’ imaginative book, the lead character awakes to find himself in heaven. There he learns that he is corporeally intact and can have anything he wishes or else he can choose to have his consciousness killed off forever now or later. After experiencing all the pleasures he can envision, including getting his golf game down to 18, meeting the world’s most famous people (both living and dead), shopping for anything and everything, winning at Wimbledon, setting a world record in the marathon, excelling at various other sports, making love to the world’s most beautiful women,

and eating and drinking the world's most exotic concoctions, he eventually becomes bored and opts to be annihilated as have all those who preceded him. In Murakami's postmodern tale the split-brain narrator is instead offered a choice between living in one half of his mind in an imaginary world of unicorns, a library, meaningless tasks, and a walled-in city and living in the other half of his mind in a real world in which he faces eventual death. He chooses the artificially constructed world over the real world. He has succeeded at nothing less than overcoming the reality of living in the material world. That is, he has succeeded in achieving a nothing existence.

Both of these tales are metaphors for the choices we make daily, for example in watching television rather than doing something more active and less artificial. We – especially, but not exclusively, those of us in the more affluent world – live in a world of post-abundance, in which we can pretty much have it all. But it all seems less and less appealing. In recognizing that the world is too much with us, we reveal a craving for a less materialistic, less burdensome, less imperfect, and less demanding world. The only way we are likely to find such a life is by embracing artificiality. There is a definite irony in rejecting nature worship in favor of the worship of the artificial as a source of release from other artificial parts of our life. But Thoreau's Walden is full of mosquitoes, hard work, and precious few creature comforts. There is further irony in the fact that we willingly pay for the privilege of a less materialistic world in places like Esalen (a spa). Simplicity does not come cheaply these days. And yet another irony is the tyranny of the machine and possession maintenance in the prosthetic iPods, computers, televisions, and other artificial devices needed to temporarily free us from reality. But to instead rely on our own imaginations is increasingly perceived as too much work. It puts us too much in touch with our selves rather than offering purposeless escape from the self.

Clearly our growing preference for artificiality, and the nothingness and anesthetization it offers,

represents a significant cultural phenomenon. There are likely some important cultural differences in this preference as well. Cultures differ in their seriousness versus playfulness, their independence versus interdependence, their religiosity versus agnosticism, their affluence versus post-affluence, and in other ways that will likely influence choices involving sources of artificiality and the manner in which it is pursued. But our expanding embrace of artificialization is very real.

## References

- Allen, Edward 1995: Penny Ante. In: Mike Tronnes (ed.), *Literary Las Vegas*. New York: Henry Holt & Company, pp. 313–324.
- Barnes, Julian 1990: *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*. New York: Vintage.
- Boyle, T. Coraghessan 1998: Filthy with Things. In: T. C. Boyle *Stories*. London: Penguin, pp. 675–691.
- Doctorow, Cory 2003: *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*. New York: Tor.
- Hochschild, Arlie 1983: *The Managed Heart*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lyon, David 2000: *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Murakami, Haruki 1993: *Hardboiled Wonderland and the End of the World*. New York: Vintage.
- Postman, Neal 1993: *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*. New York: Vintage.
- Richie, Donald 2003: *The Image Factory: Fads & Fashions in Japan*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Ritzer, George 1993: *The McDonaldization of Society*. Newbury Park, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Ritzer, George 2004: *The Globalization of Nothing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Taylor, Mark C. 1999: *About Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Van Maanen, John & Gideon Kunda 1989: Real Feelings: Emotional Expression and Organizational Culture. In: L.L. Cummings & Barry M. Staw (eds.), *Research in Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 11. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, pp. 43–104.
- Warhol, Andy 1975: *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Zerubavel, Eviatar 1991: *The Fine Line: Making Distinctions in Everyday Life*. New York: Free Press.