CONSUMING ICONS AND IDENTITY CREATION: 
BYZANTINE AND VISUAL CRITICISM

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Introduction

Indeed, not only the arts, but all the means of communication in the modern political economy—television, print journalism, film, radio—seem to share in a global network of what might be called “mediolatry” or “semiotic fetishism.” “Image-making” in advertising, propaganda, communications, and the arts has replaced the production of commodities in the vanguard of advanced capitalist societies.¹

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The world we live in is fueled with brand images enforced by corporations in any possible forms of media. While consumers are faced with their increased depersonalization under capitalist conditions, profit-driven corporations strive to have concrete and distinct identities. Taking on the innate ideological power of images, agents of capital manufacture brand images to present the abstract character² of a corporation as one living being. The power of image to create identities leads to Peter Berger’s account on culture creation in claiming that humans experience the world through analytical methods by continually constructing and restructuring it into three spheres: externalization, objectification, and internalization.³ In the first sphere, the cognitive process is materialized in social, cultural and physical objects such as public institutions, technological, and artistic products. Objectification takes place when these externalized forms of thought acquire an independent existence, defined as culture, outside the human consciousness that acts as a protective shield against the forces of nature. The internalization process occurs when the cultural products interact with human mind as active learning tools that change behavior and way of living. While “we are creators of our world…we are in turn shaped by our creation and become one of its objects.”⁴ Berger’s insight casts light on today’s consumer culture and its impact on human life where images of objects became sensual appearances aimed to increase the sale of goods in a supersaturated market.

In today’s economy corporations market their ‘personhood’ through brand images as reality to prompt consumers into not only buying products, but also worshiping them. Considering the Byzantine concept of symbolic realism in analyzing iconic images, Jenkins develops a new

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² The abstract character of corporations refers to a legal business association that is composed of workers, industrial units, shopping malls, and products.
approach to visual criticism that will incite viewers to see through the illusory aspects of consuming images. Witnessing a devaluation of visual criticism, I explore how the Byzantine aesthetics can serve as an active form of criticizing contemporary society. In this paper, I look beyond the seemingly ordinary images of the market to investigate their capacity to change identities and conceal interests and structures of power.

The paper is organized into four parts. The first section focuses on the role of commercial images in the objectification/commodification of human identity by drawing parallels between Chatterjee’s account of symbolic abstraction, Baudrillard’s notion of sign-value and Haug’s theory of commodity aesthetics. Additionally, I will elaborate on the sexualized nature of consumption culture and its effect on human senses and behavior. In the second part, I theoretically situate Guy Debord’s notion of the spectacle and the artistic techniques of derive and detournement employed by Situationist International group. I argue that Debord failed in criticizing the image produced by culture industry as he aimed for an undifferentiated oneness between the subject and object that violated the balance between humans and nature. In the third section, I discuss the Byzantine iconoclastic debate and the concept of symbolic realism in relation to the contemporary advertising industry. The fourth part focuses on Jenkins’ analysis of iPod ads based on theoretical ideas from Byzantine aesthetics. In addition, Leonid Ouspensky’s account on Byzantine visual techniques will be considered here. I conclude with a summary and some final remarks drawn from this paper.

I. Faith in Vision and the Battle between Images: Symbolic Abstraction, Sign-Value, and Commodity Aesthetics

But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have seen the LORD. But he said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe. And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them. Jesus cometh, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, Peace be unto you. Then saith He to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing. And Thomas answered and said unto him, My LORD and my God.⁵

John 20:24-28

At the heart of St. Thomas’ statement lies the idiom ‘seeing is believing,’ which seems to be the most profound belief in contemporary visual culture. The faith in vision leads to the interpretation that what is seen is ‘easily’ and ‘correctly’ understood. In today’s ready-made world of codes, signs, and symbols the viewer acts like Thomas the Believer as one relies on the ability to perceive with his/her eyes as the most important of all human senses. Consumers take the aestheticization of goods, e.g. the ‘beautiful’ packaging, as a promise for a ‘real’ happiness. The conviction that what we see must be the ‘truth,’ that an attractive label represents the actual physical body of a commodity, is successfully employed by corporations in controlling the visual stimuli of the market place to dictate consumers’

⁵ http://www.biblegateway.com/John 20:24-28
choice when shopping. For example, pictures of fluffy cotton fiber emphasizing the warmth of winter clothing are ostentatiously illustrated on labels to mislead the buyer in seeing the actual quality of the garment. Ipsita Chatterje defines these pictures as symbolic abstractions of the commodity’s use-value that “began masquerading as the goods themselves” offering only a metaphorical idea of the actual product.\(^6\)

Economist Louis E. Boone clarifies that the transition from the barter to monetized society generated a separation between the maker of goods and the customer.\(^8\) This division expanded under capitalist condition, leaving room for the development of exchange-value. Exchange-value is an abstract term that indicates the rate of transaction cost between the utility of goods, e.g. use-value, such as the nutritional quality of food or the warmth of winter clothes, and a universal mediator corresponding to a definite amount of money.\(^9\) In the capitalist economy, the use-value became an incentive for sellers to invent trendy symbolic abstractions in the form of advertisements to overexpose the utility of commodities before the public eye. This allowed for an increase in their exchange value. Through today's visual representations of symbols, cartoons, and signs, symbolic abstractions have taken a social function that bonds the consumer to the commodity while completing the separation from the producer.

Under the pressure of market competition, products with the same content appear differentiated through labels that are constantly changed in their shape, color, and description to meet the financial objectives set out by corporations.\(^10\) The ongoing battle between images applies to “an economic enterprise just as much to a political party, to a film star, or to a cake of soap.”\(^11\) In this context, the individual gaze is manipulated to see as a homogeneous group of people that follows a similar pattern of consumption. Consumers consistently covet purchasing products such as clothing, electronic gadgets, and cosmetics to give them a sense of identity similar to the popular faces of the entertainment industry.\(^12\) As a result, the subject-object relationship is mediated

\(^6\) In *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx explains that every labor-product has a use-value that facilitates the satisfaction of a human need. When labor-products are traded as a commodity in markets, in addition to use-value, they acquire an exchange-value that is translated as money.


\(^8\) Louis E. Boone, *Classics in Consumer Behavior*, Tulsa, OK, University of Tulsa, 1977

\(^9\) According to Robert C. Tucker, money is the “alienated ability of mankind,” an instrument for humans to accomplish all that they are inept of making (Tucker, 1972).

\(^10\) The permanent change in design of labels limits the amount of time, called by Marx the *use-lifetime*, that a product exists on the market. For a detailed description of the term *use-lifetime* see Haug’s explanation of aesthetic innovation in footnote 34.


\(^12\) Guy Adorno describes in *The Society of the Spectacle* how people seek to copy ideals, enforced through advertisements, which can easily shift from household products to propaganda for Fuhrer. The ultimate purpose of culture industry is to present images that would make people give up the lifestyle they previously had.
through “the compound eyes [in] which groups of [consumers share the same] view of the world.”

The collective gaze we experience in a shopping mall and watching repetitive advertisements on television are some examples of seeing through the compound eyes. Marcuse explains that “…people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment.”

Thus, humans become mere extensions of their chosen products by creating social groups as “categories of persons” based on “categories of objects.” Just as labels give a face to a product, the product displays the identity of specific social groups.

In today’s cultural industry, Baudrillard and Marcuse observe an increase in objectification/commodification of the human being. Moreover, they both agree that the regime of consumption generates a loss of subjectivity through the transition from the individual to the compound gaze of his/her cohort of consumers. According to Stewart Ewan the effect on “human consequences have been substantial and include alienation, disappearing bodies/lost subjectivity… and vast excesses of overconsumption resulting in waste and [visual] pollution.”

Bourdieu claims that the process of objectification is not unidirectional from the commercial world of images and product packages toward the consuming eye because at the level of symbolic consumption the commodity-consumer relation is not clear-cut. Corporations are now increasingly generating products based on consumer demand-driven as opposed to manufacturing for generalized consumption. This consumer-oriented approach gives the freedom to personalize the relationship with a commodity. As such, Bourdieu stresses the power of social groups in consumption choices to display their class identity arguing that “human beings are motivated by the need to reproduce a collective pattern of preference based on class demarcation.”

Although, a consumer may have the authority to control his/her consumption pattern and resist objectification to a certain degree, Bourdieu agrees with Baudrillard on the significance of vision to objectify human identity and build “consuming groups.”

To that end, Baudrillard challenges Marx’s concept of ‘fetishism of commodities’ in the capitalist consumption. It is not the fetishization of the use-value through industrial production, but rather the symbolic meaning of consuming images that changes human behavior into “a sort of high-tech robotization of human nature.”

Baudrillard rethinks the notion of commodity in the postmodern world by adding the concept of sign-value to the use-value and exchange

13 Chatterjee, p. 294
14 Herbert Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man, London: Abacus, 1964, p. 9
15 Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings, Cambridge, Polity, 1988, p. 16
16 Qtd. in Hetrick, p. 108
18 Chatterje, p. 297
19 For Marx, commodity fetishism is the process through which the relationship between people is transformed in a relationship between things.
20 In his PBS series The Public Mind: Consuming Images from 1989, Bill Moyers refers to consuming images as pictures that promote consumption.
value. His new term focuses on the “symbol manipulation through packaging that harnesses a group vision, producing a...consumer cohort which is increasingly objectified in its homogenous demand for [a socially constructed need].” The sign-value is a symbolic visualization of the intrinsic message of images displayed in any form of advertisement in the fashion industry, architecture, politics, etc. Furthermore, the sign-value invests products with an active role in structuring and controlling human’s desires and way of life. Baudrillard perceives social groups as “hollow shells” where humans are commoditized into powerless objects-like identities through heightened symbolic consumption.

When the sign-value of an image is collectively consumed and revered, the image acquires the status like that of a popular culture icon. The icon is employed by individuals in fetishistic conspicuous consumption to express their membership to a specific cultural group, as for example, buying organic products, Apple gadgets, or IKEA furniture. The importance of image in shaping human identity is revealed, as Ewen states, “in a world where many people feel very insignificant and anonymous and unseen and unimportant, one of the main ways we have access to becoming important is by becoming an image.” Roger Burrow and Catherine Marsh make clear that the sign-value of certain products has the power to cultivate consumers’ narcissistic inclination to identity and provoke segregation and exclusivist societies. While the purchase of certain products can provide impetus for narcissistic attitudes based on social class distinction, corporations advertise sign-values to harness the individual gaze in standardized consumption patterns.

Haug upholds the importance of Baudrillard’s notion of sign-value in the creation of ads to promote seductive illusions that control consumer’s need rather than serve it. The aestheticization of products appeal to human desires by visually promising more use-value than the product can actually deliver. These illusions, aimed at sensuality for the increase of sales in a supersaturated market, are defined in Haug’s theory of commodity aesthetics as an appearance of use-value that is detached from the object itself. Haug explains that “sensuality in this context becomes the vehicle of an economic function, the subject and object of an economically functional fascination. Whoever controls

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23 Chatterje, p. 304
27 Haug explains that commodity aesthetics originates from the opposing standpoints of the exchange relationship between buyer and seller. The term is employed to define sensual understanding; that draws attention to subjective sensuality and the function of the sensual object. (Haug, 8) The ideal of commodity aesthetics is to offer products that have the least amount of use-value and the highest appealing quality (defined as seductive illusions) that would bait buyers to collect capital via exchange-value. Haug argues that “commodity aesthetics is one of the most powerful forces in capitalist society. It counters the traditional ideological powers – notably religion, education and art – and infiltrates them to a certain extent” (Haug, 10).
the product’s appearance can control the fascinated public by appealing to them sensually.”

Replacing the actual *use-value* with the promise of *use-value*, the commodity becomes a means to provoke the viewer’s greed and stimulate consumerism.

If for Baudrillard the dichotomy between the subject and object collapses in the sphere of culture industry by degrading humans to the status of mere objects, for Haug, the image of commodity becomes an independent abstract entity in the process of its aestheticization. Thus, two reversed actions take place: Firstly, humans become objectified through the products they consume and secondly, under consumers’ gaze the commodity suffers a process of dematerialization in which its image detaches from the object itself.

Considering the previous observation on the biblical story of St. Thomas, one can make a parallel between the ultimate faith in vision of today’s consumers and the idiom ‘seeing is believing.’ The parallel suggests that the trust in vision is deeply rooted in human history and one needs to rethink the way visual perception is harnessed by symbolic cues. There is a need to find alternatives in mediating the relationship between consumers and commodities. By misapprehending the *use-value* of commodities one is susceptible to overconsumption and commoditization of his/her subjectivity. This leads consumers to their ultimate reduction as mere instruments in the dynamics of capitalist production and distribution systems.

### The sexualized nature of consumption culture

According to Chatterjee, the aestheticization of femininity in image-consuming industry has an essential impact on how both female and male consumers “connect in their cognitive ability with commodities.”

The gendered nature of advertising culture determines how *symbolic abstractions* objectify human identity.

From a historical perspective, Solomon-Godeau explains that the role played by a female face and body in the process of commoditization began after the French Revolution along with the solidification of the bourgeois sexual ideals.

The beautification of women for the masculine vision through product packaging transforms gender stereotypes into the most profitable icons for the libidinal capitalist economy. With the development of commercial and industrial photography, capitalism flourished by positioning iconic images of attractive young females as objects for collective voyeurism. These sexualized icons blur the distinction between the corporeal feminine body and its visual representations. For Solomon-Godeau, the difference between “image of a woman” and the “woman as image” no longer exists in the sexualized realm of commodities.

Furthermore, Chatterjee clarifies that “women’s own vision of herself reflects the social gaze of what she should be, such that in the market place her individual vision is harnessed by

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29 Chatterje, p. 298.
31 Solomon-Godeau, p. 128.
those symbols she considers congruent with the identity she wishes to project." Thus, the commoditization of female subjectivity in a phallocentric marketplace constructs fake identities based on social stereotypes that control women’s understanding of her own life. However, women’s position as ‘victims’ of advertisements remains unclear as they can also consciously contribute to the social conventions and stereotypes of the ideal type of femininity by indulging in the consumption of goods. Rachel Bowlby states that every form of advertisement benefits from showing attractive images of a “pretty girl.” Mass voyeurism puts pressure on the amount of time a product can exist on the market by demanding its outward appearance to be continuously redesigned to fit the shifting trends and keep up with the new fashion expectations. In this context, the gendered aspect of consumption culture initiates a tendency of all commodities to assume a sexual meaning to some extent. Haug explains that the sensual stimulating illusion of commodity aesthetics influences buyers to voyeuristically participate in the devotion of all types of cultural icons that corrupts and alienates human behavior. To exemplify his point of view, he gives the example of how the sexual intercourse is commoditized in the form of prostitution, consisting of a “pimp as the capitalist agent and the brothel as factory.”

The use-value of prostitution is achieved through direct physical contact. At the industrial capitalist level, sexuality is replicated and massively commercialized through video and picture media. Haug defines the capitalist valorization of sexuality as aesthetic abstraction, which is a form of sexual repression that is satisfied through voyeurism. In this case, the sexual satisfaction is based on a use-value that is purely illusory in nature. By blocking access to the tangible sexual object, commodity aesthetics encourages voyeurism, which acts as a replacement of the actual pleasure offered by the physical contact with a prostitute/commodity. This illusory satisfaction creates a new form of sexual fulf...
might be difficult to achieve in a real sensual contact. Furthermore, voyeurism triggers a universal sexualization of the human condition. Haug explains that:

… it is not the sexual object which takes on the commodity form, but the tendencies of all objects of use in commodity-form to assume a sexual form to some extent. That is the sensual need and the means by which it is satisfied are rendered non-specific. …Thus by taking on sexuality as an assistant, exchange-value transforms itself into sexuality.\(^{37}\)

Since the consumer “first [purchases] by vision and then by other senses,”\(^{38}\) the sexual angle of eye-catching labels are best employed by corporations in making evident the sign-value of products to promote symbolic identities. Considering Haug’s analogy of the commoditization of sexual intercourse through voyeurism, one understands how the estrangement of humanity from the real life takes place as stated in Ewan’s comments on the effect of consuming images over human senses and behavior.

II. The Critique of Visual Culture: Debord’s notion of the spectacle and the role of art

And just as the culture industry “impresses the stamp of sameness on everything” (DE, 120), the spectacle is a process of trivialization and homogenization (SS § 165)…. The cultural industry is a sphere where lies can be “reproduced at will” (DE, 135); the spectacle a sphere “where deceit deceives itself” (SS § 2). In the spectacle, even “truth” is a moment of falsehood (SS § 9); in the cultural industry, even the most evident propositions, such as the claim that the trees are green, or the sky blue, are nothing but “so many cryptograms for factory chimneys and service stations.”… (DE, 149). The spectacle is a veritable “colonization” of everyday life (SI, 6/22; SIA, 70)…\(^{39}\)

Guy Debord defined the dissemination of symbolic abstractions largely through film, sports, and art as the spectacle.\(^{40}\) In his book The Society of the Spectacle, Debord states that commodities, both in a tangible and intangible form, are transformed into an ensemble of independent beings that overpower real life. Huyssen reaffirms today that “the commodity itself has become image, representation, spectacle.”\(^{41}\)

Debord’s critique of the spectacle makes known that agents of capital, through a selection of pictures and symbols, transform the modern fragmented culture\(^{42}\) into a fictitious unified world of images in which people are invited to find everything they lack in life. In the illusory sphere of the spectacle, commodities do not compete for the attention of consumers in terms of their tangible content (use-value), but only at the level of their brand images. Chatterjee explains that this artificial world becomes “the ‘epitome of reality’ and the ‘real world’ becomes a mere incarnation of these images.”\(^{43}\)

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37 Haug, p. 55
38 Chatterjee, p. 309
39 Anselm Jappe, p. 106.
40 Haug’s theory of commodity aesthetics takes its roots from Debord’s critique of the spectacle.  
42 I elaborate on the fragmentation of modern culture in the following paragraphs.
43 Here the notion of ‘image’ refers to Haug’s
In his theory of alienation, Debord agrees with Haug that the sexualized visual codes, which dominate much of advertisement industry, have a profound impact on violating individual’s subjectivity. Due to the commodity nature of capitalist society, every aspect of life grows to be separated by the opposition between exchange-value and use-value transforming economy from “a means into an end.”

Debord understands the alienation of people from nature not as a simple discontent with various aspects of contemporary life but as an existential contradiction “between humanity and the forces that humanity has itself created but that have now entered into opposition to it in the guise of independent beings.” These autonomous entities that are embodied in the form of commodities stay alive and function only at the level of image in the spectacle.

The Marxist philosopher, George Lukacs, states that all the problems humans have to face in the capitalist world ultimately lead “back to…the riddle of the commodity-structure.” Lukacs’ account on reification in History and Class Consciousness had a strong impact on Dedord’s notion of alienation. In the description of reification, the spectacle acquires sexual meaning through the fetishism of commodities, a process whereby the physical objects assume human characteristics. This human attribute of the spectacle encourages consumers to forge commoditized identities in the attempt to emulate various popular cultural icons. Commodity fetishism objectifies the way people perceive each other by leaving humans in an inactive position of listening and seeing everything that the spectacle dictates. Additionally, because of “the fragmentation of production procedures that seem to unfold quite independently of the worker” social relations are transformed into “things”, “facts” and “laws.” The division of labor in the market economy had major consequences on the disappearance of any unitary aspect from society separating individuals from one another. In this context, the spectacle reunifies into a common visual stream all the isolated spheres of society to hide the effect of impoverishment and alteration on people’s knowledge caused by the division of labor. The consumer is invited to rediscover a sense of community solely in the spectacle, which is detached from every part of life, and who “monopolizes all communication to its own advantage and makes it one way only.”

Hence, Debord in 1960s led the Situationist International group, who believed that art could bring a liberating social change to help consumers overcome their contemplative mind-set from the

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44 Jappe, p. 103.
45 Ibid.
47 Jappe, p. 115.
48 Adorno argues that television “‘holds the possibility of smuggling into [its] duplicate world whatever is thought to be advantageous for the real one,’ for it ‘obscures the real alienation between people and between people and things. It becomes a substitute for a social immediacy that is being denied to people.’” (qtd. in Jappe, 107) As such, we witness the infantilization of human need.
confined relationship with the spectacle. The Situationists constructed collective spaces and aesthetic situations through the techniques of derive and detournement where the quality of the moment could be experienced as active games between “poetic subjects and objects.”50 The notion of derive, meaning ‘drift’ in English, was to create unintentional disruptions of social settings with the attempt to comprehend the totality of everyday experience. By breaking the conventional understanding of architectural styles and built environments, the Situationists aimed to explore, without preconceptions, the veracity of actually leaving in inhabited locations. Detournement (diversion) tactics were the subversive methods of unveiling the depletion and fragmentation of human activity by the dominance of the capitalist system. For example, changing the captions from billboards, posters, and comic books to reveal the crude reality developed by the forces of production [uncompleted sentence]. Situationist artists removed traditional forms of art making from their commercialized context such as painting, sculpture, architecture, literature, music and film. They attempted to re-contextualize preexisting artistic modes of expression to create new combinations and environmental relationships that would restructure individual experience and save humanity from its obedience before the aestheticized ‘reality’ of the spectacle.

Debord claimed that after Modernism, art became an anachronistic language unable to express the development of social conditions. In a market economy, which transformed traditional neighbor-


51 Jappe, p. 126.
52 Adorno and Debord agree that the productive technological forces played an essential role in liberating society from the traditional economic necessities. The development of today’s scientific performances could actually offer everyone a paradise-like lifestyle, raising human standards of living from the survival mode to the level where everyone can experience a genuine life. But the capitalist social order and its organizers perpetuate the ‘survival’ way of living by subordinating every aspect of life to the false imperatives of outer necessities. In their effort to preserve the social hierarchies based on exchange-value, agents of capital block any further social development alienating the body and soul by forcing people to conform under the socio-technical division of labor. Once the “physical survival is no longer in jeopardy”, the “dictatorial minorities” of the economy constrain “humanity to fresh mutilations that are now not natural but social in origin” (Jappe, 111). Referring to the corruption of humanity through mass consumption Adorno clarifies that “a mankind which no longer knows want […] will begin to have an inkling of the delusory, futile nature of all the arrangements hitherto made in order to escape want, which used wealth to produce want on a larger scale” (Adorno, 156-57). Debord agrees with the previous statement saying that “the reason there is nothing beyond augmented survival, and no end to its growth, is that survival itself belongs to the realm of dispossession: it may gild poverty, but it cannot transcend it” (Debord, 1967, 44). Thus, Situationist International group believed that art has the potential to bring societies in a state of awareness that liberates humans from the
paradox in the role of Modernist art to replace “what is missing from society” just by showing “the images of those lacks.”  

The belief that “a part of the totality, [art as an autonomous form of knowledge], can replace the totality itself, [all aspects of one’s life], is manifestly contradictory.” This contradiction left Modern art bereft on any critical role in an age where one witnesses the complete triumph of exchange-value. Thus, art for Debord became like the spectacle, a separate sphere outside the real needs of humans acting as a fictitious language for an imaginary society.

The critique against the spectacle and its “visible freezing of life”, which stops the flow of existence and communication, implies the empowerment of art to unify the individual’s subjectivity with the commodity/object that reins over humanity. Debord wanted to reconcile the subject and object into an absolute union by breaking the wall of the spectacle. In order for one to resist the reification of his/her subjectivity under market conditions and bourgeois ideology, he believed that the subject should escape in artistic adventures as through the techniques of detournement and derive. Aiming for that libratory social change through these events, Situationist International group perceived art more as a direct apprehension of aesthetic emotions without the intermediation of the traditional visual representations of paintings, drawing, etc.

In present day, Debord’s prospect of discovering a path to an authentic living through art is barely convincing. Advocating the oneness of subject and object, Debord ignored humans’ wish to impose their identity onto objects by recognizing themselves everywhere as themselves. In the desire to appropriate the world, the subject feels the urge to devour the object by imprinting it with his/her identity. In this process of subjective identification, the objects are divided in different categories by losing their particular qualities. Therefore, the subject is not able to see the actual identity of the object, as he perceives just what it has itself formerly provided. Debord’s notion of unity would actually negate the actual meaning of objects transforming them into ‘suppressed forms’ that conceal their original identity. Wishing for the object and subject to become one would only alienate human beings from the real world by turning them into a thing among other things. The subjective identification of objects objectifies consumers, as “it is the identity imposed by the subject that deprives man of his identity.” In Adorno’s view, the belief in a complete fusion between the subject and object is casuistic as they are both parts of a whole and can be neither diminished to a definitive union nor completely isolated from each other. Looking for an undifferentiated oneness of the subject and object, would actually violate the balance between man and nature.

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54 Jappe, p. 107.
55 Qtd. in Jappe, p. 115. It should be noted that Debord’s critique of the spectacle extends into a critique of objects as material things in general.

57 Jappe, p. 116.
58 Adorno, p. 174.
59 Adorno argues that a “unity of subject and object did not exist in the past: man never emerged out of some essence or in-itself” (Adorno, 1990, 191). The notion of unity through the identifying mode of thinking is a
In opposition to Debord’s tactics in challenging the corporate aesthetics of commodities, Byzantine aesthetics offer a visual technique that communicates the difference between the subject and object without doing any harm to either one of them. In the next section I propose to explore the visual inquiry of corporate images based on the Orthodox symbolic realism.

III. The Critique of Visual Culture: The Byzantine symbolic realistic mode of seeing

Corporations seek to develop consumers with “brand loyalty” devoted to their commodities and beholden to their brand image. …This raises the question: How does a corporation, one obviously committed to the vulgarities of profit and materialism, inspire the devotion of a cult following?

Eric Jenkins

Commercial image-makers promote symbolic abstractions that claim transcendent and spiritual meaning of the products “while avoiding perceptions of a blasphemous materialism.” Chatterjee explains that in order to hide the ‘immorality’ of profits, promotional discourses in the late capitalist market make use of nature’s symbolic value to advertise ‘environmentally right’ messages. For example, organic and locally harvested metaphysical understanding that started since the animistic period with the difference between the physical part of a plant or mountain and their disembodied spirits. Since Parmenides, the classification of things by type based on a hierarchical system began with seeing the “I” as the constant identical entity throughout time.


based goods packaged in biological materials with agricultural themed labels are promoted to support recycling. Another popular message is to advocate animal rights causes and eco-sustainability through products that were not tested on animals. Referring to the commoditization of nature in the post-modern age, Escobar states that “‘the goodness’, ‘revitalizing quality’, ‘therapeutic quality’ of nature as sign-value has been symbolically packaged, rendering it artificial.” The slogan, Going Organic is globalized without difficulty making nature a standardized international symbol. In this context, the objectification of consumers takes place through their wish to be affiliated with the prestige of organic consumption or “because of a popular desire to be a politically conscious consumer.”

Employing the spiritual effect of nature, untouched by industrialization, presents the product as non-artificial making consumers less susceptible to mass-produced goods and deflects the attention from the financial implications. Thus, corporations strategically appropriate the compound vision of shoppers to declare ‘the greater goal of humanity’ the purchasing of their products.

Benjamin defines capitalism as “a religion of pure cult.” Corporations employ the ideological power of images to market their abstractions as reality and prompt consumers into not only buying, but also worshiping their brand’s iconic images. Eric Jenkins argues that the ‘ritualistic’ nature of iconic images invite consumers into a cult following. The

icon is worshiped by viewing it in a specific manner that is known as *symbolic realistic*,65 where one recognizes an image as a blend of an abstract symbol and a realistic depiction of an object. As *symbolic realism* balances the abstract and the concrete, icons depict the transcendent in a concrete embodiment, allowing viewers to revere the message of images while deflecting the fear of their ideological implications. Furthermore, seen through the *symbolic realistic* mode, icons appear as a tangible embodiment of a metaphysical state revealing a “[quasi-]hypostasis of the spiritual and the material.”66 To better understand the concept of *symbolic realism*, Jenkins explores its use in Orthodox iconography, where it was originally developed in response to the Byzantine iconoclasm.67 Byzantine icons “address the simultaneous fear and respect for images by portraying a [quasi-]hypostasis of a spiritual quality.”68

The Byzantine dispute between the iconophiles (or iconodules), who loved the icons, and the iconoclasts, who fight against them, stems from the clash of the realistic and symbolic ways of apprehending an icon. Martin Jay associates the realistic mode as seeing with the human eye and the symbolic one with “the eye of the mind.”69 On one hand, visual perception is trusted for showing how things are in their materiality however, human sight is mistrusted for its tendency to deceive and confuse. On the other hand, ‘seeing with the mind' can convey significance and a sense of value to human life, although one could fear its ideological implications resulting in horrifying outcomes. Such fear, according to Jenkins, arouses when image-makers attempt to visually depict what is seen with the mental eye as a concrete representation. The phobia of these images fired up periods of iconoclasm throughout history accompanied by their destruction and the suppression of their makers.

The iconoclastic controversy in Byzantium occurred between 727 and 843 AD over the use of icons in churches. After the Quinisext Council (692 AD), which stated through in its canon 820 that Christ, the incarnated God, had to be represented in human form, and not in the ancient form of the lamb, the iconoclasts started an open fight against the icons and against iconodules. In 726 AD, the Emperor Leo III (717 - 741) issued his first official order forbidding the devotion of icons and their display in public spaces. In defense of icons, St. John of Damascus wrote the Apologetic Treatises against those decrying the Holy Images70—an important document that helped to reconcile the icon dispute in AD 787 during the Seventh Ecumenical Council from Nicaea. In the reign of the Constantine V (741 - 775) the

65 Robert N. Bellah explains that *symbolic realism* is an epistemological orientation that asserts the existential “reality” of religious symbols, without necessarily accepting their factual reality. For Bellah, *symbolic realism*, as a shared framework between contemporary language of theologians (the meaning and values of religion) and the language of scientist (the cannon of scientific objectivity), could have important implications for “the reintegration of our fragmented [visual] culture.” (Bellah, 8)
66 Jenkins, p. 470.
67 Iconoclasm means “the breaking of icons.”
68 Jenkins, p. 468.
70 [http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/johndamascus-images](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/johndamascus-images)
violence against the iconodules escalated and the icon makers were persecuted. After the death of Constantine V, his son Leo IV took a more tolerable position towards the iconodules, and permitted the organization of the Seventh Ecumenical Council that restored the worshiping of icons. As a result, Byzantine iconography flourished in the next centuries developing a mode of creating images identified as symbolic realism, which does not follow a realistic or a symbolic visual representation.

The iconoclasts understood the Byzantine icons solely from either a symbolic or a realistic perspective, both of which have sacrilegious implications. The impossibility of representing God in a concrete visual form by using earthly materials such as wood panels and tempera colors was the primary argument since God is referred to as omnipotent. The iconographer cannot overturn the original order between ‘the uncreated’ (God) and ‘the created’ (human being) by conceiving the divine through man-made objects. Icons focused on depicting Christ’s human-like figure, which generated a second conflict as it was considered demeaning His divine nature within the bounds of the material world. In showing only the material side of Christ—His created form—the icon maker falsifies and misleads the viewer on the ‘real’ nature of the divine. The iconophile defended themselves with the notion of hypostasis from the previously recounted claims of heresy arguing that the icons fail to illustrate the uncreated through a symbolic abstraction or the created through a realistic depiction of Christ’s body. The iconographer reveals a quasi-hypostasis of Jesus’ dual human and divine nature by equally combining his material and spiritual parts.

The Byzantine compositional aesthetic is based on the religious dualism of the following concepts: terrestrial and divine world, material and spiritual constitution of the human being, and the intellectual and the visual senses. Despite the fact that humans live on earth, it was believed that they belonged to the superior spiritual world. The incarnation of Jesus in the material world permitted the portrayal of God in Byzantine icons because He was now rationalized as a tangible entity through Jesus. Thus, from the iconophiles’ perspective, those who commit the true heresy, are the iconoclasts by rejecting the incarnation of Christ, “who was God’s image incarnate.” The incarnation of Jesus demands His visual understanding by depicting Him in a human form.

Bishop Auxentios argues that the Byzantine icons embody “a real image of that which it depicts. The image is in some way a ‘true’ form of the prototype, participating in it and integrally bound to it.” Bychkov states that iconophiles are influenced by the Neo-Platonist, Pseudo-Dionysius describes the organization of celestial and terrestrial world (including social structures) on a hierarchical order through which the divine knowledge is disseminated to humans in the form of illumination. He gives an essential role to aesthetic elements in the process of spiritual uplifting of human beings to God. The divine elevation is realized “by means of antinomical ‘likening’ to and ‘imitation’ of (mimesis), God.” (Bychkov, 321-323).

71 Pseudo-Dionysius describes the organization of celestial and terrestrial world (including social structures) on a hierarchical order through which the divine knowledge is disseminated to humans in the form of illumination. He gives an essential role to aesthetic elements in the process of spiritual uplifting of human beings to God. The divine elevation is realized “by means of antinomical ‘likening’ to and ‘imitation’ of (mimesis), God.” (Bychkov, 321-323).

72 Jenkins, p. 473.

Dionysius the Aeropagite, who argued that “symbols, images, signs, and representations perceived by the senses— including the sphere of art almost in its entirety—are one of the forms of conveyance of spiritual light to a human person.” The iconophiles view icons as a part of the divine that can be experienced through senses. The spiritual powers of the icons reside in their resemblance to the transcendental prototype. The contemplation of the prototype illustrated in the icon through the Byzantine techniques of light, inverse perspective, gesture, and color, helps the viewer transport his mind beyond the world of commodities. The austere visual feature of Byzantine aesthetics can brush aside the illusory nature of commodity’s image.

Following the Seventh Ecumenical Council, the Byzantine theologians encouraged believers to worship only icons that depict the prototype—the quasi-hypostasis of the material and the ineffable Christ. Consequently, the Orthodox Church continues to discourage the veneration of icons that portray a symbolic or a realistic portraiture of the Holy Spirit and Jesus. Ouspensky clarifies that the Byzantine symbolic realistic method of icon painting constructs a mode of seeing “somewhere between naturalistic realism and symbolic, abstract art.” This way of reading an image is figuratively defined by Jenkins as seeing with the “divine eye.” The divine eye appreciates the real value and suspiciously regards the ideological power of image to mislead the viewer. The quasi-hypostatic experience is made possible by apprehending, through the divine eye, the inherent fundamental quality of things and the spiritual in its transcendental truth. The symbolic realistic mode of seeing facilitates a unique marriage of subject/content and object/form at the level of image, thus making the Byzantine icon “neither wholly secular nor sacred, neither body nor spirit, neither concrete nor abstract, neither mere appearance nor mere representation, neither grossly material nor solely symbolic.”

Nowadays, the Orthodox icons are not just outdated museum items from the ancient Byzantine culture; on the contrary, they are a specific form of images, which incorporate a strong ideological force that can help contemporary imagemakers overcome new bouts of iconoclasm. Humans continued to respect and fear images throughout history and the iconoclastic controversy persists until today as evidenced in advertisement.

75 In Byzantine aesthetics every temporal object has its original model in an eternal world defined as the eternal prototype. Illustrations of Byzantine figures have an abstract and inorganic form signifying the essence of the human form. By contemplating the prototype presented in the icon, one can picture and transport his mind to the invisible eternal world. The contemplation implies the worshiping of the saints, which are depicted motionless, by fixating the eyes on the icons in an inert position. Therefore, icons are not only contemplated, but are also venerated. The veneration of the icon is justified through the idea that the image of the icon resembles the divine prototype. The strict rules of the Byzantine aesthetics in portraying the eternal prototype left no room for expressing personal ideas and the imagination of a particular artist.
77 Jenkins, p. 473.
78 Ibid.
industry. To escape skepticism and stimulate confidence in the purchase of their products, corporations adopt iconographic techniques to declare non-materialistic values or spiritual meaning as opposed to messages of financial gain and power.

According to Cara A. Finnegan, collective consciousness believes in photos as accurate depictions of reality—a conviction defined as the “documentary mode.” This mode refers to the trust one places in the realistic illustrations of a photograph as presentations of an objective, genuine world. Following the same line of thought, Roland Barthes refers to photographs as having the power to naturalize the story/fiction of images by making the claim of “having-been-there.” Today’s iconoclastic controversy becomes evident in the paradoxical use of photographic images in cultural industry. While a photographic image has the power to convince onlookers about its neutral stance in presenting authentic events, it can be used to disseminate information that reflect the interest of those advocating an ideology or belief. Jenkins exemplifies that “critics quickly viewed images as a way to advance claims that would be either illegal or unethical if expressed directly in words (such as cigarette smoking makes one youthful).” As such, consumers’ general suspicion and iconophobic attitude towards advertisements determined the brand image-makers to employ iconic techniques for hiding the dual quality of images—its naturalizing capability through concrete depictions of a narrative and its “persuasive power and propagandistic implications.”

To demonstrate how the visual language of icons reemerges as a marketable tactic, I will use Jenkins’ analysis of iPod television ads promoted by Apple Inc. He argues that introducing the Byzantine concept of iconic hypostasis in the creation of commercial images prevents the iconophobic tendencies of consumers and criticism. The icon techniques can accommodate the products endowed with transcendental meaning to the consumers’ understanding without forcefully linking their physical body to abstract ideas/advertisement slogans. Thus, by portraying a quasi-hypostasis in advertisements, corporations manage to keep themselves away from accusations of designing commercials that mislead and persuade the public. Using Apple Inc. as an example, Jenkins explains that profit-driven corporations use the concept of symbolic realism to encourage consumers to visually recognize the cult-value of commodity’s imagery so as to indulge them in the worshiping of products.

IV. The iPod Ads as Byzantine Icons: The symbolic realistic method of critiquing consuming images

In his analysis of Apple’s advertisements, Jenkins shows how iPod products invite consumers in a quasi-hypostatic union with music. He proposes a symbolic realistic critique of the iPod commercials, based on the Byzantine aesthetics, as opposed to the convention-
al symbolic reading developed by Erwin Panofsky.\textsuperscript{83}

From a symbolic perspective, the icon is seen as a popular image that is extensively copied and which illustrates “historically significant events” that stimulates powerful emotional reactions.\textsuperscript{84} The symbolic analysis considers the cultural environment of icons to construct three stages of uncovering their underlying meaning. In the first stage, defined as the ‘pre-iconographic’, the viewer reads the theme depicted in the icons only as visual forms outside their cultural connotations. For example, upon looking at the ring of light surrounding a human’s head in Byzantine iconography one reads it as just a simple round shape.\textsuperscript{85} Another example is when one sees the illustration of the popular cartoon figure, Mickey Mouse, as a simple picture of a dressed up mouse with a large head and round ears. The second step is when one identifies the visual attributes of the icons based on written sources or other forms of information. At this stage, the disks of light from Byzantine icons are recognized as the nimbus symbolizing the divine light; a fact known from the Biblical stories. The anthropomorphic mouse is recognized as Mickey, the iconic cartoon character of the Walt Disney Company. At the third level, known as the iconographic interpretation, Panofsky states that the icon will reveal the intrinsic mindset of “a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion.”\textsuperscript{87} One attains a full grasp of the icon’s symbolic meaning. The true and false significance of icons is questioned by comparing and contrasting contemporary texts with previous artistic examples and other various sources. The iconographic reading of the nimbus from Byzantine iconography and Mickey Mouse’s identity, involves the interpretation of their deeper historical connotations by referring to the time, place, style, and cultural context in which they were created.\textsuperscript{88}

According to Jenkins, the symbolic mode diverts from the visual form of images by focusing the critique on their meaning according to the cultural context. Carole Blair argues that in

\textsuperscript{83} Panofsky, p. 30.
\textsuperscript{85} Also referred to as halo, nimbus, and aureole.
\textsuperscript{86} The Byzantine ring of light is employed in iPod ads as described by Jenkins’ later in this paper. Please see page 20 and footnote 94.
categorizing “the full range of meanings referenced by a symbolic formulation,” the critique offers a fragmented interpretation of the particular visual techniques employed in the creation of commercials.\(^8\) This approach fails to analyze the icon-form of symbols and does not explain what the advertisements really do—that is, the reason for the devotion of products and brand images.

Studying the iconic visual properties of advertisements is essential in explaining how the worship of images is garnered in their market circulation. Jenkins starts his analysis of Apple’s corporate image with a symbolic description of iPod’s ads, more specifically the silhouette figures in commercials broadcasted between 2001 to present, that are consistently shown on television, print ads, posters, and Internet. These commercials contain five essential features such as the bright colored background, the dancing dark human figures, the iPod in a distinctive white color, rhythmic songs from both mainstream and slightly unknown artists, and a minimal quantity of text. Defining the structural components of the ads, Jenkins identifies three topics. Firstly, the message of ‘hip,’ of what is trendy and young looking accompanied by upbeat music and different neon colors in the background referencing the nightclubs and urban environments. The idea of hip suggests the freedom of thought and action against any form of authoritarian ideals. Secondly, the advocacy for individual liberty and uniqueness of one’s self is expressed through solid black figures. They perform astonishing dancing steps and display distinctive fashion and hairstyles each time the camera angle changes emphasizing the notion of individualism. Jenkins explains that “the self is condensed to body through the darkness of the silhouette and the association with the sensual pleasure of dance; yet the amazing moves allow individualism to shine through.”\(^9\)

Thirdly, the enthusiastic attitude associated with the iPod is accentuated by the energetic dance moves of the human shaped silhouettes following a progressive musical tempo and reach a climax before showing the textual message and the Apple logo. While the symbolic interpretation offers a significant understanding of iPod’s popularity, Jenkins argues that at this stage, the critique cannot reveal the commercial’s attempt to communicate a quasi-hypostatic absorption in music. He takes a symbolic realistic approach to analyze the particular visual techniques and iconic forms that are used in iPod ads.

Ouspensky asserts that the genuineness of the Orthodox icon stems from all its parts forming a synchronized union.\(^1\) This unity is made possible only by constructing a balance between the constitutive element of the icon—the raw materials, the narrative-structure, and the visual techniques/composition. Likewise, iPod ads combine the necessary ingredients to simulate the ecstatic experience of music through earphones. Apple’s success in depicting the quasi-hypostatic immersion in music is to naturally fuse elements in a way that the dancing figures, the neon background settings, the upbeat music, and the music player become one body. Every component included in the commercial is

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89 C. Blair, Contemporary U. S. memorial sites as exemplars of rhetoric’s materiality. In J. Selzer & S. Crowley (Eds.), Rhetorical bodies. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999, p. 9

90 Jenkins, p. 467.

91 L. Ouspensky, 1992a, p. 499.
needed to see the world through music. In the span of 30 seconds, iPod ads reproduce a fraction from a shared phenomenological experience such as dancing or being captivated in music. Jenkins states that “anyone who has traversed public space while entranced in their favorite song recognizes the experience, similar to the feeling one gets when consumed in dance. The world seems to become mute, while people appear to move in harmony with your song.”

iPod commercials incorporate short sound breaks in their structure to specifically recall that ‘mute’ moment when one is fully submerged in music. By claiming to sell this quasi-hypostatic experience, the iPod becomes more than an ordinary commodity in the capitalist market competition. Therefore, Apple Inc. declares itself as different from other corporations whose ultimate motive is only profit and consumerism. An identical compositional configuration is illustrated in the Byzantine icons to invite the viewer in completing the spiritual experience illustrated in the icon.

Recalling the Orthodox iconic techniques, Jenkins analyzes four aspects based on the Byzantine concepts of perspective, light, color, and gesture to reveal how iPod ads “synecdochically embodies” the quasi-hypostatic contemplation in music. The first point of resemblance between the Byzantine aesthetics and iPod commercials is the implementation of the inverse perspective. In opposition to the linear perspective that predominated in Western art since Renaissance, Orthodox iconographers developed, as Ouspensky calls, a “reverse” or “inverted” perspective. To imitate the physical universe with its depth perception as seen with the naked eye, Renaissance artists developed a linear perspective that constructed pictures based on parallel lines converging in invisible spots known as vanishing points. The illusion of depth directs the viewer somewhere faraway behind the image. This method is inverted in the Byzantine perspective by diverging the lines from the horizon, whereby the nearest objects to the observer appear smaller than the more distant ones. The effect of depth is removed and the vanishing points are placed in the foreground to give the illusion that the content of image is enlarging and opening up in the real space of the onlooker. In other words, by giving the impression that the vanishing points protrude through the flat surface of the object, in contrast to some distant point in the horizon, the image takes an active role in intensifying the audience’s sense of awe. Jenkins sees two details in iPod ads that correspond to the reverse perspective. Firstly, the uniform bright background colors and the missing shadows of the silhouettes that take away any effect of depth. Secondly, the shifting camera angle of each scene, from close-ups to full point of views, urges the viewer to picture herself/himself in the event instead of passively watching the ads, as one does when looking into a linear perspective.

The second similar aspect is the application of light to symbolically differentiate the terrestrial aspect of human figures (the sinful) from the heavenly backdrop colors. Victor Bychkov argues that the golden background of the Byzantine icons separates the saints from the

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92 Jenkins, p. 477.
93 Jenkins, p. 480.
94 L. Ouspensky, 1992a, p. 492-495.
natural world by raising them above reality.\textsuperscript{95} Traditionally, iconographers cover the background of icons with gold leaf to symbolize the divine light and use darker colors for saints and vegetation to reference the earthly world of humans. Solrun Nes argues that the light radiating from the gold comes "from the motif itself, and not, as in the case of realistic painting, from a conjectured exterior source of light."\textsuperscript{96} Likewise, the telluric silhouettes from iPod ads are surrounded by a shiny neon light embodying a spiritual like quality. An additional element to the concept of eternal light in Byzantine art is the nimbus that is placed around the heads of the saints. Jenkins makes a parallel to the soft gleam surrounding the dancing silhouettes and the whiteness of the earbuds with the halo depicted in the Orthodox icons.\textsuperscript{97}

In the third example, Jenkins observes a relation in the way colors are used to render the human figures, somewhere between a realistic and a symbolic representation. In icon painting, the portrayal of saints has generally recognized bodily features along with an unusual olive skin tone\textsuperscript{98} and an ascetic facial expression. Saints are depicted with limited hand gestures in colors ranging from reds (earthly colors) to bright blues (heavenly colors).\textsuperscript{99} Ouspensky argues that “the human body, although represented in a manner, which is not naturalistic, is, however, with very rare exceptions completely logical: Everything is in its place. The same is true of clothing..."\textsuperscript{100} Without resembling a particular person, the facial features of the saints reduce any potential distractions allowing the viewer to focus on the transcendent rather than the human forms. The same is true with the dark silhouettes against the glowing neon colors from iPod ads. The bright background colors (bright blues, reds and yellow) recall the spiritual experience similarly as the heavenly colors from the Byzantine icons. The earthy colored silhouettes give a realistic representation of ordinary young people while their specific identities are erased, such as race or facial details. Much like in Byzantine icons, the anonymity of the human figures allows the viewer to easily identify with them.

In the fourth common aspect, Jenkins argues that the apparently opposite gestures of the continuously moving silhouettes from iPod ads and the stillness in depictions of Byzantine saints from Orthodox iconography


\textsuperscript{97} Jenkins, p. 479.

\textsuperscript{98} The first rule in icon painting is to start with a dark layer of colors. The iconographer successively applies lighter tones of that particular background color by adding a certain amount of white. This process is seen as a spiritual journey from a state of being in darkness towards a transcendental light.

\textsuperscript{99} The color red symbolizes humanity; the blue signifies the kingdom of God in haven; the white stands for spiritual purity, the green and brown refer to the transitory living condition on earth; and the black portrays evil and demon like beings. For example, in the Byzantine icons, Mary, the mother of Jesus (Greek: Theotókos), is depicted with a blue gourmet underneath an outer red one. The blue stands for her divine nature and the red for her human character. Contrarily, Christ is represented wearing clothing with a reversed color structure—the blue is outside and the red is inside. This indicates that the heavenly nature prevails over his human existence.

\textsuperscript{100} Ouspensky, 1992b, p. 187.
communicate the same meaning, the divine presence. The dancing figures, holding the bright white iPods, are immersed in music, performing “astounding flips, splits, twists, and turns [that] are simultaneously realistic and extraordinary.” Likewise, the Byzantine saints are enveloped “by the divine, captured in prayerful communion or penitent reflection.” Both characters reveal a transcendental experience in concrete grabs encouraging the viewer’s participation. By portraying a quasi-hypostatic experience, the commodity, besides its symbolic and use-value, is invested with a cult-value. iPod ads create an ‘incomplete scenario’ where the missing component is the consumer itself. The scenario becomes complete only when the viewer participates in the ritual of seeing the commodity through the symbolic realistic lens.

Conclusion
In this corporate world, it is imperative that we accommodate ourselves to the parameters of consumer culture by critiquing how brand images achieve the status of icons that inspire a cultic devotion. For Jenkins, the symbolic mode of critiquing icons is inefficient in showing how brand images, as employed by corporations for materialism and profits [?], attract such a devoted group of followers as those of Apple products. Panofsky’s approach offers a fragmented interpretation of the particular visual techniques employed in the creation of advertisements. Therefore, a consideration of the Orthodox concept of symbolic realism as a method of critique will incite viewers to identify the cult-value and reveal the reason for the devotion.

Baudrillard argues that in the sphere of culture industry humans are increasingly degraded to the status of mere objects. If one’s identity becomes objectified/commoditized through the products they consume, one needs to rethink the way vision is harnessed by commercial images. Benjamin states that a cult manifests through a ritualistic participation. Brand images reach the level of ‘divine celebration’ only when the consumers take part in their ritualization through the symbolic realistic mode of seeing—that is, seeing with the divine eye. According to Jenkins, this “mode is not the only way users participate in ritual, but seeing with the divine eye is a crucial part of being in the cult.” In the case of Apple Inc, the cult following forms when the iPod turns into “my iCon.” A visual analysis based on Byzantine aesthetics reveals this process in which iPod ads objectify human identity. The dancing silhouettes are specifically depicted with no realistic identifiable features so as to encourage the viewers to picture themselves in the ads with the product. However, not every consumer participates in Apple’s cult the same way. One can read the ads from a utilitarian perspective or just as a random association of image and product.

Debord’s critique of the spectacle that reins over humanity implies the empowerment of art to break the authoritative wall of consuming images to allow the flow of existence and communication. To bring that liberating social change and help consumers overcome their

104 Jenkins, p. 481.
105 Ibid.
contemplative mind-set from the confined relationship with the spectacle, Debord looked for a direct apprehension of aesthetic emotions through the techniques of detournement and derive. By escaping in these artistic adventures, he wanted to reconcile the subject and the object into an absolute union. Hence, his notion of unity overlooked the subject’s tendency to dominate the object by projecting his/her own identity onto it. Dedord delegated art as a way to take control over commodities by looking for an undifferentiated oneness of man and nature, which is another form of domination. Moreover, paying less attention in analyzing the visual quality of culture industry, Debord failed to successfully evaluate its role in objectifying human identity.

In order to bring societies in a state of awareness and liberate humans from the ‘open-air prison’ created by the mechanism of economic laws, art has to deal directly with the visual language of commodities. The techniques of Byzantine aesthetics can empower art to challenge the commodity nature of capitalist society, by offering a visual inquiry that would enable the subject and object to relate in a non-dominating way. The Orthodox method of symbolic realism does not aim to control or reconstruct commodity aesthetics, but rather, presents visual examples that will prompt consumers to see through the spectacle.

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