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Grounds for a "Third Place": The "Starbucks Experience," Sirens, and Space

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Theory and Criticism

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Abstract

My goal in this dissertation is to help demystify or “filter” the “Starbucks Experience” for a post-pandemic world, taking stock of how a multi-national company has long outgrown its humble beginnings as a wholesale coffee bean supplier to become a digitally-integrated and hypermodern café. I look at the role Starbucks plays within the larger cultural history of the coffee house and also consider how Starbucks has been idyllically described in corporate discourse as a comfortable and discursive “third place” for informal gathering, a term that also prescribes its own radical ethos as a globally recognized customer service platform. Attempting to square Starbucks’ iconography and rhetoric with a new critical methodology, in a series of interdisciplinary case studies, I examine the role Starbucks’ “third place” philosophy plays within larger conversations about urban space and commodity culture, analyze Starbucks advertising, architecture and art, and trace the mythical rise of the Starbucks Siren (and the reiterations and re-imaginings of the Starbucks Siren in art and media). While in corporate rhetoric Starbucks’ “third place” is depicted as an enthralling adventure, full of play, discovery, authenticity, or “romance,” I draw on critical theory to discuss how it operates today as a space of distraction, isolation, and loss.

Keywords:

Starbucks Corporation; Starbucks Experience; spectacle; coffeehouse history; coffee culture; cultural capitalism; coffee colonialism; digital immersion; third place; third space; urban space; commodity culture; Siren mythology; Adorno and Horkheimer; Walter Benjamin; Guy Debord; George Ritzer, Ray Oldenburg

Summary for Lay Audience

This dissertation demystifies or “filters” the post-pandemic “Starbucks Experience,” taking a critical look at a multinational company that has long outgrown its humble beginnings as a wholesale coffee bean supplier to become a digitally-integrated and hypermodern café for the global consumer. The primary question I explore in this thesis is: How has Starbucks as a successful global coffee house chain curated a unique, exclusive coffee house experience, selling itself as a comfortable and inclusive “third place” for informal gathering, while concealing a darker history of labour exploitation and union busting? I pay special attention to the role that Starbucks’ “third place” philosophy plays within larger conversations about urban space, commodity culture, and the consumer experience. While in corporate rhetoric Starbucks’ “third place” is depicted as an enthralling adventure, full of play, discovery, authenticity, or “romance,” I discuss how its cafes today operate as a space of distraction, isolation, and loss. Drawing on critical theory, cultural studies, and multi-disciplinary perspectives, I take a closer look at the coffee conglomerate’s own story to re-read Starbucks advertising, architecture, and art, while tracing the spectacular rise of the Starbucks Siren, including its reiterations and re-imaginings in corporate advertising, contemporary art and popular media.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	i
Summary for Lay Audience.....	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
List of Figures.....	vi
Introduction: “Look Up!”—Architectural Vertigo and the Starbucks Roastery Experience.....	1
1. Blending Reality.....	2
2. Filter Paper.....	14
Chapter One: “The Coffee wasn’t the point. The place was:” Building on Coffee House Culture.....	20
1. The Starbucks Experience	20
2. The Best Part of Waking Up: Sights, Sounds, Smells...Space?.....	24
3. Eastern Perks.....	27
4. English Coffeehouses.....	38
5. Parisian Cafes: “Coffeehouses in Vogue”.....	43
6. Viennese <i>Kaffeehäuser</i>	53
6.1 Café Central: “Cosmic Uneasiness”.....	58
6.2 Magris’ Danube.....	61
7. The Modern Café.....	64
8. Starbucks.....	70

Chapter Two: Towards a “Third Place”: The Starbucks Experience, Reloaded.....	78
1. Sticks & Stones & Sharpies & Lattes: Performative/Theatrical/Ritualistic Labour of the Barista.....	78
2. Stories about a Third Place.....	90
3. Oldenburg’s “Third Place”.....	105
4. The Desecration of the Third Place.....	125
5. An Alternate Digital Third Place.....	133
Chapter Three: The Starbucks Siren, Resurrected.....	138
1. The Seductive Siren: A Tale of Dramatic Doom.....	138
2. The Technological and Mythological Starbucks Siren: A Feminist Critique.....	148
3. After-Life of the Starbucks Siren: Spectacular Submersions, Subversions, and Rearticulations in Social Media, Visual Culture, and Popular Culture.....	166
Chapter Four: Another Odyssey: Oleato, Labour, and Loss or Starbucks in a Post-Pandemic Age.....	190
1. Socially Distanced Café.....	190
2. The “Third Place” in a Pandemic.....	195
3. Shaking It Up: Starbucks Workers United.....	197
4. Starbucks Odyssey.....	213
5. Starbucks’ Alchemy.....	219
Conclusion: A New Siren: Behind the Scenes.....	228
Bibliography.....	248
Curriculum Vitae.....	294
Copyright Release.....	295

List of Figures

Figure 1: Urban Sanctuary on the Magnificent Mile: The Chicago Starbucks Roastery.....	2
Figure 2: Metaphorical Hourglass: Chicago Roastery Cask.....	3
Figure 3: Cyclical Coffee Production Process in Eulojio Ortega's Mural, Chicago Roastery.....	4
Figure 4: Interior of a Turkish Caffinet (Robert Walsh, <i>Constantinople and the Scenery of the Seven Churches of Asia Minor</i> . Illustration by Thomas Allom, 1839).....	33
Figure 5: “The most distinguished story-teller of the capital, Kiz-Achmet” (Robert Walsh, <i>Constantinople and the Scenery of the Seven Churches of Asia Minor</i> . Illustration by Thomas Allom, 1839).....	34
Figure 6: Teenager sitting on a bed with laptop: <i>Every Name’s a Story</i> , Nicolas Jack Davies, January 2020).....	84
Figure 7: Teenager addressed as “Jemma” by their father: <i>Every Name’s a Story</i> , Nicolas Jack Davies, January 2020).....	85
Figure 8: “It’s James” with Starbucks Logo in background: <i>Every Name’s a Story</i> , Dir. Nicolas Jack Davies, January 2020).....	86
Figure 9: The Starbucks Interior: <i>Every Name’s a Story</i> , Nicolas Jack Davies, January 2020.....	87
Figure 10: Mythological Siren with Wings (<i>The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt</i>).....	139
Figure 11: Mermaid Siren (<i>The Lighthouse</i> , Dir. Eggers, 2019).....	139
Figure 12: Four versions of the Starbucks Logo, 1971-2011 (Starbucks Logo Research).....	152
Figure 13: Trademark Tale: Siren meets Speed.....	152
Figure 14: “Sovanna Maccha” Mural (Siren Princess at the flagship store in Phnom Penh, Cambodia).....	163
Figure 15: Embedded Iris: Starbucks Original Siren Logo (<i>Siren’s Debut</i> , Josh Crews, 2015)	171
Figure 16: “She came from a story”: Medium Close-Up of Starbucks Symbol, Muse and Spectacle (<i>Siren’s Debut</i> , Josh Crews, 2015).....	171
Figure 17: “A Muse...a Legend”: Medium Shot of Starbucks’ Pageant Siren (<i>Siren’s Debut</i> , Josh Crews, 2015).....	172
Figure 18: “Who can resist?”: Medium-Long Shot of Pageant Siren with (Male) Photographer (<i>Siren’s Debut</i> , Josh Crews, 2015).....	172

Figure 19: Méliès’ Siren Spectacle with (Male) Showman (<i>La Sirène</i> , Méliès, 1904).....	173
Figure 20: Siren Installation by Jade Purple Brown (Starbucks Reserve Roastery, Empire State Building).....	178
Figure 21: Jordan Kay’s Psychedelic Pride Siren (2021).....	181
Figure 22: Soo Min Kim’s Siren Escapes! <Escape!> (2012).....	183
Figure 23: Soo Min Kim’s Strong Businessman Siren, 2016.05.10).....	183
Figure 24: Soo Min Kim’s ‘The Scream’ Siren, undated].....	184
Figure 25: Soo Min Kim’s “Flashing” Siren (2015.02.22).....	184
Figure 26: Soo Min Kim’s “It’s hot!” Siren (2015.03.30).....	184
Figure 27: Behind the Veneer: Persegati’s Siren.....	186
Figure 28: Starbucks Workers United Original Logo.....	201
Figure 29: Starbucks Workers United Revamped Logo.....	201
Figure 30: The Cyber Third Place Reddit Logo.....	204
Figure 31: “Why is Starbucks at War with its Unions?” (Michael Deforge, <i>Walrus</i> , 2023).....	204
Figure 32: Siren sign holder.....	216
Figure 33: Green Plastic coffee stirrer (or “stopper” plug).....	216
Figure 34: 2006 trademarked logo [3841834].....	216
Figure 35: 2023 Starbucks Siren Collection NFT #1483.....	216
Figure 36: 2023 Starbucks Siren Collection NFT #1328.....	216
Figure 37: 2023 Starbucks Siren Collection NFT #5.....	216
Figure 38: Starbucks Odyssey Graphic.....	218
Figure 39: National Chamber of Italian Fashion and Starbucks introduce Starbucks Oleato.....	223
Figure 40: Oleato Siren in front of her mirror (Hand Model: Lya Pouleyy).....	241
Figure 41: Oleato Siren with lapel-pin reflected in her mirror (Hand Model: Lya Pouleyy).....	242

Figure 42: Campy hands that craft the elegant Oleato cocktail (Hand Model: Lya Pouleyy).....242

Figure 43: Oleato Siren’s Kiss.....243

Introduction - “Look Up!”—Architectural Vertigo and the Starbucks Roastery Experience

Two words could perhaps encapsulate the Chicago Roastery design: look up. The most vertical of the roasteries,” Starbucks Stories reporter Jennifer Warnick explains. “Chicago was designed to draw the eye, and incoming visitors up, up, up.”¹ Five floors high, spreading across 35 000 square feet on Magnificent Mile, the largest Starbucks in the world is encased by glass windows, features a curved escalator and large murals painted by local artists, and boasts the latest method of braiding HVAC systems, Internet cables, and lighting wires that weave through the ceiling. One part dubbed the *sunray ceiling*, Warnick continues, “with rings of outward spiraling shades of green, was designed to symbolize rays of sun touching rolling hills of green coffee trees. The shades of green were inspired by the agricultural nature of growing coffee. Illuminated ‘sunbeams’ radiate outward throughout the floors.”² Almost seamlessly, the largest Starbucks Roastery fuses nature with technology in symbolic effort to reconcile the cosmos with the hubris of human intervention and science. The plant seems self-reliant, as if it generates its own source of power that glows after sunset, providing the citizens of Chicago with a beacon of warmth and light (Figure 1).

At the centre of this supermarket titan is its metallic heart, “a 5-foot steel and aluminum cask with a bronze finish,” where visitors are mesmerized by the fleeting thought of green coffee beans churning and fumbling over each other before they begin roasting. In an interview with designer Jill Enomoto, Warnick says that exposing the inner structures to a public-facing community grants the public witness to and participation in clandestine barista operations.

¹ Jennifer Warnick, “New Starbucks Reserve Roastery: A Love Letter to Chicago,” *Starbucks: Stories & News* (November 12, 2019), <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2019/new-starbucks-reserve-roastery-a-love-letter-to-chicago/>.

² Ibid.

Peering behind the curtain, so to speak, shares a level of intimacy with the customer symbolizing a handshake or, in the romantic language of Starbucks, a hug. In this glowing relationship, the customer is complicit with the Roastery's silent intent: to enrapture the customer with big sensations and even bigger experiences. Warnick describes this disorientation: "With the cask in the center and the way the ceiling radiates from there, it creates an almost optical illusion that the ceiling seems [to] tilt upward as you go up each floor towards the cask.... And from the outside, you see this really great pop of color on each floor."³ The optical illusion engineered into the structural appearance of the Roastery encourages—or distracts—the public to keep looking and looking; up and up. The Roastery or "Starbucks Reserve" is clearly designed to be different than your average Starbucks. It is an urban sanctuary.

1. Blending Reality



Figure 1: Urban Sanctuary on the Magnificent Mile: The Chicago Starbucks Roastery
[Source: <https://www.starbucksreserve.com/en-us/locations/chicago>]

³ Ibid.



Figure 2: Metaphorical Hourglass: Chicago Roastery Cask
 [Source: <https://www.starbucksreserve.com/en-us/locations/chicago/highlights#>]

There are six Starbucks Reserves Roasteries fully operating in major urban centres worldwide (Chicago, Seattle, Shanghai, Milan, New York, Tokyo).⁴ Starbucks features each iconic site on their Reserve website hub that artfully displays each location’s design concept and inspiration and offers us sneak peaks of their “superb food, rare coffees and everything in between.”⁵ Each Reserve location is advertised with modernist photos that serve as “curated views” celebrating the design of the respective iconic buildings and the power of the “multi-sensory play” at work in the interiors. These sites (“destinations like none other in the world”) according to the website not only marry cultural finesse and architectural innovation; they also offer “immersive” adventures: “Starbucks Reserve is our commitment to push even further, scouring the world for its most exceptional beans while evolving the coffeehouse experience to something surprising and multi-sensory.”⁶ Of special note here is the caption used to describe the

⁴ The Chicago Roastery opened to the public on November 15, 2019. In addition to the Reserve Roasteries, there are 28 Reserve Bars with two locations in Canada (Toronto and Vancouver). Starbucks locations that are not Reserves may still sell Reserve products. “Starbucks Reserve Bars locations”, *Starbucks Reserve* (undated): <https://www.starbucksreserve.com/en-us/locations/reserve-bars>

⁵ “This is Starbucks Reserve,” *Starbucks Reserve* (undated): <https://www.starbucksreserve.com/en-us>

⁶ *Ibid.*

spiralling 56-foot cask installed in the most recent and largest location in Chicago: “The 56-foot cask stands as the centerpiece of the Roastery. It is a sculptural work of art that acts like a multisensory hourglass with the roasted beans as the grains of sand. The skin itself is perforated and slit to reveal views of freshly roasted coffee moving through tubes in all directions. Ride the spiral escalator as it wraps around the cask and gaze up at the ceiling emanating rays that reflect onto our centerpiece”⁷ (Figure 2). The sly description of the cask as a metaphorical hourglass should not go unnoticed in this brief caption; the beans rushing through are reanimated and produce a strange noise and are softly aromatic. At this magnitude, every single bean is a symbol of work or the transfer of it: a discreet measure of the passing of time. The surge of millions of beans in this cask conveys the sensation of altered or compressed time; a mystical, surrogate logic governed by unusual laws. The urgency of this hourglass displaces the hourglass of an earthly time, reflecting the sensation of loss, of losing oneself in the yawning spaces of the modern coffeehouse.



Figure 3: *Cyclical Coffee Production Process in Eulio Ortega's Mural, Chicago Roastery*
 [Source: <https://www.starbucksreserve.com/en-us/locations/chicago/highlights#>]

⁷ “Starbucks Reserve: Chicago Roastery Design,” *Starbucks Reserve*, <https://www.starbucksreserve.com/en-us/locations/chicago/highlights#>

Specially commissioned artwork, including the “progressive mural” designed by local American artist Euljio *Ortega* (Figure 3) extends the powerful symbolism of time as a spiral to depict the cyclical coffee production process—planting, selection, and processing—normally hidden behind the scenes. The centrepiece of Ortega’s mural, which unfolds in a staircase extending all five floors of the iconic building, depicts a lone farmer in a field who plants coffee seeds in a circular pattern, perhaps a homage to the modernist design of Robert Smithson’s natural design earthwork, *Spiral Jetty*, constructed in 1970 in Utah. The earthy meets the ethereal, as the Starbucks Reserve also circles and spins around the lone consumer and a frameless elevator or curved staircase lifts them to new heights.

At this fifth and top level, altered and, perhaps, privileged perceptions of the world can occur as one ascends higher through thinner air. It is clear that height is important to Starbucks’ exclusivity: “Our Roasteries are theatrical, experiential shrines to coffee passion.”⁸ The company has here uncannily appropriated a deep religious history with its own roots in thirteenth-century gothic architecture inspired by the French Gothic architects of Chartres cathedral.⁹ The epic five-story Roastery designed by architects Perkins and Will is reminiscent of many enormous and breathtaking European cathedrals with dizzying spires that scrape the sky. Such trepidation and *horror vacui* once conveyed to devout and exhausted pilgrims the glory of a theodrama, a powerful spiritual encounter, after a long and arduous journey over thousands of kilometres on foot to a Church. Creatively christened again as “multi-sensory destination of epic proportions... five stories of coffee theater [*sic*]”¹⁰ the Roastery not only offers a “360-degree *panorama* of the

⁸ “Starbucks Reserve, Visit,” *Starbucks Reserve* (undated): <https://www.starbucksreserve.com/en-us/visit>

⁹ On gothic architecture history, see Simon Jenkins’ *Cathedrals: Masterpieces of Architecture, Feats of Engineering, Icons of Faith* (Rizzoli, 2022).

¹⁰ “Chicago Roastery Design,” *Starbucks Reserve* (undated): <https://www.starbucksreserve.com/en-us/locations/chicago/highlights>

coffee roasting process”; it also boasts panoramic views of the surrounding neighbourhood, featuring a roof-top terrace overlooking Michigan Avenue.¹¹ The Reserve’s circular rotunda and optical illusions also conjure up the immersive play and dizzying perspectives of the grand sight-seeing spectacles built in the nineteenth-century that, in some areas, still grace modern cities—the vertiginous dioramas and panoramas that ushered in a new kind of *flânerie* with their own *trompe l’oeil* effects and intoxicating sights, sounds, and smells.¹² The Roastery, it might be said, is a “cathedral of consumption” and a form of cultural bravado, a postmodern Tower of Babel that draws people together from all over the world in celebration of coffee and the Starbucks coffee culture with its pseudo-Italian menu that Howard Schultz has exported internationally.¹³

The Roastery has also inspired the corporation to experiment with other towering immersive environments. In November 2022, Starbucks opened a new coffee spectacle that extends over three floors in one of the world’s tallest buildings, the New York Empire State Building. This new Starbucks coffee destination, a Reserve Bar that spans three floors and 23,000 square feet, also fuses art and commerce, curating special consumer displays and artistic murals or “larger than life visuals” that allow “for connection and discovery.”¹⁴ In addition to their mobile order & pick-up services offered in many Starbucks around the world, a customer can also “Book Experience Tickets” where guests can personalize and “explore your love of coffee, cocktails and

¹¹ “Starbucks unveils largest store yet with Chicago Reserve Roastery” *World Coffee Portal* (November 15, 2019): <https://www.worldcoffeeportal.com/Latest/News/2019/November/Starbucks-unveils-largest-store-yet-with-Chicago-R>

¹² On the art of the moving panorama and other related spectacles, see Erkki Huhtamo’s *Illusions in Motion: Media Archaeology of the Panorama and Related Spectacles* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013). On the new flânerie promised by the virtual travel of the panorama and diorama, also see Anne Friedberg *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

¹³ On Starbucks’ pseudo-Italian coffee language, see Fran Hawthorne’s *Ethical Chic: The Inside Story of the Companies We Love* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012). Although *grande* in Italian means large or big, Starbucks uses “short, tall, grande, venti, trenta” for “extra-small, small, medium, large, extra-large” cup sizes, the latter two a measurement of the number of fluid ounces the cups can carry (twenty and thirty, respectively).

¹⁴ Heidi Peiper, “New Starbucks Reserve Store in NYC brings landmark coffee experience to empire state building,” *Starbucks Stories & News* (November 15, 2022): <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2022/new-starbucks-reserve-store-in-nyc-brings-landmark-coffee-experience-to-empire-state-building/>

spirit-free beverages, . . . step into our private workshop to craft and learn alongside baristas and mixologists.”¹⁵ Their website promises the customer “an experience like no other”¹⁶ that features Innovation Bars, Meeting Rooms, Workshops, and Private Event Spaces. In this Starbucks, one can even get an up-close view of one of the original splice plates that holds the Empire State Building together, according to the senior store designer John Nelson.

If we follow George Ritzer’s diagnosis of modern consumerism, such modern “cathedrals of consumption” exist at a new nexus of wonder between a tension of sacred and profane, myth and technology, or in his opinion, between enchantment and rationalization. Ritzer dubs towering marketplaces one of many “cathedrals of consumption”¹⁷ designed from elaborate blueprints and corporate strategies that spike up from modern horizons.¹⁸ Ritzer argues that such innovation has its roots in the Parisian Arcades described by Frankfurt School theorist Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*. For Benjamin, the illuminated, luxurious buildings that connect to form an interior city in Paris, “the capital of luxury and fashion” also gave birth to commodity “dream images.”¹⁹ Funded by the “boom in the textile trade,”²⁰ the nineteenth-century arcades were architectural innovations composed mostly of marble, glass, and iron, the latter a material that was used on railways and largely “avoided in home construction but used in arcades, exhibition halls, train stations—buildings that serve transitory purposes.”²¹ Celebrating

¹⁵ “Starbucks Reserve: Empire State Building – Book Experience Tickets,” *Starbucks Reserve*: <https://www.starbucksreserve.com/en-us/locations/esb/bookexperiencetickets>

¹⁶ “Starbucks Reserve: Empire State Building,” *Starbucks Reserve*: <https://www.starbucksreserve.com/en-us/locations/esb>

¹⁷ George Ritzer, *Enchanting a Disenchanted World: Continuity and Change in the Cathedrals of Consumption* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2010), 7.

¹⁸ See *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* (Roach, 1999) for an example of how a fully-operating Starbucks is located at the highest point in the city of Seattle, rather inconveniently on the top floor of the Seattle Space Needle, masking the covert operations of Dr. Evil.

¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 8.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 15.

²¹ *Ibid*, 16.

transition, travel, and vicarious tourism, the Arcades-gracefully paid homage to this emerging commercial trade that eventually housed various eclectic items or “commodity fetishes”²² for the first time in one localized place. These items, for example, ranged from imported exotic plants and leather and mirrors to strange fish swimming around in aquariums and lit at night by gas lighting. The improbability of these collections and juxtapositions then weaved a “dream world” for the spectator-consumer,²³ writes Benjamin, wherein Baudelaire’s peering *flâneur* “abandons himself to the phantasmagoria of the marketplace.”²⁴ The urban wanderer and window-shopper thus gains macroscopic access to and surrogate knowledge of the entire world through the simple act of looking. By allowing spectator-consumers to gaze at wares from distant lands and experience these cultures vicariously, the Arcades collapsed continents and cultures and crystallized them into a new timeline and a new place, granting the *flâneur* the fleeting delights of locations from where exotic objects were poached.

Above the shops and cafés in the Berlin Arcades and the Kaiser-Galerie, Benjamin as a child visited August Fuhrmann’s stereoscopic panorama.²⁵ Benjamin notes that when he was a child, he was able to interiorize the stereoscopic sights and exchange them, as it were, with his own enchanted memories: “*Distant worlds were not always strange to these arts. And it so happened that the longing such worlds aroused spoke more to the home than to anything*

²² Ibid, 7.

²³ Ibid, 13.

²⁴ Ibid, 14. In her article “Walter Benjamin’s Phantasmagoria” Margaret Cohen ascertains that Benjamin’s use of the term phantasmagoria is indebted to Marx’s use of the term in *Capital* and the *Eighteenth Brumaire* to denote Parisian cultural products and “commodity culture’s experience of its material and intellectual products.” She argues that “Benjamin quotes Marx in the *Passagen-Werk*’s Konvolut G: ‘This fetishism of commodities has its origin... in the peculiar social character of the labor that produces them... It is only a definite social relation between men that assumes, in their eyes the *phantasmagorical* form of a relation between things’ (PW 245). As has often been observed, Benjamin extends Marx’s statement on the phantasmagorical powers of the commodity to cover the entire domain of Parisian cultural products, a use of a phantasmagoria that Marx himself initiates in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*.” See Cohen, “Walter Benjamin’s Phantasmagoria,” *New German Critique*, vol. 48, no. 48 (1989): 87-107, 88.

²⁵ See Walter Benjamin, “Imperial Panorama,” *Berlin Childhood around 1900* trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 42-44.

unknown. Thus it was that, one afternoon *while seated before a transparency* of the little town of Aix, I tried to persuade myself that, once upon a time, I must have played on the patch of pavement that is guarded by the old plane trees of the Cours Mirabeau.”²⁶ Ritzer draws a brief lineage from these enchanted Arcades to the sprawling mega-department stores, enormous cruise ships and malls of today, arguing that the thrills of discount centres, the highs and lows of casinos, the exquisiteness of boutique hotels, and the comfort of fast-food cafés are modern-day derivations of the dream worlds the Arcades once promised Benjamin and the masses. Ritzer concludes that a new means of market-driven consumption operates through a calculated method of symbolic exchange that stems from Benjamin’s notion of phantasmagoria: *enchantment*.

In dialogue with other Marxists and postmodern thinkers, Ritzer suggests that the capacity to concoct dream worlds in spite of rationalization has not disappeared. In his book *Enchanting a Disenchanted World*, Ritzer argues that a social theory on the “reenchantment of the world,” an alternative to the increasingly rationalized and quotidian thinking of Capitalism, can be developed out of Max Weber’s rational critique of the Protestant ethic, Jean Baudrillard’s theory of “*simulation*”²⁷, Guy Debord’s theory of the spectacle, Karl Marx’s “*means of production*,” Zygmunt Bauman’s harrowing take on postmodernity, and Benjamin’s observations on *phantasmagoria*.²⁸ The term phantasmagoria, as used by Marx in *Das Kapital*, refers to as optical deception, visual illusion, and consumer bewitching. As Ritzer writes: “The idea of a phantasmagoria is crucial to understanding the new means of consumption as enchanted worlds.” Ritzer argues that “on one hand, it implies a cornucopia of goods and services that offers the possibility of exciting and satisfying people’s wildest fantasies. The dream here, and one that is

²⁶ Ibid., 44

²⁷ Ritzer, 70.

²⁸ Ibid 69; 64-65.

played to by most of the new means of consumption, is to be immersed in a world filled with everything one could ever imagine, with all of these things there for the taking. It is akin to the childhood dream of finding oneself in a land in which everything is made of candy and all of it is within easy reach.” Yet since the 18th and 19th-centuries, the screen practice of phantasmagoria was also used to project ghosts and instil terror. As Ritzer argues, it “also implies a negative side of enchantment—a nightmare world filled with specters, ghosts, and a profusion of things that seem simultaneously to be within one’s grasp and impossible to obtain.”²⁹ Ritzer perhaps uniquely diagnoses the woes of a postmodern (“drive-thru”) American audience under the deception of corporate phantasmagoria with this quip: “In a rational society, consumers want to know what to expect in all settings and at all times. They neither want nor expect surprises. They want to know that the ‘Big Mac’ they order today is going to be identical to the one they ate yesterday and to the one they will eat tomorrow.”³⁰ It is worth mentioning again that Starbucks customers can receive the same cup of coffee, enjoy the very same spectacle, anywhere in the world, as touted in the corporate mission statement: *To inspire and nurture the human spirit—one person, one cup and one neighbourhood at a time.*³¹ Re-enchantment is perhaps what Schultz consistently refers to as the Starbucks “romance,” best defined as a short-lived fascination or “affair” with its phantasmagoric ebbs and flows.

The three attractions that churn the corporate mantra, or the Starbucks aphorism, are: person, product, and place. This statement provides a worldview based on the perfection of the *product* as coffee is clearly omitted from this equation. As Ritzer notes, products are prone to *disenchantment* over continued exposure and seek re-enchantment. But to accomplish this task,

²⁹ Ritzer 64-65.

³⁰ Ibid, 80.

³¹ “Our Mission,” *Starbucks Stories & News*, <https://stories.starbucks.com/press/2015/starbucks-mission-and-values/>

to maximize the exigent operations of increasing profit margins and the chain of global supply and demand, the product must be abandoned. Rather, the consumer-spectators demand taking the product to “new heights” via the spaces in which the product is exchanged: “It is the consumers who demand reenchanting cathedrals of consumption,” Ritzer purports, “and those demands must be met if their business is to be retained.”³²

There are three architectural-aesthetic conditions Ritzer identifies that would foster re-enchantment: 1) *manipulating spatial constraints*, 2) *seeming to be everywhere*, and 3) *a sense of enormous space*.³³ These three conditions create an implosion of the spaces that hold the product. Inspired by Benjamin’s writings, Ritzer explains that this process happens when “the disintegration or disappearance of boundaries as formerly differentiated entities collapse on each other. The explosive growth in the new means of consumption has led to a series of such implosions. Those implosions, in turn, have served to make those means more spectacular and thereby helped them to grow even more.”³⁴ While the term “spectacular” often connotes a dramaturgy of attention, here, as in the Starbucks Reserve experience, it also distracts. Ritzer notes how this term is used in a new way to suggest consumer (subject) accessibility, but also a dream-like loss of time and space.³⁵ The spectacular is not a means through which corporations

³² Ritzer, 71.

³³ Ibid, 143-145.

³⁴ Ibid, 118.

³⁵ “Mobile Order & Pick-Up” is certainly one way that consumers can experience the implosion of spatio-temporal limitations. We can even see this unfolding in the Starbucks Stories official website. In the “Love Letter to Chicago” Jennifer Warnick penned to celebrate the Chicago Roastery on the Starbucks & Stories webpage, Jill Enomato the Starbucks Vice-President who led the Chicago Roastery design team is quoted as fondly recalling when “Howard [Schultz] had a vision of creating an experience where we would bring our love and passion for coffee to life.” Such dream-like passion emanating from Schultz is a thread weaving throughout many accounts of the corporation from his own poetic, anecdotal history of the business to his own final love letter to the company, published on Starbucks & Stories “Message from Howard Schultz: Introducing Oleato.” See Warnick, “New Chicago Reserve Roastery: A Love Letter to Chicago,” *Starbucks & Stories* (November 12 2019), <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2019/new-starbucks-reserve-roastery-a-love-letter-to-chicago/> and Howard Schulz, “Message from Howard Schultz: Introducing Oleato,” *Starbucks & Stories* (February 21, 2023): <https://stories.starbucks.com/press/2023/message-from-howard-schultz-introducing-starbucks-oleato/>

provide equitable access to services and goods. Alternatively, “The spectacle in the vast majority of [fast-food restaurants and other chains] is generally the feeling of a *loss* of a sense of time, a dreamlike state in which time—very much unlike in the rest of one’s life—seems not to matter. In many cases, this works in conjunction with the spectacular size of these new means; getting lost in space also means getting lost in time. And getting lost in time is often critical to the success of the new means of consumption. It is a key part of the dream they are marketing to customers.”³⁶ It is not coincidental that the multi-sensory hourglass cask in the Chicago Roastery is at the heart of the Starbucks Reserve, a circular symbol itself echoed by other architectural elements like the vertiginous spiral inscribed into the agrarian utopia reflected in Ortega’s mural.

In the Roastery dream-like megalopolis, coffee stands in for the ever-pervasive spectacle Situationist Guy Debord theorized in the 1960s—that which “presents itself simultaneously as all of society, as part of society, and as *instrument of unification*.”³⁷ Certainly the obsession with coffee has its own merits, but the carnivalesque commodity ode to it—including Starbucks-themed merchandise, mobile apps, and newspapers—is larger than the bean itself. The Starbucks Reserve Roastery overwhelms the senses and channels Debord’s theory of the spectacle in numerous ways, especially as it “presents itself as something enormously positive, indisputable, and inaccessible. It says nothing more than ‘that which appears is good, that which is good appears.’”³⁸ In the Roastery, coffee itself is not the only spectacle or sole obsession, however. The primary spectacle (or fetish) is Starbucks as a location. While coffee certainly plays an important role in how Starbucks is perceived (FairTrade and premium beans), the Roastery is arguably more about positioning Starbucks as an ideological gatekeeper by providing new

³⁶ Ritzer, 140.

³⁷ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Fredy Perlman and John Supak (Detroit: Black & Red, 1983), paragraph 3.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, paragraph 12.

tantalizing sights and sounds, interlocking interfaces that encourage continuous interaction with the company. Today, one might argue in a Debordian vein that Starbucks “does not realize philosophy, it philosophizes reality.”³⁹ In other words, Starbucks does not brew coffee, but instead brews spectacular (buzzing) “reality”. In expanding the coffee chain to China where a new store is opened nearly every day, Schultz has built an empire on a philosophy of the spectacle, but also on a common “grounding” of the consumer, what he and many others call “The Starbucks Experience.”⁴⁰ The vertiginous and overpowering Starbucks Reserve Roastery conjured up by Schultz, architects and designers “steep” the spectator in Starbucks commodity culture. If the vertiginous experience of the Starbucks Roastery invites us to “look up and up,” this act of looking is also an invitation to look beyond structural limitations and fathom the corporation’s expanse, both its material and immaterial reach. The multi-sensory-soaked looking at the Starbucks Roastery is a final culmination of what CEO Schultz calls “the Starbucks Experience.” One is invited to imagine the proliferation and expansion of Starbucks coffee culture, not only its ever-increasing number of stores worldwide, but also the way Starbucks homogenizes and “romanticizes” the customer experience, taking it to new heights. Starbucks not only pitches itself as “elite” and “lofty”. Schultz as CEO has claimed repeatedly over the years that Starbucks’ unique coffee experience is also a “grounding”, an attempt to carve out a common ground, a *third place*, or forge a new connection with its customers.

³⁹ Ibid., paragraph 19.

⁴⁰ See Joseph A. Michelli, *The Starbucks Experience: 5 Principles for Turning Ordinary into Extraordinary* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2007)

2. Filter Paper

My goal in this dissertation is to help demystify or “filter” the “Starbucks Experience,” also taking stock of a company that has long outgrown its humble beginnings. Here we might consider Imre Szeman and Susie O’Brien’s vivid cultural studies prompt: “Let’s go get a coffee.”⁴¹ If “going for coffee” does not require drinking coffee at all, as they claim, but rather points to a particular set of social rituals, how does Starbucks as a corporation curate a global culture by steeping the consumer-spectator in new rituals? In other words, how could “Let’s go get a Starbucks!” differ from “going for coffee”? With the former, coffee is not immediately invoked but, instead, is part of a unique set of rituals that presumes certain ideological dispositions ranging from social capital, status, class, gender, race, and geographical location or nation.⁴² If we return to Debord’s manifestos, we might say that Starbucks, as an omnipresent spectacle, transcends the typical billboard advertisement: “the spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.”⁴³ Linked to these complex social relations are equally complex social environments that Starbucks (among other marketing giants like Nike, Lululemon, Under Armour, Lindor, and McDonalds) manufactures and manipulates daily, creating or curating what Naomi Klein in her book *No Logo* famously referred to as a “brandscape.” Originally coined by anthropologist John Sherry in 1998, the term brandscape extends beyond the cup of coffee and captures everything from in-person café visits to lengthy, serpentine slow drive-thru lineups, and collective in mall experiences. Brandscapes, Klein more importantly observes, “are revolutionizing the future of political engagement.” Craig Thompson and Zeynep Arsel push this further by developing the concept of the hegemonic

⁴¹ Imre Szeman and Susie O’Brien, *Cultural Studies: A User’s Guide* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2017), 1.

⁴² According to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu “social capital” includes economic, social, and cultural capital.

⁴³ Debord, paragraph 4.

brandscape, “a cultural system of servicescapes that are linked together and structured by discursive, symbolic, and competitive relationships to a dominant market-driving experiential brand.”⁴⁴ The smile of a siren peering between your fingers on the morning commute is the spectacular commodity sign that speaks to us, the seductive face of the Starbucks brandscape.

When analyzing the social environments Starbucks seeks to curate, one must ask: What is unique about these environments? What do these environments, spaces and places imitate or copy? How is the Starbucks space idyllically described in corporate discourse as a “common ground” or comfortable “third place,” but also as an enthralling adventure, discovery, or “romance”?⁴⁵ How have the spectacular images and stories of Starbucks been revised, as the coffee house grew from a humble place that drew academics and protest culture in the 1970s to a multinational corporation discussed and debated by politics, partners, academics and religious groups? How have partners, artists and consumers reimagined Starbucks symbols like the Siren? How has glocalization impacted the Starbucks Experience? If “going for a Starbucks” is not actually about coffee but about ways in which people imagine community, what community experiences are important for Starbucks to mine, catalogue, and recreate through global networks and how has the digital turn interrupted and reshaped the Starbucks community? Finally, how has Starbucks as an interlocutor of community become more inclusive or, more nefariously, more exclusive as it expands and gentrifies smaller neighbourhoods and how has the pandemic transformed the “Starbucks Experience”?

⁴⁴ Craig Thompson and Zeynep Arsel, “The Starbucks Brandscape and Consumers’ (Anticorporate) Experiences of Glocalization,” *Journal of Consumer Research* vol. 31, no. 3 (December 2004): 631-642, 632. Also see Naomi Klein’s *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (Knopf Canada, 2000) and John F. Jr. Sherry’s article “The Soul of the Company Store: Nike Town Chicago and the Emplaced Brandscape” in: J. F. Sherry, Ed., *Servicescapes: The Concept of Place in Contemporary Markets*. Lincolnwood, IL: Nike Town Chicago Business Books, 1998, 109–150.

⁴⁵ Howard Schultz uses “romance” as a way of describing coffee from Italian coffee bars throughout his co-authored book, *Pour Your Heart Into It: How Starbucks Built a Company One Cup at a Time*.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I situate the “Starbucks Experience” within a larger history of the café and coffee house history. This chapter provides a brief history of the coffeehouse and also discusses the complex, fraught history of coffee as a commodity. According to leading scholars on coffeehouse culture, especially Aksel Tjora and Graham Scambler (*Café Society*) and Christoph Grafe and Franziska Bollerey (*Cafés and Bars: The Architecture of Public Display*), the modern-day café “is many things: an object of nostalgia, a stage for inventing oneself, a place for creating relationships and a home, in the words of the Austrian critic, Alfred Polgar, ‘for all who wish to be alone, but need sociability for this.’ Café life represents one aspect of the ways in which people from different backgrounds have come to terms with transitory existence in the modern metropolis.”⁴⁶ A number of key questions frame my inquiry. Is it possible for the grand cathedrals of coffee culture and consumerism to also function as liminal spaces, spaces that offer more than mind-numbing spectacle? Can the café be a levelling space or a birthplace of creativity? Can one recognize “today’s cafés” as the “progeny” of an older European ancestry?”⁴⁷ As we will discuss more closely in this first chapter, Tjora and Scambler’s project reminds us that there is a micropolitics behind the daily operation of the café, just as the coffee bean itself is tied to colonialism. The café itself is a microcosm of society and it can both order and discipline: “[it is important to consider] how the café is produced and reproduced as a social institution by the day-to-day actions of its personnel, managers, and baristas as well as customers.”⁴⁸ If we live in a “café society” today, the apocalyptic question remains: “what can, and sometimes does, what we call café society promise

⁴⁶ Christoph Grafe and Franziska Bollerey, “Introduction: Cafés and bars – places for sociability,” *Cafés and Bars: The Architecture of Public Display* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 3.

⁴⁷ Aksel Tjora and Graham Scambler, “Introduction,” in *Café Society*, ed. Aksel Tjora and Graham Scambler (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 2.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

for the future?”⁴⁹ Is the concept of a “‘café society,’ denoting a novel, pervasive and distinctive subculture and third place,” anything more than a “‘passing phase?’”⁵⁰

The second chapter of this dissertation discusses sociologist Ray Oldenburg’s use of the term “third place” and examines Starbucks’ own “third place” storytelling and pedagogy. As I explore in this dissertation, Starbucks is a large coffee shop conglomerate that for over two decades tried to sell itself as an inclusive and informal “third place,” although it ultimately distanced itself from this rhetoric after a fraught labor dispute and store restructuring linked to the social distancing of the pandemic. Over the years, Starbucks has, in its architectural imaginary, brandscaping, marketing rhetoric, and larger consumer “experience” both sought to “elevate” coffee experience and, in a reverse move, make their expensive product seem more accessible by “grounding” their coffee experience as an everyday, shared communal experience. It is important to consider how the rhetoric of the “third place” has been used in corporate literature and training to both romanticize and ground the Starbucks Experience, but also explore how the company imagines digital permutations of the “third place” as it becomes a hyperreal café.

The third chapter contemplates how the siren has evolved as one of the key curating topoi for the Starbucks mythology and experience. I take a closer look at the Siren figure in mythology, literature and popular culture and trace the origin and meaning of the Starbucks Siren logo. I next ask how the Starbucks logo has been woven into advertising, the hyperreal Starbucks Experience, and larger attempts to commodify social justice. Particular attention is paid to the corporation’s own attempts to “clean up” the logo and new artistic re-inventions of the Siren. I argue the revamped siren icon is itself negotiated cultural capital, a constructed “shared”

⁴⁹ Ibid., 1.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 6.

mythology; like the Roastery's vertiginous architecture it involves play, enchantment, and distraction.

As theorists like Slavoj Žižek and cultural critics like Bryant Simon have pointed out, Starbucks seeks to be a progressive brand, a shining example of "conscience capitalism" or "New Age welfare capitalism." But the humanitarian stories it brews up for public consumption are only part of the story. While it has a history of introducing progressive policies for partners and customers who consume the brand on a regular basis, as we will discuss in this dissertation the company also has a fraught history of union-busting and slave labour accusations. Beneath the smooth veneer of the dream of an "American third place" lurks the darker tale of exploited workers and coffee colonialism. In this same spirit, the final chapter of my thesis entitled "Another Odyssey: Oleato, Labour, and Loss or Starbucks in a Post-Pandemic Age" draws on my own experiences as a Starbucks barista and manager to frame my thoughts on labour and loss. In this chapter I explore the contemporary Starbucks moment, as the coffee giant struggled through a pandemic, moved away from its "third place" platform and instead embraced a drive-thru/pick-up model, tried to fight off unionization and finally promoted a new elite beverage, a hybrid olive-oil "coffee forward" beverage. My conclusion also extends my thoughts on Starbucks in a Post-Pandemic age, returning to the debates around unionizing partners to discuss Schultz' highly publicized Senate hearing and the debut of a new CEO. I also here playfully introduce a new Siren, analyzing an advertisement Starbucks and *Vogue* use to promote Oleato as the official drink of the 2023 Met Gala.

In order to demystify the mythical "Starbucks Experience", we must consider how Starbucks itself has been richly read and interpreted over the years. Although scholarship on Starbucks often views the coffee conglomerate through a single disciplinary lens, my goal in this

thesis is to put Starbucks coffee culture, history and storytelling into a fluid dialogue with a variety of disciplines, such as cultural studies and cultural history, sociology, political theory, urban theory, literary theory, and critical theory. It is my hope that the multi-disciplinary lens repositions the Starbucks actors and theater, also defamiliarizing and denaturalizing its own aspirations and dreams.

Chapter One – “The Coffee wasn’t the point. The place was:” Building on Coffee House Culture

1. The Starbucks Experience

As suggested in the introduction, Starbucks translates mystical, religious experience, or a spiritual odyssey or “theodrama,” into a secular litany using similar tropes. YouTube Account “Artistry Labs” posted a video in 2009 called “What if Starbucks Marketed Like a Church? A Parable” which situates Starbucks as a larger evangelical religious centre. Showing off bumper stickers reading “Real Men HEART Java” and a door decal that announces, “International Anointed First Starbucks of the Northern Valley,” the team at Artistry labs plays on the tension between the enthusiastic proselytization “born again” experiences central to the megachurch and the universal, cult-like following of Starbucks consumers. While hypothesizing what a Starbucks could look and feel like when adopting similar marketing, the satirical video at the same time demonstrates that Starbucks own “prosperity gospel” is already quite embedded in cultural discourse. Entering the Roastery, let alone any Starbucks in the world, one is immediately overwhelmed by an enveloping incense of freshly ground coffee, smooth jazz, and the liturgy of immaculate beverage sequencing that includes embarrassing spellings and recitations of customer names.⁵¹ Starbucks critic and journalist Taylor Clark aptly refers to the holistic experience of Starbucks as the “hazy mysticism of the new Starbucks image,”⁵² or what the company is constantly trying to perfect when they speak of a rewarding ambience and “high standards” of “customer service.” Three-time CEO Schultz called it the “inviting” and

⁵¹ See Artistry Lab’s 2009 video on YouTube, “What if Starbucks Marketed Like a Church? A Parable,” *YouTube*, uploaded by Artistry Labs, 30 Oct 2008, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D7_dZTrjw9I

⁵² Taylor Clark, *Starbucked: A Double Tall Tale of Caffeine, Commerce, and Culture* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2007), 104.

“enriching” multi-sensory environment of the “Starbucks Experience.”⁵³ As Taylor Clark writes in *Starbucked*, in focus groups led by Starbucks on the topic of coffee house culture, research showed that “Most consumers didn’t really care about coffee minutiae like flavor profiles and acidity, as long as the product tasted decent; instead, they craved a sense of relaxation, warmth, and luxury, all within the safe coffeehouse social sphere. ‘The coffeehouse, when it’s as good as it gets, is much like a public living room’ [Jerome] Conlon explained. People wanted to have that coveted coffee *experience*, an idealized version of the much-loved ‘coffee break.’ And they were willing to pay for it.... The coffee wasn’t the point—the place was.”⁵⁴

The Chicago Starbucks Roastery certainly does not look like your average Starbucks on the corner of a busy intersection or wedged in between similar fast-food joints in strip malls. Nor is it nestled into the corner of an airport lounge or attached to a bookstore filled with the blended aromatics of freshly ground espresso and new and/or old book-smell.⁵⁵ It might not be your typical place to meet a friend for coffee and gossip, a romantic date, or a place to bump into people from your local neighbourhood. The Roastery is also not exactly what urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg had in mind when he introduced the term “the third place” in 1989 to describe casual places where people meet informally or hangout in dusty bars. But the Roasteries and Reserves do amplify Schultz’s original goal of giving customers a “refreshing,” “stimulating” and “rewarding” break, curating and “enhancing” “all the customers see, touch, hear, smell or

⁵³ Howard Schultz explains that the Starbucks Experience is a product over and above the coffee they sell: “At Starbucks, our product is not just great coffee but also what we call the ‘Starbucks Experience’: an inviting, enriching environment in our stores that is comfortable and accessible yet also stylish and elegant.... In effect, our stores are billboards. Customers form an impression of the Starbucks brand the minute they walk in the door. The ambience we create there has much to do with brand building as the quality of coffee.” See Howard Schultz and Dori Jones Yang, *Pour Your Heart Into It: How Starbucks Built a Company One Cup at a Time* (New York: Hyperion, 1997), 251-252.

⁵⁴ Clark, *Starbucked*, 92.

⁵⁵ New book-smell, or bibliosmia, is “caused by the chemical breakdown of compounds within the paper.” See Oliver Tearle, “On the Science of Bibliosmia, that enticing book smell,” *Interesting Literature* (undated): <https://interestingliterature.com/2017/07/on-the-science-of-bibliosmia-that-enticing-book-smell/>

taste.”⁵⁶ Since 1987, Schultz has convinced a global population that his cafés, and by extension even the Starbucks Reserve Roasteries and Bars, are edifying and uplifting “third places.”

If we heed the rhetoric popularized by Schultz and the *Starbucks Stories & News* website, the “heart of the Starbucks Experience” and the personalized mission of the corporation (forever linked to its inspirational story of Schultz) is “*to inspire and nurture the human spirit – one person, one cup and one neighborhood at a time.*”⁵⁷ Schultz’ “grande” claim is that Starbucks is not only percolating coffee, but fostering human “connection,” “conversation” and “community,” curating a rewarding and stimulating “third place.” In his first co-authored autobiographical book published in 1997 entitled *Pour Your Heart Into It*, the rags-to-riches business mogul admits to have borrowed the “third place” terminology from Oldenburg to describe the uniqueness of his globally renowned enterprise: “In some communities, Starbucks stores have become a Third Place—a comfortable, sociable gathering spot away from home and work, like an extension of the front porch.”⁵⁸ Starbucks’ success has over several decades extended this front porch imagery to reach places beyond North American borders, extending Starbuckese (or Starbucksese) into the geography—and vocabulary—of non-Western cultures.⁵⁹

The Starbucks coffeehouse chain has long outgrown its humble beginnings. Originally founded in 1971 in Seattle by three academics, by November 28, 2022, Starbucks had 35,711

⁵⁶ Schultz insists that the stores must communicate the Starbucks Experience through a multi-sensory way: “All the sensory signals have to appeal to the same high standards. The artwork, the music, the aromas, the surfaces all have to send the same subliminal message as the flavor of the coffee: *Everything here is best-of-class.*” See Schultz and Yang, *Pour Your Heart Into It*, 252.

⁵⁷ It should be noted that since Schultz stepped down as head of Starbucks, the mission statement has changed to the following: “With every cup, with every conversation, with every community—we nurture the limitless possibilities of human connection.” See “Mission,” *Starbucks Stories & News* <https://stories.starbucks.com/mission/>

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁹ There are a number of blog posts that discuss Starbuckese. For example, one reddit user posted a picture from their linguistics book on the topic of “Starbuckese”: https://www.reddit.com/r/starbucks/comments/g6tkys/my_linguistics_textbook_has_a_problem_about/

stores worldwide, over 15,000 in the U.S., and with China in second exceeding 6000 stores.⁶⁰ The dizzying rate of the corporation's expansion one could say replicates the feeling of climbing the spiral staircase of the Roastery. Starbucks cafes are everywhere and have infiltrated the spaces and traditions of many non-Western cultures. According to *Starbucks Stories Asia*, "[i]n this next era of accelerated growth at Starbucks, the company expects to operate 9,000 stores across 300 cities in China by 2025, opening one new store nearly every nine hours in China for the next three years."⁶¹ The incredible growth of the Starbucks corporation in 2022 was at an all-time high, as the company itself was continuously "looking up" and "looking out" for new markets. In Fall 2022, the Starbucks Corporation proclaimed they were entering a new era of growth, propelled forward by an "unparalleled reinvention plan," although the Stories and News page used to launch this article also quietly cautioned that the financial predictions in this "forward-looking statement" are "fluid and unpredictable in nature."⁶² This disclaimer, no doubt a result of the corporation's rocky pandemic experience, quietly cautions the customer and investor that this heedless corporate ambition might not be sustainable. In the next chapter, we will more closely analyze Starbucks' own attempt to anchor or ground this dizzying or vertiginous expansion with a more comfortable, common ethos and space—the dream and the romance of a "third place." The final chapter of this thesis will discuss how the COVID-19

⁶⁰ For more statistical information, see "Selected Countries with the largest number of Starbucks Stores worldwide as of October 2022," *statista* (undated): <https://www.statista.com/statistics/306915/countries-with-the-largest-number-of-starbucks-stores-worldwide/>

⁶¹ Niloofar Shaikh, "Starbucks aims to operate 9,000 stores in China by 2025" *Starbucks Stories & News* (September 27, 2022) <https://seekingalpha.com/news/3886241-starbucks-opens-its-6000th-store-in-china-and-expects-to-operate-9000-stores-by-2025> and "Starbucks Opens its 6,000th Store in China," *Starbucks Stories & News* (September 26, 2022): <https://stories.starbucks.com/press/2022/starbucks-opens-its-6000th-store-in-china/>

⁶² "Starbucks enters New Era of Growth driven by Unparalleled Reinvention Plan," *Starbucks Stories & News* (September 13, 2022): <https://stories.starbucks.com/press/2022/starbucks-enters-new-era-of-growth-driven-by-an-unparalleled-reinvention-plan/>

pandemic radically shifted the “Starbucks Experience” as well as Howard Schultz’s dream of “nurturing the human spirit.”

2. The Best Part of Waking Up: Sights, Sounds, Smells...Space?

Take it all in. Sights, sounds, and smells: these three sense perceptions are symbolically represented by the coffee bean, the spatiotemporal history and nutritional information darker than its brew. In addition to their sleek oily resin shine after refinement and the aromas they produce upon grinding, coffee beans also contain a stimulating and addictive substance many coffee dependents habitually (over)consume. Caffeine’s molecular lifeforce, chemically expressed as $C_8H_{10}N_4O_2$ and scientifically known as 1, 3, 7-trimethylxanthine, is poured into millions of Starbucks-branded porcelain mugs, white paper/clear plastic cups, or reusable thermoses belonging to many loyal and newly curious Starbucks consumers daily.⁶³ The sacrosanct beverage is then ritualistically consumed at critical points throughout the day, in a variety of preparations and locations, for both its complex flavour profiles and, at full caffeination, for its mentally energizing and restorative properties. Caffeine is, perhaps, one of the most widely consumed and accepted psychoactive substances because, as Clark mentions in *Starbucked*, it “is so good at boosting one’s attitude, in fact, that researchers have discovered that a strong dose of the stuff does as much to bring up a person’s spirits as cocaine or amphetamines.”⁶⁴ Coffee can also agitate while sharpening focus, with a soft promise to pry open the eyes of its user. In other cases, coffee has been used to create poetry.⁶⁵ Elevating the soft colloquy of sophisticated settings, embellishing weekly meetings, and even the quotidian

⁶³ Colleen Walsh, “How caffeine changed the world,” *The Harvard Gazette* (August 20, 2020): <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/08/author-michael-pollan-discusses-how-caffeine-changed-the-world/>

⁶⁴ Clark, *Starbucked*, 223.

⁶⁵ While I write this dissertation, I am listening to an infinite loop of recorded café sounds as white noise in the background.

tick of blue-collar break clocks, above all, “a good cup of coffee can turn the worst day tolerable, provide an all-important moment of contemplation, rekindle romance.”⁶⁶

Yet as coffeehouse historian Markman Ellis puts it, “As all coffee drinkers know, it does not seduce by the flirtatious charms of sweetness but, rather, has a more insidious effect. It is not pleasant to drink for the first time; it is an acquired taste.”⁶⁷ This unpleasant taste may simply be an indicator of its complex molecular structure that is, for all practical purposes, chemically comparable to “bug poison.” Clark describes how coffee cherries produces a “natural insecticide that developed in plants as a means of short-circuiting the nervous systems of any crawlers who much hazard a munch.”⁶⁸ Though deadly to the fly and the gnat, moderate caffeine consumption is known to be a relatively harmless to humans. Metabolizing caffeine involves the liver which “treats caffeine as a poison and furiously attempts to dismantle it, stripping off methyl groups. It can’t cope with all of them, so quite a few whole caffeine molecules make it past the liver and eventually find a docking place in the brain.”⁶⁹ The molecular compound, according to independent scholar Mark Pendergrast, “mimics the neurotransmitter adenosine, which decreases electrical activity in the brain and inhibits the release of other neurotransmitters. In other words, adenosine slows things down. It lets us rest and probably helps put us to sleep once a day. When caffeine gets to the receptors first, however, it doesn’t let the frustrated adenosine do its job.

Hence, caffeine doesn’t keep us awake in a positive sense—it just blocks the natural mental

⁶⁶ Mark Pendergrast, *Uncommon Grounds: The History of Coffee and How It Transformed Our World* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), xvii.

⁶⁷ Markman Ellis, *The Coffee House: A Cultural History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004), 24.

⁶⁸ Clark, *Starbucked*, 222. Clark writes: “In one study conducted by NASA, researchers dosed common house spiders with several different psychoactive drugs—Benzedrine (a variant of amphetamine), chloral hydrate (a sedative and hypnotic), marijuana, and caffeine—to see what kind of effect each would have on their webs. The tweaked, sedated, and stoned spiders spun decent-looking facsimiles of the standard web, with the necessary hubs and concentric circles. The caffeinated spiders, on the other hand, wove the arachnid equivalent of gibberish, a fractured and haphazard mess.”

⁶⁹ Pendergrast, 412.

brake, preventing adenosine from making us drowsy.”⁷⁰ In other words, caffeine does not allow the brain to relax and reach a resting state. Instead, as Clark describes, “our neurons begin firing more rapidly because they have no way of slowing down.... The body responds to the foreign menace by sending squadrons of liver enzymes to dismantle the caffeine molecules, and after six or so hours things return to normal.”⁷¹ Humorous depictions of over-consuming coffee or caffeine in popular culture promise to “give you wings” (for example, the “Three Hundred Big Boys” episode of *Futurama* or Red Bull beverage advertisements).⁷² Consuming caffeine, in any form—coffee, energy drink, pill, or chocolate bar—leads to chemosensory sensitivity, even an alteration of taste. The user or subject also has an increased heart rate and appears to have a slight increase in lower body strength and increased mental acuity.⁷³ On a caffeine buzz, with less effort one moves and thinks faster or works harder and longer. As *renowned journalist, essayist, and author* Michael Pollan told *The Harvard Gazette*, coffee breaks are “the best evidence of caffeine’s gift to capitalism.”⁷⁴

In extreme cases, consuming caffeine in larger quantities can cause intoxication. This occurs when too much of the chemical is consumed and leads to symptoms “rather similar to those of a panic attack,”⁷⁵ as Pendergrast relates from his own experience. In fact, Antony Wild’s polemical book, *Coffee: A Dark History* reveals that caffeine intoxication has its own entry in the

⁷⁰ Ibid., 412.

⁷¹ Clark, *Starbucked*, 223.

⁷² In this *Futurama* episode that aired on Fox in June 2003, Fry drinks one hundred cups of coffee, starts hallucinating and can move faster than the speed of time. Although I don’t have room to explore this further here, coffee has also frequently been the topic of political satire in popular culture, for example, in Gary Larson’s *The Far Side* comics. In one unfortunate case, coffee sales and advertisements helped fund dictator Idi Amin’s genocidal regime. See Pendergrast’s perceptive study for more on coffee, satire, and politics.

⁷³ See the study by Jozo Grgic et al, “Effects of caffeine intake on muscle strength and power: A systematic review and meta-analysis,” *Journal of International Society of Sports Nutrition* (2018), 1-11.

⁷⁴ Walsh, “How caffeine changed the world,” *The Harvard Gazette* (August 20, 2020):

<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/08/author-michael-pollan-discusses-how-caffeine-changed-the-world/>

⁷⁵ Pendergrast, 414.

USA's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.⁷⁶ Drinking beverages or over-consuming food with too much caffeine can result in what Wild calls “caffeine psychosis, which can produce hallucinations: truck drivers in the USA have reported being pursued by balls of white light, which suggests that caffeine psychosis could explain the widespread belief in UFOs in that country.”⁷⁷ Put simply, drinking coffee plays a large part in cognitive processes, particularly in how the world appears and how we experience it. Coffee is often advertised as a temporary elixir for depression and exhaustion, offering a quick “pick me up” that will encourage the consumer to “look up” in better spirits. However, in extreme cases, coffee poses threats to physical health and mental wellness.⁷⁸

3. Eastern Perks

And yet, as poetic or divinely inspiring as its taste and aroma may be for some, the history of coffee is lined with equally bitter controversy. Long before caffeine psychosis was diagnosed, the sensation was thought to have been produced by consuming the coffee cherries which, when eaten raw, induced frantic and frisky behaviours. Pendergrast, Clark, and Wild all illustrate the rather humorous origin of coffee by narrating a story about an Ethiopian goatherd named Kaldi who one day saw that his goats did not respond to his whistle call:

Running around the corner of a narrow trail, Kaldi suddenly came upon the goats. Under the thick rain forest canopy, which allowed the sun to sift through in sudden bright splotches, the goats were running about, butting one another, dancing on their hind legs, and bleating excitedly. In wined wonder, the boy stood gaping at them. *They must be bewitched*, he thought. *What else could it be?*” After consuming the coffee cherries that

⁷⁶ Antony Wild, *Coffee: A Dark History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 11. Wild's study productively draws on numerous disciplines and perspectives including alchemy, anthropology, and politics.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

⁷⁸ Adding caffeine to Coca-Cola and other soft drinks was called into question on account of its poisonous qualities, along with brief periods of television advertisement when actors flirted “over freeze-dried coffee in commercials positively dripping with sexual innuendo, sensuality, and intrigue.” See Pendergrast's collection of image plates for more bizarre commercial ads for coffee in *Uncommon Grounds*.

his goats were seen eating, eventually he was just as animated; “Kaldi was frisking with his goats. Poetry and song spilled out of him. He felt that he would never be tired or grouchy again. Kaldi told his father about the magical trees, the word spread, and soon coffee became an integral part of Ethiopian culture.”⁷⁹

The origins of coffee consumption are shrouded in myth; indeed, the quotidian practice of coffee drinking has long been said to spill from this notorious fable. The coffee bean itself traveled to the Southern Arabian Peninsula through the port city of *Al Mokha*.⁸⁰ According to Ellis, coffee drinking first emerged as a cultural “practice in southern regions of the Arabian peninsular in the early fourteenth century, although knowledge of the coffee bean and the coffee shrub among physicians and herbalists can be dated some centuries before that. Nonetheless the Ottoman and, before that, the Arab, history of coffee is a difficult story to tell, as there is little firm evidence and the story is confused, and enlivened, by some fairly tall stories.”⁸¹ What one can say with certainty, however, is that coffee, colonization and the slave trade are inextricably linked. The bitter controversy of coffee is wrapped up in colonial history. Some historians believe slaves on route to Yemen first brought coffee cherries in their pockets as a food source. Walter Miyanari claims that “*Coffee* was brought to *Yemen* by *slaves* of Sudanese origin” and was first commercially grown in Yemen.⁸² Ultimately, “The spiralling international demand for *Yemeni coffee* during the seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries made a steady supply of *slaves* indispensable.”⁸³ Around 1708, seedlings from a coffee tree planted in Paris were brought to the

⁷⁹ Pendergrast, 4-5.

⁸⁰ Mocha coffee is of course named after the port of *Al-Mokha* on the Red Sea.

⁸¹ Wild, 46.

⁸² Walter Miyanari, *Aloha from Coffee Island* (Honolulu: Savant Books, 2008), 75.

⁸³ Junius P. Rodriguez, *Historical Encyclopedia of World Slavery, Volume I: A-K* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1997), 483.

New World by the East Indian Company, since slave plantations in the American colonies had lower costs than the artisanal production in Yemen.⁸⁴

According to Wild, the production of coffee as we know it today was made by boiling water with crushed coffee cherries and was “discovered by an alchemist who identified in its transformation the means of bringing men closer to God, in the same way that the use of communion wine, which was variously forbidden and allowed in different branches of the Christian ritual, has underlying it much of the same transformational thinking.”⁸⁵ Spiritual themes of awakening, clarity, and enlightenment over time became linked to the bean’s intense somatic and neurological experiences.⁸⁶ Wild wonders whether “the sudden dawn of self-awareness in the Genesis story concerning the forbidden fruit of the ‘Tree of Knowledge’ is something that could have been prompted by a psychoactive substance such as caffeine”, not the apple shared by Adam and Eve.⁸⁷

Coinciding with these religious stories, harvesting, and percolating coffee was also affiliated with Sufism as part of religious ceremonies practiced in Ethiopia in the early fifteenth-century. As Clark writes, “It took seven centuries of culinary experimentation before the Yemeni mystic Ali Ibn Umar al-Shadhili found the perfect use for the beans, in about AD 1200: steeping them in water. The drink, he found, helped him stay awake during prayers, and thus coffee brought him closer to God.” As Wild puts it, this “transformation of coffee from dull, sublunary vegetable matter into a substance of almost divine aroma and extraordinary flavour is a compelling symbol of what alchemy and its Sufi followers wished to achieve with their spiritual

⁸⁴ Tony Ward, “Coffee,” in *Encyclopedia of World Trade: From Ancient Times to the Present, Volumes 1-4*, ed. Cynthia Clark Northrup (New York: Routledge, 2005), 186

⁸⁵ Wild, 46.

⁸⁶ Clark, 22.

⁸⁷ Wild, 18. The author continues: “Such awareness (or perhaps, gnosis) is also an attribute of language and thought, without which it is quiescent.”

quest. In every sense, then, coffee brought them closer to God and it became a vital component of their communal prayers.”⁸⁸ Caffeine was considered a powerful substance that could expand epistemological prowess or widen the spiritual capacities of practicing devotees, perhaps preparing for divine inspiration or call.

Though the imbibers’ intentions of consuming coffee were presumably pious, this new tradition was not received well by religious elders and leaders. Pendergrast observes how “many reformers were convinced that coffee was an evil drug whose immoderate use could lead to insanity or even death.”⁸⁹ In a discussion of its origins in the Middle East, Pendergrast tells us that the drink was “banned as a creator of revolutionary sedition in Arab counties and in Europe. It has been vilified as the worst health destroyer on earth and praised as the boon of [humankind].”⁹⁰ As coffee migrated near Mecca in the early sixteenth-century, Wild clarifies that the novelty of coffee “represented something of a puzzle to Islamic orthodoxy. Because of the strict prohibition on any form of intoxication, coffee was a genuinely sticky issue which required a ruling.”⁹¹ According to the *sunna*, stanzas of commentary on the Qur’an, the core Islamic concept of *marqaha* questioned the role of coffee alongside *khamr* (wine) as forms of inebriation that would lead Muslims away from prayer and practice. However, coffee was eventually permitted because, other than doing bodily harm, it tended to only produce a form of melancholia rather than the insobriety wine would incite.⁹² Coffee, then, was not blamed for acts of transgression against the community or distraction from God, but was used instead to keep Muslims awake through the night for ceremonies, prayer or, according to Ellis, to play

⁸⁸ Ibid., 47.

⁸⁹ Pendergrast, 94.

⁹⁰ Ibid, xvii.

⁹¹ Wild, 49.

⁹² Ibid, 50.

recreational or intellectual activities such as “chess or backgammon.”⁹³ Though coffee itself was a contentious issue in Islamic law, Wild points out that it was the *place* in which coffee was consumed that was most contested and said to influence societal and religious deviance.

As Wild documents, Islamic places of worship were primarily used at night for prayer. Yet they were known to gather people from various regions, a medley mix of those who may have deviated from their faith or, in more dire circumstances, questioned the legitimacy of Islamic law. Recreational games available in these houses suggest that these places drew intellectuals, scholars, and conversationalists who would also engage in some form of “play” with moralities while consuming caffeine. These places of worship were extravagantly decorated, as Clark writes: “Ottoman sultans liked to lounge on cushions as a slave brought a gilded, diamond-encrusted demitasse of coffee—perched on a bejeweled saucer called a *zarf*—to their lips. Then men of Constantinople would gather in plush dens to drink coffee brewed in huge cauldrons and seasoned with cardamom, saffron, or opium.”⁹⁴ Wild notes how archaeological evidence gathered elsewhere at Zabid has “shown that initially (c.1450) coffee was almost certainly served amongst the Sufi community at their *dhikrs* (communal worship, usually at night) from a ladle dipped into a glazed bowl named a *majdur*. Previously, this sort of pottery had not been glazed, which suggests that coffee was deemed of higher importance than other liquids.”⁹⁵

Robert Walsh, a European traveler and chaplain visiting Constantinople in 1839, stumbled upon a Turkish “*caffinet*” and in great detail described its playful culture (Figure 4). First shocked by the confusing city-space, he lamented that there “are no straight spacious

⁹³ Ellis, 14.

⁹⁴ Clark, 22-23.

⁹⁵ Wild, 47.

avenues ... no names to the streets, to direct his way; no advertisements on walls; no women behind counters; no public places, for walking or amusement; no monuments displaying taste... no libraries or news-rooms; no club-houses; no theatres, or public exhibitions).”⁹⁶ He complained that they were “no shops blazing with the glare of gas; no companies flocking to or from balls; or parties or public assemblies, of any kind, thronging the streets after night-fall.”⁹⁷ He writes the European traveller is thus perpetually lost and “gets entangled in crooked, narrow, steep lanes, where the pavement is so imperfect that he is every minute in danger of breaking his leg between the loose angular stones...”⁹⁸ Stumbling upon the *caffinet*, however, Walsh is suddenly reminded of home and the “social habits of a European city.”⁹⁹ He carefully describes this place of indulgence:

The only places of public resort that seem in any way to remind him of the social habits of a European city, are the taverns and coffee-houses. Even these are distinguished by customs peculiarly Oriental.... The *caffinet*, or coffee-house, is something more splendid, and the Turk expends all his notions of finery and elegance on this, his favourite place of indulgence. The edifice is generally decorated in a very gorgeous manner, supported on pillars, and open in front. It is surrounded on the inside by a raised platform, covered with mats or cushions, on which the Turks sit cross-legged. On one side are musicians, generally Greeks, with mandolins and tambourines, accompanying singers, whose melody consists in vociferation; and the loud and obstreperous concert forms a strong contrast to the stillness and taciturnity of Turkish meetings. On the opposite side are men, generally of a respectable class, some of whom are found here every day, and all day long, dozing under the double influence of coffee and tobacco. The coffee is served in very small cups, not larger than egg-cups, grounds and all, without cream or sugar, and so black, thick, and bitter, that it has been aptly compared to “stewed soot.” Besides the ordinary *chibouk* for tobacco, there is another implement, called *narghillai*, used for smoking in a *caffinet*, of a more elaborate construction. It consists of a glass vase, filled with water, and often scented with distilled rose or other flowers. This is surmounted with a silver or brazen head, from which issues a long flexible tube; a pipe-bowl is placed on the top, and so constructed that the smoke is drawn, and comes bubbling up through the water, cool and fragrant to the mouth. A peculiar kind of tobacco, grown at Shiraz in

⁹⁶ Robert Walsh, *Constantinople and the Scenery of the Seven Churches of Asia Minor. Illustrated. In a series of drawings from nature by Thomas Allom. First and second series* (London and Paris: Fisher Son & Co., 1839), 51.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 52.

Persia, and resembling small pieces of cut leather, is used with this instrument [...] In the centre of the room is generally an artificial fountain, bubbling and playing in summer, and round it vases of flowers, with piles of the sweet-scented melons of Cassaba, to keep them cool, and add, by their odour, to the fragrance of the flowers.¹⁰⁰



Figure 4 - Interior of a Turkish Caffinet (Robert Walsh, *Constantinople and the Scenery of the Seven Churches of Asia Minor*. Illustration by Thomas Allom, 1839)

In this performative “*caffinet*” space (Figure 4) the European traveler not only encounters musicians, he also meets story-tellers or *medacs* (Figure 5). The Oriental *caffinet*, Walsh writes, is soaked in melancholy tales. The clergyman at one point enters a *caffinet* for respite and “while he partakes of the refreshments offered him, some hoary-headed sentinel enters into conversation with him, and tells him the melancholy fate of Lorenzo the Hakim Bashi.”¹⁰¹ Another famous story-teller Kiz-Achmet, the author tells us, was even the proprietor of a coffeehouse. “He keeps a coffee-house himself, and adds to his profits by entertaining his company; but at festivals he is invited to others, and paid liberally for his exhibition.” Communal story-telling takes centre stage. During the story-teller’s tale, the author writes, “stools were

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 56-57.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 60.

placed in semicircles in the streets before the *caffinet*, and refreshment sent from the house.”¹⁰²

In a grand communal gesture, even those outside the coffeehouse were invited to hear and see the *medac*: “A small platform is laid on the open window, so that the audience within and without may hear and see. On this the story-teller mounts, and continues his narrative sometimes till midnight. The excellence of some of these men in their department, is surprising, and altogether out of keeping with the dull and phlegmatic character of a Turk. In humour and detail, they are equal to the best European actors; and sustain singly, and without any aid, a whole drama of various characters.”¹⁰³ The clergyman writes that the *medac* called Kiz Achmet or “Achmet the Maid” who owned and ran a coffeehouse “was particularly famous. He has been engaged during the Bairam at a salary of eight hundred piastres; and the sultan often sent for him, to entertain the ladies of the harem, though his stories on ordinary occasions were of a very coarse and indelicate character.”¹⁰⁴

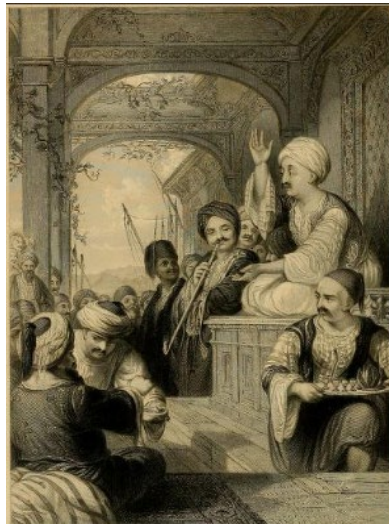


Figure 5: “The most distinguished story-teller of the capital.” Kiz-Achmet” (Robert Walsh, *Constantinople and the Scenery of the Seven Churches of Asia Minor*. Illustration by Thomas Allom, 1839)

¹⁰² Ibid., 61.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

Concerns about the coarseness of coffeehouse culture and the mind-altering properties of coffee and other substances consumed in such lavish dens or places of workshop, filled with chatter and incense, ultimately led to mob riots in various Middle Eastern regions. In the introduction to his volume on coffeehouse history, W. Scott Haine notes, however, that in “1511 in Mecca, Islamic jurists decreed that although some places that served the beverage might pose a threat to public morality, the drink itself could not be outlawed simply on the supposition of its evil effects without just proof. This principle, as Ralph Haddox has shown, became part of Islamic law and ensured that coffeehouses, although often shut, were never banned—as was the sale and consumption of alcohol.”¹⁰⁵ Separate laws governing coffee and alcohol were drafted; one of the celebratory documents praising coffee, as Ellis notes, “a beautiful example of Arabic calligraphy,”¹⁰⁶ would eventually make its way to Europe as a symbol of the Enlightenment.¹⁰⁷ Haine mentions that one such treatise written by scholar Abdalcafer Alanzari in 1587 can be considered “one of the first publications reflecting the intellectual life of coffee and cafes.”¹⁰⁸ From folklore to systematically written defenses, a unique cataloguing of the coffee bean charted

¹⁰⁵ W. Scott Haine, “Introduction,” in *The Thinking Space: The Café as a Cultural Institution in Paris, Italy and Vienna*, ed. Leona Rittner, W. Scott Haine, and Jefferey H. Jackson (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2013), 3.

¹⁰⁶ Ellis, *The Coffee House: A Cultural History*, 15.

¹⁰⁷ Markman Ellis, *Eighteenth Century Coffee House Culture, Volume 1: Restoration Satire*, ed. Markman Ellis (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2006), xxv.

¹⁰⁸ Haine, 4. Ellis’s illuminating account of the history of coffee and the coffee house also points out that the text by Alanzari entitled “What ought to be sincerely and distinctly believ’d concerning Coffee that is, if it be lawful for a Mussulman to drink it” penned in 996 Hegira or 1587 AD “discussed the etymology of the word *Cahouah* (coffee), its properties and history, then surveyed the religious disputes at Mecca and finished with a collection of verses in praise of coffee. As well as a polemical defence of coffee drinking, situated within controversy on its legality in Islamic law, this document was a beautiful example of Arabic calligraphy.” According to Ellis, “when the Marquis de Nointel—appointed the French ambassador to the Sublime Porte in 1672—returned from Constantinople in 1679, he brought back to Paris a copy among his collection of oriental treasures intended for the Bibliotheque du Roy of Louis XIV. There, the manuscript was translated by Antoine Galland, an Arabic scholar and traveller who later wrote the famous twelve-volume *contes arabes*, *The Thousand and One Nights*. Galland’s translation formed the basis of his treatise *De L’Origine et du Progrez du Café*, published in a small edition in Caen in 1699, which became central evidence in its subsequent treatises on coffee by the French travel writer Jean de La Roque in 1716 and the Scottish physician James Douglas in 1727” (Ellis, *The Coffee House: A Cultural History*, 15-16).

out the migration of knowledge, spices, and culture as the “wine of Islam”¹⁰⁹ made its way into the figurative and literal cups of European civilization through merchants, botanists, and philosophers.¹¹⁰ By the 1560s, the Turkish mecca of Istanbul boasted more than 600 coffeehouses.¹¹¹ As Wild writes: “Coffee was introduced into Europe by the Ottomans during the seventeenth century via two channels: diplomacy and war. In the former case, it was the Turkish ambassador who brought coffee to the attention of the French, and in a manner befitting a meeting of the most powerful empires of East and West. In 1669, the Court of the Sun King, Louis XIV, at Versailles was nearing its magnificent zenith when news arrived that Sultan Muhammed IV had sent Soliman Aga to Paris for an audience with the young King.”¹¹²

Almost simultaneously, the migration of coffee near the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth centuries started to empty the coffee bean of its mysterious properties. It soon shed its religious (particularly Islamic) connotations. As a vehicle of “Enlightenment” thinking, coffee became wrapped up in a battle of European colonial powers. In the early 1600s coffee started growing outside of Yemen, imported from both Middle Eastern and African regions and exported to European settlements and beyond. Although wine would keep its place in religious contexts, coffee from this point on was less frequently integrated into orthodox liturgy. Drinking coffee bestowed a new power on those who could stay awake longer, discoursing into the night, but coffee’s powers were slowly stripped of their religious connotations by intellectuals in the name of science. One important “man of science,” as Ellis notes, was philosopher Francis Bacon who, just before dying in 1626, wrote at length about “the

¹⁰⁹ Clark, 22.

¹¹⁰ For a more detailed explanation of how coffee migrated to Europe, see Wild, *Coffee: A Dark History*, 57-64.

¹¹¹ Ross W. Jamieson, “The Essence of Commodification: Caffeine Dependencies in the Early Modern World,” *Journal of Social History* (Winter 2001), 275.

¹¹² Wild, 57

physiological effects of a range of natural products, grouping together four similar officinals, including coffee, tobacco, the opium poppy and betel (*Piper betle*), a leaf chewed as a mild stimulant.”¹¹³ Citing its soothing properties for the brain and the heart, Bacon also pointed out how coffee helped with digestion when consumed in moderate amounts. Bacon’s inclusion of coffee with other powerful mind-altering substances compelled fellow scientists to research psychoactive herbs and plants. For Bacon, “they shared an ability to ‘condense the spirits’ or change the emotional state of the consumer, rendering them ‘Strong and Alegar’, or resourceful and lively.”¹¹⁴ Coffee was no longer cloaked in religion, but was now equated with medicine; this early scientific research helped secure coffee as “London apothecary’s *materia medica*.”¹¹⁵ It was later used in hospitals as an anodyne to treat minor illnesses and even in some cases to encourage blood circulation. But as coffee started to appear in markets and bazaars, the drink leveraged itself more as a recreational drink rather than a remedial tincture. This piqued the interests of inquisitive British scholars and seasoned merchants alike who wanted to mine its mysterious properties.

W. Scott Haine observes that the first coffeehouses attracted these vendors and intellectuals who were as interested in cultural exchange as they were in exchanging textiles, spices, metals, and knowledge. Coffeehouses first appeared “in England—Oxford in 1650 and London by 1652—arriving while the English Revolution was in full swing; and later in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century were tied to the emergence of the newspaper and

¹¹³ Ellis, *The Coffee House*, 22.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

modern journalism.”¹¹⁶ Although the precise origins of the first coffeehouses are unclear, many sources note that London was their place of inception.¹¹⁷

4. English Coffeehouses

During a time of civil unease with rumours of plague outbreaks in neighbouring cities, a few neighbourhoods in London saw an increase in wandering civilians secretly gathering in private homes where prohibited acts and events such as “gambling, Christmas, cockfights and football matches”¹¹⁸ were held frequently, as Ellis notes. One notable merchant by the name of Daniel Edwards, a “prodigious drinker of the new beverage,”¹¹⁹ housed many of these activities, where he also provided coffee imported from Smyrna to a group of drifters and close friends. Encumbered by lack of sleep or ailments, people found these houses appealing because they served a mild sedative that could uplift the weary traveler. Ellis points out that “The pleasing aspect of drinking coffee, the Levant merchants knew well enough, was that it did not make you drunk and, in fact, it made you feel better and brighter.”¹²⁰ As Edwards’s home grew in popularity, however, he found that offering his house for people to coalesce was physically demanding and took time away from his primary ventures. “The trouble with this collective coffee drinking, Edwards realized, was that there were so many men coming to his house that it was impeding the family’s work—the ‘novelty’ was ‘drawing too much company to him,’”¹²¹ Ellis writes. To avoid the dread of city officials fining Edwards for housing people in his own

¹¹⁶ Haine, 4.

¹¹⁷ Antony Wild’s historical account lists Oxford as the official place where the coffee “beverage made its English debut. In 1651 one Jacob, a Lebanese Jew, took a room in the Angel Inn on the High, where coffee ‘was by some who delighted in noveltie, drank’. Cirques Jobson, another Jew, opened the second a year later. Encouraged by a group of young students, an apothecary and royalist, Arthur Tillyard, opened the third in 1655, to sell ‘coffey publicly in his house against All Soules College’.” (88). Also see Aytoun Ellis’s *The Penny University: A History of the Coffee House* (London: Secker & Warbung, 1956).

¹¹⁸ Ellis, *The Coffee House*, 29.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

apartment in times of curfew and plague, Edwards switched locales and started a lucrative business that would change how coffee was consumed. The opportunity lied in setting up a place where coffee could be consumed in a manner similar to that of the “sociable nature of the ‘Cahue-hane’ or coffee-houses [Edwards] encountered [in Ottoman Smyrna], which he called ‘cabarets publics de cahue’.”¹²² The new coffeehouse was housed in a shed near St. Michael’s Parish in an alleyway next to its cloister, Edwards hired a Greek man by the name of Pasqua Rosée, whose first language was not English but could nonetheless cook and could brew coffee, to operate London’s first coffeehouse (which offered shelter, respite, and a space for informal gathering) in 1652.¹²³

Though coffee itself had long shed its religious affiliation or connotations, ironically this nascent coffeehouse appeared close to, if not on, Church property. Edwards rented a space in the Cornhill neighbourhood near St. Michael’s Church and a nexus of marketplaces, where Rosée brewed and sold coffee to the public out of a shed.¹²⁴ According to Ellis, “sheds were common in the London retail trade in this period: the main feature of which was a shelf—called ‘the stall’—on which the goods were displayed for sale.... If Rosée’s shed was like the others in the

¹²² Ibid., 28.

¹²³ According to Ellis, Pasqua Rosée’s “English was not perfect: it was presumably his third language, after Greek and Turkish. English satirists found much to mock in his accent. In *A Broadside against Coffee; Or, the Marriage of the Turk* (1672), the anonymous satirist explains that the first coffee-man in London, Pasqua Rosée, was a lowly coachman in the service of Daniel Edwards, recording his strongly accented speech: ‘*Me no good Engalash!*’ In this broken English Rosée promoted the beneficial effects of coffee, playing ‘the Quack to salve his Stygian stuff’, recommending his beverage as ‘*Ver boon for de stomach, de Cough, de Ptisick*’” (33).

¹²⁴ “The alley was dominated by St Michael’s parish church, described by John Stow in 1603 as ‘fayre and beautifull’, but ‘greatly blemished’ since the mid sixteenth century by a series of buildings erected around it. Various pressures, from the need to house a rapidly growing population to the desire to lock up the parish’s wealth in bricks and mortar, led the Rector and the Churchwardens to permit these buildings, first along the frontage to Cornhill, then later around the edges of the green and pretty churchyard. Though no more than six feet wide at points, St Michael’s Alley was a thoroughfare, as it opened through passageways under houses on to several other alleys: George Yard leading to Lombard Street and Bell Yard leading to Gracechurch Street. The cloister had a beautiful internal courtyard surrounded with an arcade of columns supporting an arched ceiling round a peaceful central garden. From there, passers-by could walk through several gates into the walled churchyard, with its large wooden pulpit cross mid the grass and memorial stones. This was the spot on which they chose to open Rosee’s coffee shop” (Ellis, *The Coffee House*, 31).

churchyard, it was made of deal boards: thin planks of pine or fir, painted and decorated to attract custom. His shop sign, identifying his business, was said to be an image of himself, dressed in some Levantine clothing.... Rosée's shed must have had some sort of hearth or brazier to heat water to make coffee."¹²⁵ The success of Rosée's shop and his proficiency with brewing techniques was measured by the number of people drawn back to taste coffee again and again. The coffee shed, in close proximity to the church and the wider marketplace in Cornhill, was also easy to access. Local alehouse owners who operated in larger buildings were allegedly intimidated by Rosée's smaller shop, which radically cut into their business and exploited a method where people could socialize without inebriation and extortion: drinking in public. According to Ellis, "it seemed that Rosée's coffee-house was an interloper invading their trade and stealing their livelihood, so they reported him to an alderman, who brought notice of his infraction to the Lord Mayor's office. This was, of course, a matter of interpretation: Rosée's was not an illegal tipping house selling 'ale, beer or other strong drink without licence', nor was it a disorderly house 'harbouring rogues or master-less men'. But it was, equally, more than a little like such places. What his coffee shop shared with the tavern, it was plain to see, was a communal and convivial sociability."¹²⁶ As people clamoured for more coffee, perhaps due to its nature as an energizing beverage, it was clear that the shed could no longer support all the bustling crowds and newcomers who wanted a taste. Edwards eventually partnered Rosée with Grocer and apprentice Christopher Bowman who helped (and eventually replaced) Rosée by relocating the St. Michael's Alley shop or shed into an abandoned house Bowman and Edwards found nearby.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Ellis, *The Coffee House*, 32.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹²⁷ According to Ellis, "no visual images of Bowman's coffee-house in St. Michael's Alley survive" (37).

In its newly renovated home, the coffee shed turned into a coffee *house*. This was a monumental move for both Bowman and Rosée as this not only provided shelter for additional patrons, but opened up the opportunity for wanderers to gather without purchasing coffee. Bowman's coffee house also set a new standard for the importance of interiors, setting an example for how contemporary coffee houses are designed up to this present day.

Unlike the rickety shed, the new house featured a solid “timber-framed structures, with lath and plaster or brick infilling, double-storeyed bay windows and jettied upper floors extending out over the passageway below.”¹²⁸ In his introductory chapter to a collection of essays in *Cafés and Bars: The Architecture of Public Display*, Grafe emphasizes how this renovation “offered what a new urban middle class was gradually learning to expect from the home and in its various forms this proposal of selling not only a beverage but also a warm, cozy and convivial environment became the common model for places of sociability.”¹²⁹ This new space contained within it “a range of rooms and fitted with fires and stoves, the coffee house provided an environment that was more spacious, refined and warmer than most homes of the time that emulated the domestic arrangements its visitor may have aspired to, but would not have been able to afford.”¹³⁰ In this way, Bowman's coffee house appeared more like a home in which people could spend increasing amounts of time, converse and observe others. A striking feature of this new establishment, Ellis and Grafe point out, was the second floor of the four-storied

¹²⁸ Ellis, *The Coffee House*, 37-38. Ellis provides two accounts of Rosée's departure. In *The Coffee House*, Ellis states that “Rosée dropped out of the picture when the wardens became acquainted with his alien status. Houghton remarked cryptically that sometime after 1654 ‘*Pasqua* for some Misdemeanour run away, and *Bowman* had the whole Trade’. In any case, after appearing in the churchwardens’ accounts for this year, issued in April 1658, Rosée is not mentioned again, although his name lived on in the coffee-house” (37). In *Eighteenth Century Coffee House Culture*, Ellis states that Rosée “had to leave the business (perhaps because as an alien he was disqualified from trading in the City).” (xxvii).

¹²⁹ Grafe, 18.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

house. Here a “substantial”¹³¹ coffee *room* was placed, a loft with more fireplaces and chairs where men exclusively sipped hot coffee “conversed, gossiped and transacted business.”¹³² The coffee house and its dedicated coffee rooms granted the public access to a form of social exclusivity behind closed doors, which began introducing the notion of privacy in public spaces, a notion that sociologist Jürgen Habermas would more fully elaborate on in 1991 through his readings of Hannah Arendt. “What Bowman achieved in his coffee-house,” Ellis notes, “with its dedicated, specifically furnished coffee room...was a retail revolution, although such places quickly lost their strangeness....[t]he coffee-house to many was a haven of civility.”¹³³ Though for many Londoners the concept of the coffee house was a new and unexplored social arena, for others it became a place strangers and patrons frequented daily. Slowly it became a more familiar part of London’s cultural scene.

The awareness, experienced by those who attended more often, was not only due to the impartial and informal conditions created by the coffee house. In various readings of works by poet Samuel Butler between 1667 and 1669, Ellis shows how coffee itself started to symbolize new beginnings and cultural and social intermingling. “The ‘coffee market’, [Butler] says, is ‘where people of all qualities and conditions meet, to trade in foreign drinks and newes, ale, smoak, and controversy. The coffee-house, he continues, ‘admits of no distinction of persons, but gentlemen, mechanic, lord, and scoundrel mix, and are all of a piece, as if they were resolv’d into their first principles’. The coffee-house is a social leveller, reducing all (or elevating all) to their essential quality, their first principle. And the coffee, it seems, is central to this social alchemy: ‘all manner of opinions are profest and maintain’d in the coffee-house, ‘to the last drop of

¹³¹ Ellis, *Eighteenth-Century Coffee House Culture*, xxvii.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 38.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 38.

coffee', which, he says, is due to 'the sovereign virtue it has to strengthen politic notions'.¹³⁴ The mind-altering effects of coffee together with the new, liminal space in which it was consumed created a unique social environment. Jürgen Habermas later turned to coffee houses when contemplating the "institutional criteria" that work together to generate an observable publicness: "First, they preserved a kind of social intercourse that, far from presupposing the equality of status, disregarded status altogether. The tendency replaced the celebration of rank with a tact befitting equals....Laws of the market were suspended as were laws of the state."¹³⁵ In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas taxonomized the salons and coffeehouses of eighteenth-century England to demonstrate the origins of a publicness that operated on the soft rules of a democratic nature. According to Habermas, these early institutions arguably set the tone and aesthetics for the visualization and planning of democracy. They also set new standards for what contemporary cafés and coffee shops continue to look like today.

5. Parisian Cafés: "Coffeehouses in Vogue"

Not surprisingly, shops emulating Rosée's coffeehouse that emerged in, around, and outside London eventually started to stock exotic goods, like tobacco and chocolate; other coffeehouses provided discreet services to the public. Their appearance shockingly close to churches and libraries expressed a cultural *Zeitgeist*, as Wilde says, attesting to "a spirit of the city at that time, dedicated to pleasure."¹³⁶ Ellis's explains how early coffeehouses close to churches in a central part of the city served "as the market for news, [and] scapegoated as a kind

¹³⁴ Ellis, *The Coffee House*, 49.

¹³⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996), 36.

¹³⁶ Wilde, 88.

of brothel, or market for sex.”¹³⁷ Adding to this, Grafe notes how these coffeehouses “seem to have acted as postal centres, employment agencies, auction rooms, lost property offices, business addresses, gambling dens and Masonic lodges.”¹³⁸ The diverse façades and names each coffee house took, including the title of ‘Penny University,’ suggests that the coffeehouse could conform to the nomadic scholar’s fantasy. This led to the emergence of what Wild calls the “Coffee House Man,” an equally plastic male citizen who could with dexterity “grapple equally with social, political, and scientific issues.”¹³⁹ The Coffee House Man, perhaps similar to Benjamin’s *flâneur*, contributed to the development of new social environments that encouraged citizens to start candidly playing with one’s relationship to the community. The transient nature of the Coffee House Man reinforces the liminal nature of the coffee house itself as a place of endless possibility.¹⁴⁰ Coffeehouses create a network of safe transitory spaces that attract the weary and unrested. They are perhaps the precursor to Marc Augé’s theory of the non-place, the threshold of introducing both inexperienced and seasoned travelers to new experiences.¹⁴¹

Though the coffeehouse was important in setting the tone and scenery for emerging institutions, Grafe points out that they “coincided with the emergence of quite another cultural concept, that of domesticity and ‘home’ as a place, a space and,” of interest to this dissertation, a

¹³⁷ Ellis, *The Coffee House*, 44.

¹³⁸ Grafe, 18.

¹³⁹ Wild, 86. As Wild notes, the coffee house as Penny University was inspired by “Hermeticism, which...had been preserved in Islamic culture during the European Dark Ages, was the hugely influential esoteric philosophy that became of the intellectual fuels of the Renaissance, and was also the undercurrent of the Enlightenment. It found expression in diverse forms, one of which was the early seventeenth century Rosicrucian movement. A key tenet of the Rosicrucians was the existence of an ‘Invisible College’, an ethereal academy of seekers after truth. There is more than an echo of the ‘Invisible College’ in the informal, yet highly instructive environment of the London coffee houses. They were often called ‘Penny Universities’ because the price of entry was a penny, but the knowledge that could be gleaned there was invaluable.” (85).

¹⁴⁰ On the term liminality as employed by Victor and Edith Turner to discuss rites of passage and the concept of “communitas” or what Edith Turner now calls “inspired fellowship,” see Edith L.B. Turner, *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

¹⁴¹ See Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 2008).

“mode of behaviour.”¹⁴² Even though the newly christened coffeehouse was public, it was more importantly as Grafe notes the domestication of the public, a public space in a sense modelled on a re-modelled “home.” The question remains: if domesticity ushers in a sense of security, even among strangers, how could such a “dwelling” reveal or structure identity, community or encode behaviors? Martin Heidegger in his homage to mad Romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin “Poetically man dwells” reminds us that dwelling involves thinking, social relationships, art/aesthetics and a being in the world. Within urban space, the café as urban historian Graham Ward notes “could mark a corner in the city where... alienation is overcome. Where there is a sense of dwelling. And, in that dwelling, there is ... an imaginative inspiration.”¹⁴³

Historian Tabetha Ewing insightfully argues that Habermas’s work on the public sphere paints the image of the Parisian café “as a free space of bourgeois intercourse that functioned independently of the royal court, as a hub in the new world of urban culture and information consumption....The café helped engender a new wherewithal for bourgeois, royal subjects to speak.”¹⁴⁴ Ewing’s article situates the coffeehouse as an “informal performance space” where the café “enabled its habitués to try on new identities.”¹⁴⁵ In this form of coffee house play, she writes, “café patrons used the space for intellectual and social performances, linking critical discussion to aesthetics and theatricality. The close relationship of cafés to theatres meant that remarkable conversations in cafés were often connected to dramatic performances and explicitly

¹⁴² Grafe, 18.

¹⁴³ Graham Ward, “The Making of the Modern Metropolis,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Theology and Modern European Thought*, ed. Nicolas Adams, George Pattison, and Graham Ward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 64.

¹⁴⁴ Tabitha Ewing, “Bad Places: Sedition, Everyday Speech, and Performance in the Café of Enlightenment Paris,” in *The Thinking Space: The Café as a Cultural Institution in Paris, Italy and Vienna*, ed. Leona Rittner, W. Scott Haine, and Jefferey H. Jackson (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2013), 68-69.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

compared to them.”¹⁴⁶ Ewing’s perceptive analysis dovetails nicely with Habermas’s second observation of institutional criteria in the public sphere, that of interpreting or performing literature and communicating news for the purpose of creating sociability. For Habermas, the collection of discourse by means of journals and essays circulating in coffee houses was itself subject to social commodification; “as commodities they became in principle generally accessible. They no longer remained components of the Church’s and court’s publicity of representation; that is precisely what was meant by the loss of their aura of extraordinariness and by the profaning of their once sacramental character. The private people for whom the cultural product became available as a commodity profaned it inasmuch as they had to determine its meaning on their own (by way of rational communication with one another), verbalize it, and thus state explicitly what its implicitness for so long could assert its authority. As Raymond Williams demonstrates, ‘art’ and ‘culture’ owe their modern meaning of spheres separate from the reproduction of social life to the eighteenth century.”¹⁴⁷

As coffee sales exponentially grew in London, the cultural transmission of coffee and the ways in which it flowed through literature “was more like a plague, or virus,”¹⁴⁸ Ellis concludes. “As all coffee drinkers know, it does not seduce by the flirtatious charms of sweetness but, rather, has a more insidious effect. It is not pleasant to drink for the first time; it is an acquired taste. But it does have rewarding effects and it is habit-forming. Coffee changes people. Moreover, it changes the way they interact with their friends, their fellow citizens and their

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 69.

¹⁴⁷ Habermas, 36-37.

¹⁴⁸ Ellis, *The Coffee House*, 24.

community. The proliferation of coffee-house drinkers and the establishment of coffee-houses were the first signs of this change.”¹⁴⁹

Clark and other historians point to an account, for example, that illuminates how cafés in Paris also poached Eastern cultures of their symbolism, offering them a fantasy world where the public could live out Orientalist fantasies vicariously. Clark notes that the year 1669 saw the enmeshing of Turkish culture and French society when Turkish ambassador Suleiman Aga

journeyed to Paris to deliver an important message from his sultan to Louis XIV.... During his stay Suleiman Aga turned his charm on the Parisian society women, inviting them to his lavish quarters for elaborate, dimly lit coffee ceremonies, complete with Oriental rugs and exotically dressed Nubian servants. These get-togethers became the most prized invitations in town, which stoked the fashion-conscious Parisians into a frenzy for over-the-top imitations of his coffee service. In salons all over the city, Frenchwomen donned turbans and ornamental robes, taking their coffee ‘a la Turque.’ A couple of decades later, after they had lived down the embarrassment somewhat, the Parisians opened their first proper café.¹⁵⁰

Just as London’s coffeehouse sheds and stalls eventually were replaced by larger buildings, Paris also eventually moved their coffee culture into larger structures that ultimately “scoured the coffee-house of both vulgarity and orientalism.”¹⁵¹ Yet for a time the blend of Parisian interiors and Turkish café aesthetics still lingered. Suleiman Aga proceeded to rent and renovate a palace in Paris and fit the building with “emerald and turquoise Iznik tiles, and domes were softly illuminated by stained glass. Divans, carpets, and cushions were spread sumptuously about.”¹⁵²

Wild notes that coffee with an added touch of sugar was presented to the King and his court when devising military strategies as a deceptive tactic as it “unlocked their tongues”¹⁵³ in the hope that Louis XIV would aid Suleiman Aga in sieging Vienna. Though Louis XIV refused,

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 24.

¹⁵⁰ Clark, 23.

¹⁵¹ Ellis, 81.

¹⁵² Wild, 58.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 59.

apparently “Paris society became besotted with the Ottoman style, and coffee was the fashionable beverage that accompanied it.”¹⁵⁴ While Suleiman and his army journeyed to siege Vienna, Pascal, one of Suleiman’s advisors, remained behind to open the first coffee house in Paris decorated in a manner similar to that of the great palace. However, while coffee consumption remained popular, the Parisian public soon lost interest in the Turkish style and the city eventually saw the construction of a café that was not overtly Turkish in style: Café de Procope.

Owned and operated by proprietor Francesco Procopio dei Coltelli in 1678, the Café de Procope was on rue-Saint-Germain, a street where artists and writers, including Voltaire and Diderot, would gather and rub shoulders with aristocrats, sharing ideas and exchanging philosophical views and news.¹⁵⁵ Café Procope was important because it drew more nobles, scholars, and artists to it than its predecessors. Grafe notes how it was furnished in a grander style. Unlike “the London coffee houses, [as] the furnishings of the Procope suggested something substantially grander than a respectable bourgeois home....the large mirrors, a remnant from the Turkish baths that had been located in the building, were most notable, if only because Procope established a precedent followed by hundreds of cafés in Paris and elsewhere.”¹⁵⁶ As Lewis Theobald remarked in 1717, Parisian coffeehouses became “polite” and “vogue,” and were a posh place to see and be seen.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 59.

¹⁵⁵ According to Haine, “The Cordeliers Club met there during the early phases of the Revolution, with Georges Danton and Jean-Paul Marat being the principal leaders in residence. The Jacobins and Robespierre then became habitués; the Phrygian cap (*bonnet*) that became the symbol of the Revolution—and especially an obligatory sartorial accoutrement of the sans-culottes—was first worn here; and the order to storm the Tuileries Palace on 10 August was announced here” (6).

¹⁵⁶ Grafe, 21.

¹⁵⁷ Ellis, *The Coffee House*, 191.

As a land-locked city and travel route nexus, Paris was a hub for “victualling trades,”¹⁵⁸ according to Ellis, as they spread across Europe gathering important and exotic goods and spirits, people, architecture, and literature. As he reports, “the right to sell eau-de-vie [alcohol] was a lucrative business, quickly finding a ready market, and this propelled the early coffee-house keepers to move their business upmarket,” but “this accidental turn in regulation permanently changed the sociability of the Parisian café. From their inception, the primary commodity sold in French cafes was alcoholic drink. Although coffee was the nominal difference between the café and its competitors, (*guiguettes*, taverns and *cabarets*), it was essentially metaphorical. As numerous visits to Paris noted, the café was not a coffee-house.”¹⁵⁹ As many historians have noted, the French cafés with their sumptuous, eclectic interiors and revered guests-exuded an air of exclusivity, whereas the plainer English coffeehouses were populated by wandering travellers (primarily men exchanging news and gossip) and a more diverse public (attracting artisans and merchants as well as nobility). The café décor also reinforced this air of exclusivity, as Ellis writes: “high status decorations, furniture and appurtenances, such as silver coffee settings, gave the French cafes a high and narrow status appeal, unlike the broad appeal of the London coffeehouses, which advertised their accessibility to all, except women.”¹⁶⁰ Grafe notes how in the former “customers would sit down or remain standing in small groups, walk about to join in conversations around the [central] table, get up to refill their cups...leave the premises and return a little later. As the coffee houses evolved and diversified, the central table gradually disappeared and was replaced by a series of smaller ones devoted to specific topics. Elsewhere, booths or

¹⁵⁸ Ellis, 81.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁶⁰ Markman Ellis’ historical footnote to Jean de La Roque’s 1732 text, “An Historical Treatise concerning the Original and Progress of Coffee,” in Ed. *Eighteenth-Century Coffee-House Culture: Science and History Writings*. Vol 4. 445.

boxes resembling church pews appeared, with high backs allowing a greater degree of privacy.”¹⁶¹ As we will explore further in the third chapter, as Grafe and other scholars have noted, both the Parisian and English coffeehouse banter was usually overseen by a woman. In fact, if London coffeehouses in particular were primarily “the domain of men” “it was nearly always a woman—[who] could overlook the entire café and keep control over waiting staff, usually young handsome boys, and customers....Parisian establishments (also) had their ‘Belle Limonadiere’, advertised as part of the attraction of the establishment and paid handsomely for her presence.”¹⁶²

Architecturally, the defining characteristic of the Parisian cafés were its large and spacious rooms, or *salons* that borrowed from the style of the intimate rooms of the English coffee-house. According to Grafe, these *salons* could hold larger tables and could provide comfortable seating to patrons, which “made the French café of the eighteenth century appear significantly more exclusive than its London equivalent.”¹⁶³ Grafe depicts Café Militaire of 1762 and Café Riche of 1894 as exemplary coffeehouses that drew throngs of people to their highly ornamented interiors through a series of connected rooms that in some cases led to different levels. “In the nineteenth century,” as Grafe points out, “the Procope, which by this time had lost its status as the main meeting place of the Paris elite of writers and philosophers, illustrates how

¹⁶¹ Grafe, 21.

¹⁶² Ibid. It is worth noting that historians are not of one mind when considering whether or not women were paying customers of early coffeehouses. What is well-documented is the role women played in managing and working in coffeehouse establishments. London coffeehouses often had a raised “counter” where patrons would pay their penny to access “the services of the house” (“penny university”). The woman at the counter was given an “air of authority” and from her higher position could supervise various comings and goings. In Vienna, as well women working as cashiers (*Sitzkassierin*) also presided over the coffeehouse. Grafe also notes that “In Vienna, the counter was usually located near the entrance and occupied by the cashier: surrounded by the sugar cups and rum bottles, the *Gnädigste* (the benevolent lady) ruling with her charm, that never goes old, with her heaving bosom, diamonds in the ears and a high blonde coiffure of freshly burnt hair. In most cases it is not the landlady herself, but a so-called *Sitzkassierer* (a seated cashier), but always she is a voluptuous lady with a friendly smile, who has to unite *coquetterie*, virtue and conscientiousness.” Grafe cites Otto Friedlaender, ‘KaffeeHäuser’ in Petra Neumann (ed.), *Wien und seine Kaffeehäuser*, Munich: Heyne, 1997, 34.

¹⁶³ Grafe, 22.

the arrangement of a café on several floors invited social differentiation.... On its first floor ‘serious types played dominoes and booksellers discussed their business; on the second floor, students smoked and played billiards.’¹⁶⁴ This differentiation was not only carried out floor by floor or room by room. Entire coffeehouses were sometimes dedicated to key groups, interests or occupations. For example, the Café Militaire was reserved for military and was respectively embellished with coats of arms and “beams in the shape of card spades.”¹⁶⁵ Most of the Parisian salons, however, were “presumably dedicated to dining, arranged along a long corridor, much like a standard Parisian middle-class apartment. While following the domestic arrangements its clientele would have aspired to, the café added to these an atmosphere of festive elegance and brightness, subtly articulating the difference between the boulevard and the interior.”¹⁶⁶ What made Café Riche an exemplary model of the Parisian café, on the other hand, was its play with the boundaries between interior and exterior; public and private; sacred and profane. Large floor-to-ceiling mirrors encased by exquisite gilded frames, hung on walls facing the outdoors, enhanced this playful theme as they “reflected the movement of visitors and those passing the café as an incident that was part of the afternoon or evening promenade.”¹⁶⁷ Not only did the mirrors play with and bend light to illuminate shaded corners; they also amplified the number of guests inside the coffeehouse and at what angle they could be seen. Mirrors then represented a vicarious and voyeuristic means of peering around the larger rooms and at the people occupying and manoeuvring within them. Patrons sitting in elaborate “glass canopies,” as Grafe points out, could divert their gaze into a reflected yet abstract world, a place of intrigue, eavesdropping, and

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 22.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 22.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 23.

¹⁶⁷ Grafe, 23. Mirrors were a sign of opulence and beauty but also deception and trickery. As we will discuss in chapter three, mirrors are also part of the cultural imagery of the siren.

humour. Though coffee still played a large part in the operation of the Parisian Café, it was the reputation and formality of the coffee salon that often preceded the drink. It was sociability, not coffee itself, that gave patrons the discursive buzz.

These newer ways of socializing also brought different types of people or classes into close proximity. Referencing Scott Haine's historical research, Ellis emphasizes that one auxiliary function of coffeehouses was to give people ample space to move and play freely, "where there was insufficient space or money in the home for entertainment."¹⁶⁸ In other words, Parisian cafés and their English counterparts were designed and decorated to simulate noble places of recreation and relaxation; however, the English coffeehouses and Parisian cafés also drew together noisy and rambunctious crowds that at times digressed from political debate to debauchery; in some unfortunate cases, this led to quarrels and violent altercations.¹⁶⁹ Ellis notes some coffeehouses sold spirits. Heated conversations between clientele were sometimes fuelled by alcohol, "which constantly attracted the police to cease feuds and the destruction of property. Numerous cafés were under "intense surveillance," Ellis concludes, "with special detachments of police spies for every establishment, ready to report anyone voicing revolutionary sentiments.... To the police, any kind of group socialising was nearly always suspicious, redolent of rebellion or delinquency. Yet café socializing played an important role in making the industrial city feel like home, creating bonds of affection between migrant workers from different backgrounds, whether from the provinces or abroad."¹⁷⁰ Whether feud or friendship, or both, coffeehouses

¹⁶⁸ Ellis, *The Coffee-house*, 217.

¹⁶⁹ Ellis includes images in his book that illustrate the throwing food and drink within the coffeehouse.

¹⁷⁰ Ellis, *The Coffee-House*, 217. Ellis notes that, in addition to utilizing the creative work of authors and painters, much of coffeehouse history comes from police reports and documents.

were constantly spied on by their business owners and nearby authorities.¹⁷¹ However, the greatest threat posed to clientele hung on the coffeehouse walls: the mirror. That someone else (a friend?) was always watching constructed one of the very first iterations of a civil panopticon, fuelled by the anxiety of civil conscientiousness and the play of democracy.

6. Viennese *Kaffeehäuser*

If the English coffeehouses and Parisian cafés were known for lively, revolutionary debate, the Viennese *Kaffeehäuser* attracted a different buzzing literary type. Although intellectualism and sophistication were hallmarks of Parisian, English and Viennese cafes, Harold B. Segel explains that “a peculiar concatenation of circumstance” lent “an irrefutable specialness, perhaps even uniqueness, to the place of literature of the Vienna coffeehouse.”¹⁷² Ellis states that the Viennese “*Kaffeehaus* was not simply a place to socialise over coffee and read newspapers, but also a central location for authors and their intellectual life. As houses in Vienna were generally small and cramped, and few had telephones, the *Kaffeehaus*, warm, spacious and inviting, took on the role of a home away from home.”¹⁷³ While patrons and guests could transition between indoor and outdoor settings rather easily in Parisian cafés and English coffeehouses, this was not a luxury readily available to regular café “*Stammgäste*”¹⁷⁴ in Vienna

¹⁷¹ Scandalous claims came from all corners. The 1674 satirical libertine treatise *Women’s Petition against Coffee* argued that the “excessive use of that drying, enfeebling liquor” could lead to “unfruitful” husbands. See the *Women’s Petition against Coffee* (1674) housed in the Folger Shakespeare Library: <https://www.folger.edu/blogs/shakespeare-and-beyond/consuming-caffeine-early-modern-england-coffee-chocolate-tea/womens-petition-against-coffee/>

¹⁷² Harold B. Segel, *The Vienna Coffeehouse Wits 1890-1938*, trans. Harold B. Segel, ed. Harold B. Segel (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993), 4.

¹⁷³ Ellis, 218.

¹⁷⁴ Segel, 12. Segel notes that there were many Jewish intellectuals in the literary community gathering in Viennese *Kaffeehäuser*. The Viennese cafés’ *Stammgäste* “were by and large professional and business people: physicians,

since, as Grafe notes, “the climate of the Austrian capital with its cold winters did not allow the degree of openness customary to Paris.”¹⁷⁵ As such, the Viennese coffeehouse was decorated and designed to convey cosiness or instil a sense of *Gemütlichkeit*. The Viennese cafe “presented itself as a highly differentiated, comfortable interior, well protected by the firm walls of houses or palaces in the mediaeval inner city or its suburbs.”¹⁷⁶ Such cafes were a warm, cozy environment, fostering both buzzing sociability and comforting solitude.¹⁷⁷ Since the colder winds pierced the private homes of many Austrians, as Segel emphasizes, the *Kaffeehäuser* was a “home away from home.”¹⁷⁸ In particular, many citizens in the Jewish community who experienced economic devastation after the Great War sought out safe, warm spaces. Viennese *Kaffeehäuser* fit the bill. “They were usually warm enough,” Segel continues, “well-lit, and spacious, with the possibility of as much or as little privacy as one wanted.... The broad array of newspapers available provided plenty of reading material while the game rooms with their billiard and card tables offered another type of diversion.”¹⁷⁹

Numerous scholars including Segel have claimed that Austria’s “modernist movement, which heralded an Austrian literary coming-of-age, arose in fin-de-siecle Vienna within the context of the coffeehouse.... The proponents of antitraditionalist modernity—the forerunners of the early twentieth-century avant-garde—were at first a self-alienating and alienated species for whom the coffeehouse was an alternative to more staid, formal, and ultimately inhospitable

attorneys, journalists, critics, schoolteachers, factory owners, tradespeople. Of the arts, the only one in which the Jews were truly prominent was literature. Jewish painters, actors, theater directors, and architects were far fewer.”

¹⁷⁵ Grafe, 23.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Segel, 14.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

meeting places.”¹⁸⁰ Bollerey states that coffee houses in major metropolises were “the most important meeting places” of modernist artists and exiles.¹⁸¹ Indeed, as Bollerey notes, “in 1916 Tristan Tzara invented the term ‘DADA’ as an habitué of the Café Odéon” in Zurich, existentialism was born in the Café de Flore in Paris, “where we find Sartre and de Beauvoir” and the ‘Beat Generation’ movement several decades later led by Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg was first founded “in New York’s West End Café on Broadway”.¹⁸² As literary giants continued to populate coffee houses, modern cafes on both sides of the Atlantic¹⁸³ garnered a reputation for drawing creative types to bask in the milky, aquatic aesthetics described by one Claudio Magris. Music tended to accompany the chatter, too, as a means of orchestrating conversation: “Mozart and Beethoven played in the Aufgarten Café; Josef Lanner and his ensemble played in the Paradeisgartel, founded in 1760 by the Italian Pietro Corti at the location of today’s Burgtheater. Johann Strauss had his own orchestra which entertained audiences in the Stadtpark Café.”¹⁸⁴ Promising to serve any guest (be it traveler or citizen) baked goods and coffee, the Viennese *Kaffeehäuser* “was explicitly a venue for all times of the day...allowing the promenade through the city, as it were, to be relocated inside.”¹⁸⁵

Viennese cafes were also more diverse than their British counterparts.¹⁸⁶ As scholars like Segel have stressed, the *Jewish* presence in the Viennese *Kaffeehaus* particularly in the interwar

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 4. Vienna’s iconic Café Museum (nicknamed Café Nihilism) had an interior designed by modernist architect Adolf Loos.

¹⁸¹ Franziska Bollerey, “Setting the stage for modernity: The cosmos of the coffee house,” in *Cafés and Bars: The Architecture of Public Display*, ed. Christoph Grafe and Franziska Bollerey (New York: Routledge, 2007), 74.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ For a longer history of coffee house culture in North America (these cultural institutions initially served more elite clientele in commercial hubs of the British colonies), see Ellis: *The Coffee House: A Cultural History*.

¹⁸⁴ Herbert Lederer, “The Vienna Coffee House: History and Cultural Significance,” in *The Thinking Space: The Café as a Cultural Institution in Paris, Italy and Vienna*, ed. Leona Rittner, W. Scott Haine, and Jefferey H. Jackson (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2013), 30.

¹⁸⁵ Grafe, 24.

¹⁸⁶ Hans Vandevoorde, “About Well-Lit Hullaballoos and Suffocating Air: Scenes in the Brussels and Viennese Cafes at the Fin-de-Siecle,” in *Brussels 1900 Vienna: Cultural Transfers 1880-1930* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 394.

years was so pronounced that a common proverb claimed that “the *Jew* belongs in the coffeehouse.”¹⁸⁷ Shachar Pinsker has also argued that the Viennese Kaffeehaus not only “fostered intense sociability, creativity and debate”; it also created what he identifies as a “thirdspace” situated at the “borderzone between the ‘public’ and ‘private’, the ‘inside’ and ‘outside,’ the ‘real’ and ‘imagined,’ the ‘immigrant’ and the ‘native,’ the ‘elitist’ artistic avant-garde and ‘mass’ consumption.”¹⁸⁸ Modernist Jewish writers like Joseph Roth frequently mined café culture for their own fiction and imagined the Viennese café as a space for “freedom from the oppression of bureaucratic work in the Austrian government as well as a double horror of solitude and a stifling community.”¹⁸⁹

Pinsker in “The Urban Literary Café and the Geography of Hebrew” also argues that the “thirdspace” of the Viennese literary cafes brought “immigrant writers together and opened new paths for them.”¹⁹⁰ Since the harsh winter weather discouraged moving inside and outside, Grafe notes that *Kaffeehäuser* in the imperial city ultimately became more than alternative homes or an escape from home – they became new informal workspaces for the public. “The central role that the *Kaffeehaus* played in the organization of the day and the economic life of the city is also stressed in the numerous anecdotes about habitués using the café as their offices and workspaces,

¹⁸⁷ Steven Beller, *Vienna and the Jews, 1867-1938: A Cultural History* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 22, as quoted in Shacher Pinsker’s essay “Jewish Modernism and Viennese Cafes, 1900-1930,” in *The Thinking Space: The Café as a Cultural Institution in Paris, Italy and Vienna*, ed. Leona Rittner, W. Scott Haine, and Jefferey H. Jackson (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2013), 54. In the early twentieth-century, in sharp contrast, as Pinsker writes many of the café habitués were not Jewish. Here it is worth pointing out that in 1856, the “Café Français” became the first Viennese coffee house to admit women. Although some historians like Segel see the Viennese Kaffeehaus as a predominantly male space, it is worth noting that there is an untold history of women artists and intellectuals like Lina Loos who also helped shape Viennese Kaffeehauser. See, also Austrian business woman Emma Schwarz’ defense of what one might call the “New Café Woman” in “Die Frauen im Kaffeehaus” *Die Sonne* 34 (October, 1917), 9-11. Thank you to my supervisor Janelle Blankenship for pointing me to Schwarz’ essay.

¹⁸⁸ Pinsker, 53.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ Shachar Pinsker, “The Urban Literary Café and the Geography of Hebrew and Yiddish Modernism in Europe,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, ed. Mark A. Wollaeger and Matt Eatough (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 445.

supplied with telephone connections and various other services.”¹⁹¹ Enormous salon-like rooms filled with daylight and soaring ceilings in Viennese cafés “were clearly designed for their use during the day, while more intimate and darker rooms were provided for playing cards and billiards.”¹⁹² Mobile ‘gardens’, the so-called *Schanigärten*, were also woven into the organization of some Viennese *Kaffeehäuser*. These were simply an assortment of chairs and tables on the pavement with a walkway or passage along the façade “surrounded by lightweight fences adorned with plants and flowers.”¹⁹³ The Viennese salons drew the attention of important European intellectuals, artists, musicians and authors: Karl Kraus, Arthur Schnitzler, Sigmund Freud, Franz Kafka, Gustav Mahler, Alfred Polgar, including Magris. As novelist Stefan Zweig famously notes, “Here the battle raged: about the unconscious, about dreams, about new music, the new way of seeing, the new architecture, the new logic, the new morality.”¹⁹⁴

Polgar, Kraus, and Magris perhaps best theorized the fluidity of ideas and sociability that was rooted in the power of free speech unleashed by the books, journals, loose papers, literary sketches, glosses, miniatures, mini-essays, aphorisms, pithy reviews and short prose penned in this cultural space. The “*Kleinkunst*,” “so-called art of small forms” or ‘little art’¹⁹⁵ crafted in Vienna’s cozy cafés helped kick start the careers of these literary giants, to this day fuelling important debates in literary criticism.

¹⁹¹ Grafe, 24.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid, 26.

¹⁹⁴ As cited in Andreas Whittam Smith, “In Viennese painting of the early 20th Century, you get a sense of horrors to come,” *Independent* (November 14, 2013): <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/in-viennese-painting-of-the-early-20th-century-you-get-a-sense-of-horrors-to-come-8940166.html>

¹⁹⁵ Segel, 29. Segel discusses in more depth “the type of literature peculiar both to the world of coffeehouse and to fin-de-siecle Vienna. That literature comprises a variety of short prose forms, including the impressionistic literary sketch, or miniature, at which Peter Altenberg excelled, the acerbic satires of Karl Kraus, the pithy review and mini-essay for which Alfred Polgar has long been admired, and the feuilleton—that archetypal Viennese literary genre—so handsomely represented by, among others, Felix Salten, whom we know best in English as the author of the much-loved children’s tale *Bambi*.”

6.1 Café Central: “Cosmic Uneasiness”

Perhaps the most famous and well-sung of the over 600 coffeehouses that have sprung up over the years in Vienna is the Café Central.¹⁹⁶ Segel notes its unique character, a “mystique accrued from the regular encampment there—and its place in the writings—of such coffeehouse denizens and wits as Peter Altenberg, Egon Friedell, and Alfred Polgar.”¹⁹⁷ Austrian-born columnist Alfred Polgar’s (1873-1955) lucid reflections on *Café Central* speak of the metamorphosis of the coffeehouse into something other than merely drinking coffee and socializing. He waxes poetic about its beguiling and oxymoronic nature in a feuilleton manifesto published in 1926 entitled “Theory of the Café Central.” Rising far above its humble origins in England (a place to merely sell coffee in shacks on the streets), the Viennese coffeehouse according to the Austrian columnist symbolized “instead a worldview and one, to be sure, whose innermost essence is not to observe the world at all.... So much is experientially certain, that there is nobody in the Café Central who isn’t a piece of the Central: that is to say, on whose ego-spectrum the Central colour, a mixture of ash-gray and ultra-seasick-green, doesn’t appear. Whether the place adapted to the individual, or the individual to the place, is a moot point. I would imagine a reciprocal action. ‘Thou art not in the place, the place is in thee,’ says the Angelic Pilgrim.”¹⁹⁸ Polgar’s ruminations on coffeehouse culture point to a dynamism where social and cultural collisions frequently empower the writer. For example, by invoking theological imagery, the declaration made by the angelic pilgrim might convey to the reader that the coffeehouse becomes less of a physical location, burdened with its operations, and instead

¹⁹⁶ Other notable Viennese *Kaffeehäuser* still operating today include: Griensteidl, Imperial, Central, Museum, and Herrenhof.

¹⁹⁷ Segel, 21.

¹⁹⁸ Alfred Polgar, “Theory of the Café Central,” in *The Vienna Coffeehouse Wits 1890-1938*, trans. Harold B. Segel, ed. Harold B. Segel (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993), 267.

lifts the coffeehouse user up with new sensations. However since coffeehouses drew the attention of some writers and intellectualists who tended to keep to themselves while writing in a corner, Polgar satirically catalogued the insular qualities of some of the guests who receive the angelic annunciation: “Its inhabitants are, for the most part, people whose hatred of their fellow human beings is as fierce as their longing for people, who want to be alone but need companionship for it. Their inner world requires a layer of the outer world as delimiting material; their quivering solo voices cannot do without the support of the chorus.”¹⁹⁹ According to Polgar, the *Kaffeehaus* encouraged cursory social interaction, small amounts of social interaction scattered over prolonged periods of time working on monographs or *Kleinkunst* fuelled by the creative minds of Viennese writers. The Café Central poet was an exiled figure left lingering in a harrowing world, but protected by a layer of colloquy, chorus, and confabulation.

According to Polgar, the angelic voice pierces through layers of “creative chaos,” penetrating to the depths of their work where the voice can finally meet the ears of the writer. Polgar describes the interiors of the Café Central as having a subterranean quality and sketches this environment out using imagery associated with the nautical realm (the colour of the café, is for example, depicted poetically as “a mixture of ash-gray and ultra-seasick-green”²⁰⁰). In “Café Central,” he specifically writes that the coffeehouse itself is like an “aquarium...using the slanting refraction of light of their environment for diverse amusement, always full of expectation, but also full of anxiety lest sometime something new, playing ‘Sea’ with a stern look, fall into the glass tank, onto their artificial miniature sea-bottom. And if, God forbid, the aquarium should turn into a banking house, they would be utterly lost.”²⁰¹ Polgar continues to

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 268.

use deep-sea imagery and phrases such as “suspended sociability” to convey a place where guests sitting inside are productively inert thinking subjects, suspended deep in their work: “Only there, only at the tables of idleness, is the worktable laid for them, only there, enveloped by their air of indolence, will their inertia become fecundity.”²⁰²

Imagined through the lens of Polgar’s writings, Café Central is a psychic, libidinal space, a realm of creative chaos where Polgar also locates a feeling of “cosmic uneasiness,”²⁰³ perhaps anticipating a foreboding rise of authoritarianism or a loss of order. Coincidentally, this recapitulates Samuel Butler’s theme of existential dread when describing the English coffeehouses as a leveler, where the guest is brought to their “first principles.” Polgar states that relationships formed in the coffeehouse are “loose ... [similarly] the relationship to God and the stars also loosens. The creature escapes from its compulsory relations to the universe into an irresponsible, sensuous, chance relationship to nothingness.”²⁰⁴ The apocalyptic turn to describe this place of alterity is renewed with each visit.

For Polgar, the modern coffeehouse is not merely a place to socialize with strangers or even drink coffee, although the two are inextricably linked. Stepping outside of restricted labour and domestic responsibilities, the guest of the coffeehouse traverses a “space in which people could become their true selves by casting off their work-time identities, precisely by doing nothing.”²⁰⁵ In this liminal space, the coffee house habitué exists and creates outside of restrictive home and work-time identities. Polgar writes: “The Central-ist is a person to whom family, profession, and political party do *not* give this feeling (that they are a little part of a

²⁰² Ibid., 269.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ellis, 218.

whole). Helpfully, the coffeehouse steps in as an ersatz totality, inviting immersion and dissolution.”²⁰⁶

Polgar’s impressionistic sketch of the Café dovetails nicely with Pinsker’s notion of the thirdspace, “a public-private space with distinctively contradictory features: on one hand, it is a place of leisure and sociability, a literary market and information source exempt from the pressure to consume; on the other, it is a place of consumption and of non-commitment, of time-killing and gossip, a refuge for drop-outs and failures who can find their place only in the café.”²⁰⁷ A new terrain is born in the café’s tectonic collisions and contradictoriness.

6.2 Magris’ *Danube*

Building on Polgar’s musings and metaphors in a lengthy chapter on Café Central in his 1986 elegy for a “lost Europe” *Danubio* [Danube], Italian scholar and writer Claudio Magris (1939 -) unpacks the psychic properties of the quintessential *Kaffeehaus* that fed modern European consciousness. Magris in the process tangentially develops a preliminary systematics of a café as a kind of “thirdspace.” Nicoletta Pireddu notes how the author in his philosophical “*Danube*, reconceptualizes Europeanness as a geographical and temporal process of unsettlement and resettlement, in (constant) tension between the local and the global spheres. In line with the hybrid form of Magris’ book...the conceptual fluidity of the Austrian and Mitteleuropean river *par excellence* not only undermines the idea of origin as self-sameness but also represents ‘*the image for the questioning of identity*’.”²⁰⁸ Though Magris is not as explicit as Polgar in cloaking Café Central and other European cafes with aquatic imagery, the title and structure of his text –

²⁰⁶ Polgar, 267.

²⁰⁷ Pinsker, “Jewish Modernism and Viennese Cafes, 1900-1930,” 58.

²⁰⁸ Nicoletta Pireddu, *The Works of Claudio Magris: Temporary Homes, Mobile Identities, European Borders* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 57.

the wandering, fragmentary and “nonlinear structure”²⁰⁹ of the literary form of his larger project—*Danube*—undoubtedly also informs his reading of café culture. As Pireddu perceptively argues, Magris’ exploration of modernity “problematizes monolithic identity, undermines teleology, interrogates memory...and *feels* critically about the complexities and contradictions of life.” The *Danube* text, as a “liquid epic,” Pireddu shows, “connotes the journey along the river at once as an itinerary of liberation from the rigor of constraining categories and as a path fraught with geographical obstacles and intellectual challenges, one of the numerous odysseys in Magris’ overall works. Furthermore, with its impetuous flow, the river conveys the idea of temporality, change, and renewal more effectively than the eternal uniformity of the sea.”²¹⁰ Devoting a chapter of *Danube* to “Café Central” suggests that the coffeehouse and its libations can act as a dramatic diorama of the ebbs and flows, challenges and possibilities structuring everyday life. In his earlier text, “*Il mito absurdico*” Magris claimed that the café is a modern “symbol of humanitas,” and of “serene intimacy.”²¹¹

Magris immediately locates a liminality in the guest’s experience inside Café Central, claiming that “one is indoors and outdoors at the same time, or at any rate that is the illusion one gets. The glass dome far above, covering a kind of winter-garden, lets in so much light as to make the panes invisible; yet no rain ever enters.”²¹² This play of light through the windowpanes and the teasing of rain as if it were about to drip through the glass places the guest in a peculiar situation for Magris. Not only does this “thirdspace” play with interior and exterior. The *Kaffeehaus* creates what one could see as a “protected openness: fear may knock at the door, but, if it is faith that opens, it dissipates all danger threats as it withstands the anxiety of the

²⁰⁹ Ibid, viii

²¹⁰ Ibid, 64.

²¹¹ Ibid, 81.

²¹² Claudio Magris, *Danube*, trans. Patrick Creagh (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux), 168.

unknown.... The welcoming ambiance of the café teaches precisely to overcome the fear of a challenging new, so as to let in the uncertain, the foreign, the unusual, the precarious, abandoning our attachment to completeness and self-referentiality. It is for this reason that the café—a site of impermanence, where one sits as on a journey in a hotel, a train, or on the road—is also ‘a place for writing’, where the pen penetrates with perplexity and obstinacy into the world’s ‘cavity of uncertainty’.”²¹³ Although Magris jests that political revolution can stem from writing (“I suppose you’re going to tell me that it’s Bronstein who sits all day at the Café Central?”²¹⁴), the precarious writing process itself is just as revolutionary.

Magris positions the *Kaffeehaus* as a model to comprehend both the human psyche and European sociability, associating the currents of the Danube River with the deep, swirling drifting and desires of the “Coffee House Man.” Magris anecdotally explains in a section entitled “More Gloomy and More Glorious” that the “city is thus one vast café, scene of methodical habits and of casual comings and goings. It also leads us to think of death, of our last exit from the door of the café, and draws all of us, like that character in Roth, towards the Crypt of the Capuchins, in an attempt to understand what death means. But the answer is not even there.”²¹⁵ Mapping out the city as a vast café of encounters, behaviours and comings and goings allows the reader to step in the shoes of a *flâneur*, contemplating a café “thirdspace” as a borderland or threshold, visualizing it as a realm “beyond” the limited spaces of home and work.

²¹³ Pireddu, 81.

²¹⁴ Magris, 167.

²¹⁵ Ibid, 215.

7. The Modern Café

In the decades leading up to the twentieth century, café conversations evolved into more nuanced political debates. Coffee bean distribution, preparation, and percolation also became more complex and coffeehouses were themselves subject to the creative willpower of trained architects who were commissioned to design larger or more sophisticated spaces not only for socializing or sharing more intimate moments with “*Kaffee und Kuchen*,”²¹⁶ as Grafe points out. Entrepreneurialism widened the functional space of the coffeehouse to include spaces where food and drink were served. The introduction of food service and inclusion of cafés on trains also partitioned crowds into smaller groups, which made for new multi-faceted, multi-sensory café experiences.

Housed in railway hotels and music halls, coffeehouses also started to host larger and more extravagant forms of thematic entertainment. “Rather than resembling refined houses,” Grafe notes, 19th-century British “cafés “developed into veritable purpose-built palaces combining entertainment and the consumption of beverages and food. The efforts invested in the construction and the décor of these venues, their management requirements and the largely extended range of their offerings required a considerable financial commitment, which was often beyond the possibilities of individual entrepreneurs.”²¹⁷ The coffeehouse as a venue provided mid to lower classes an elegant escape where they could spend their time after working hours, giving them a taste of entertainment before heading back home. For example, *The Eagle Tavern* constructed in 1839-1840 had a *faux marbre* [Marmor] hall entrance, “with a coffee room and a bar on the sides. With its grand ballroom on the first floor, accessed by an equally impressive

²¹⁶ Grafe, 28.

²¹⁷ Ibid, 28-30.

staircase, the Eagle was a palace not only in its appearance, but also in the arrangement of its rooms and functions.”²¹⁸

Regardless of the café’s design theme, from “romantic caves and grottos”²¹⁹ to the “Egyptian salon,”²²⁰ structural and aesthetic partitioning became a new integral part of the coffeehouse structure. This allowed patrons to either withdraw or socialize, joining the coffeehouse public. This was a sharp departure from the layout of smaller post-Reformation coffeehouses where, as Ellis reminds us, “customers were expected to take the next available seat, placing themselves next to whoever else has come before them. No seat could be reserved, no man [*sic*] might refuse your company. This seating policy impresses on all customers that in the coffee-house all are equal.”²²¹ The emerging obsession with privacy demanded a certain measure for partitioning off certain groups from each other. In discussing a blueprint of a pub in Kentish Town, London, Grafe points out that “pubs needed to find a solution for the differentiation required by a society as madly class-conscious as late Victorian England.”²²² The British coffee house and bar started to exaggerate, not mitigate societal difference. Bars more dramatically drew hierarchies and segregated citizens from each other based on interest, wealth, gender, or status. Grafe says that bars and rooms within them installed “screens demarcating socially distinct areas such as the public bar for blue-collar workers and artisans, the saloon bar for clerks and lower-ranking civil servants and private bars occasionally used even by middle-class women. The desire, especially of the more respectable part of the clientele, to retain their privacy, resulted in the installation of so-called snob screens with frosted glass panels preventing

²¹⁸ Ibid, 32

²¹⁹ Ibid, 31.

²²⁰ Ibid, 37.

²²¹ Ellis, *The Coffee House*, 59.

²²² Grafe, 33.

visual contact between bar staff and customers.”²²³ Glass, a brittle yet hard substance that both entices the viewer to look but discourages interaction, also contributed to a partitioned sociability inside the Victorian coffee house. As Grafe notes, innovations in glass production meant that the material “could be frosted, embossed or cut.” When “after 1850 new technologies allowed sheet to be produced and decorated at a much reduced cost, every limitation to the use of the material disappeared.”²²⁴ Glass invited haptic interaction, leaving behind fingerprints or painted clouds of breath, both fading remnants of a desire to connect—or confirm solitude.

Seen insularly, glass can also reflect. The higher rate of glass manufacturing suggests that more mirrors appeared in coffee houses which, as Grafe notes, were rare and “had been an element of distinction that only the most prestigious cafés could afford, [but soon] became one of the quintessential and ubiquitous ingredients of the Parisian café of the Second Empire, even in its humblest form.”²²⁵ As indicated previously, mirrors not only assisted the guest to realize their place inside (or outside) the coffee house but also became a window the same guests could look through to vicariously view others. Not surprisingly, Grafe includes a birds-eye illustration of Krasnapolsky Winter Garden in Amsterdam in 1888 and entitles it “Crystal Palace as urban café.” The elongated, brightly-lit and partitioned café features a high glass ceiling with brass chandeliers budding with incandescent lightbulbs, receding glass corridors, and glass lamps. Though crowded with tables at floor level, the glass ceiling invites guests to look up and beyond the glass ceiling to the ceiling of the sky. As in the Roastery, we are invited to look up and up. The Crystal Palace resembled an aquarium, a realm of translucent protection (although no precipitation could enter), where *faux marbre*, exotic plants, illuminated fountains, and oriental

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Ibid, 34-35.

²²⁵ Ibid, 35.

goods framed a cosmopolitan collection of guests drawn to the scent of coffee, percolated by the latest invention.

Outfitted with opulence and luxury, coffee houses were an unrelenting spectacle at the previous turn-of-the century. They promised a pinnacle of human innovation and socialization that did not show signs of stopping. Yet as more guests lingered within these crystal palaces or cathedrals of consumption to both socialize, demonstrate wealth, and increase social capital, in the early twentieth-century coffee house furniture and layouts shifted to encourage, as they did in Vienna, as Grafe points out, “*Gemütlichkeit*, the cozy comfort of the golden age of a well-ordered pre-industrial society.”²²⁶

When the First World War ended, the desire for *Gemütlichkeit* took a back seat to designs that “demanded functional and structural ‘honesty.’”²²⁷ Citing the Montparnasse *café-brasserie* La Couple as a bleak example from 1927, Grafe notes that this “style was recognizably modern without being puritanically functionalist, using aluminum or stainless steel instead of wood, new synthetic materials instead of leather, neon and fluorescent lighting in the place of the dimmed light of traditional fittings – all of these elements shown in their naked form rather than being covered in ornament.”²²⁸ Shifting away from exuberance and ornamentation, post-World War I coffeehouses were functional, what Franziska Bollerey later calls *modern*. According to a survey of 1928 and 1929 coffeehouses, “‘one goes [there] to solve problems, not to chat.’”²²⁹

Though glass partitions disappeared, their transparent phantoms remained. An enthusiasm for organization, didacticism, faster service and turnover reflected an ongoing differentiation and mechanization of coffee production, techniques in percolation, and the

²²⁶ Ibid, 35.

²²⁷ Ibid, 36.

²²⁸ Ibid, 27.

²²⁹ Ibid, 38.

automatization of social activity, as well as a growing class divide. Even in the interwar years, in many European and North American cities ornamental coffee houses, with soft wood furniture, gilded mirrors, and imported textiles hung on walls no longer reflected the times. Grafe points out that “the sophisticated but also unreal glamour of the cafés looked increasingly out of place in the everyday realities of mass unemployment and the rise of authoritarian political movements.... Elsewhere, too, the fabulously fashionable entertainment palaces saw their clienteles impoverished and worried, leaving them as vestiges of a recent prosperous past stranded in the grim environment of the years before the Second World War.”²³⁰

In the dark years that preceded World War II, the warm glow of the Viennese *Kaffeehaus* was in crisis. The coffee house could no longer support guests who could not pay for its services and the Nazis considered many *Viennese coffee houses* “Jewish institutions.” Many coffee houses, primarily in Vienna’s 2nd inner district, were seized and either permanently shut or aryanised as early as Spring 1938. Nevertheless, Viennese writers and artists still gravitated towards coffee houses, even after German troops entered Austria and the storefronts of Café Reklame, Café Rembrandt and countless other cafes were shattered or smeared with anti-Semitic propaganda on the “Night of Broken Glass” (*Kristallnacht*) in November 1938.²³¹

In post-war Vienna, the coffee house crisis continued. Italian-style espresso bars started to pop up and replace traditional coffee houses. Traditional Viennese-style coffee houses remained shuttered until the 1980s. No longer capable of drawing enormous noisy crowds, the 20th-century post-war coffee house in other cities joined forces with inns and were later attached to recreational centres. Grafe argues that “It was in the context of corporate environments, the

²³⁰ Grafe, 38.

²³¹ See the City of Vienna’s summary of the coffee house on their governmental website: “History of Viennese Kaffeehauser”: [‘https://www.wien.gv.at/english/culture-history/viennese-coffee-culture.html’](https://www.wien.gv.at/english/culture-history/viennese-coffee-culture.html)

business hotels introduced by transatlantic chains, that the American hotel bar in its most standardized, non-specific form replaced the Viennese or Parisian café as a model to be applied universally.”²³² Yet if these coffee houses were to survive, as Grafe notes, they had to be powered by a nostalgic drive. *Gemütlichkeit* became entangled with functionalism, as Grafe notes: today, “enterprises seek an explicit continuity with the café culture of the late nineteenth century, exploiting existing decorative or typological features.... Traces of decades are created, and nicotine stain applied from bottles suggests a history of smoke-filled nights of intense café life imagined by clientele happy to believe the fiction.”²³³

In this spirit of nostalgia, there is one more café we must catalogue before starting our Starbucks story proper: the Automat. It is interesting to note that although he continuously stresses Italy as the cultural model for the Starbucks dream, Joseph Horn and Frank Hardart's American “Automat” restaurant chain which first opened in 1902 also served as a tremendous home-grown inspiration for Howard Schultz. In several interviews, Schultz documents that the idea of the Automat was in his “mind’s eye” while conceptualizing Starbucks. In Lisa Hurwitz' 2021 documentary, *The Automat*, the director interviewed a number of celebrities including Mel Brooks and U.S. Supreme Court Justice, Ruth Bader Ginsburg. In the words of these prominent figures, the automats, enormous buildings with tall ceilings packed with pristine white marbled tables and luxurious wooden chairs, “had panache.” Food could be purchased by diners from automatic servers, small vending windows encased with brass that would open up when customers inserted a nickel into the machine and pulled a knob. Coffee was also a self-service commodity that could be inexpensively poured from elaborate brass dolphin heads into an ornate coffee cup. The dolphin heads were inspired by Italian fountains flanked by mythological sea

²³² Grafe, 39.

²³³ Grafe, 40.

creatures. The Automat flashed with Italian pedigree, although it was actually modeled on Max Sialaff's AUTOMAT restaurant in Berlin and used Sialaff's patented fast-food vending machines. As Hurwitz documents, Horn and Hardart's cafes attracted large immigrant audiences, artists, journalists and musicians and became an intercultural venue buzzing with intrigue. Irving Berlin's 1930s depression-era song "Let's Have Another Cup of Coffee" was a homage to Horn and Hardart's self-service restaurants.

The last Horn & Hardart Automat closed in 1991, but Starbucks' longtime CEO lovingly returns to it in his own café origin story. In Hurwitz's documentary, Schultz recalls his mother bringing him to Horn & Hardart's automat when he was a child. When the brass-lined window opened up to reveal an apple pie after he inserted coins into the vending machine, the future CEO incredulously asked his mother how it got there. She cleverly replied "there is a magician on the other side." Schultz in the documentary states that he hopes to maintain this level of theatre, discovery, and surprise and delight at Starbucks. In the documentary he holds up a framed photo of a column of automat windows that he hangs in his office to remind him of this magical promise. The cultural and material history of the Automat nostalgically fuels Schultz' own dream, his attempt to blend spectacle, architectural and automat-infused sensation, streamlined efficiency and Italian "romance."

8. Starbucks

As we will more closely examine in subsequent chapters of this thesis, the Starbucks Corporation has since the 1970s worked tirelessly to position itself as a legitimate heir of a mesmerizing, magical coffee culture and has used nostalgic, mythological references and rhetoric to ground this legacy. Although we find 1971 stamped on many forms of Starbucks

merchandise, including cups, ground coffee bags, gift cards, and clothing, the history of Starbucks starts earlier, if we consider how both European coffee culture and San Francisco's cultural revolution has inspired the company. Markman Ellis observes that the college town of "Berkeley was an area at the front line of the hippy movement, of anti-Establishment feeling and anti-war protests. This period saw the first stirrings of the whole-food movement, which championed organic food production methods against the increasingly homogenised, branded, corporate food industry."²³⁴ In the post-war era, coffee was a "social catalyst" of sorts as Kerian Delamont writes. In the 1950s and '60s, coffeehouses became "political spaces that housed (and in some senses themselves expressed) the political mood of youth in the '50s and '60s... The GI coffeehouses were spaces where Vietnam veterans, draftees, dodgers, and college kids could come together and express their opposition to the Vietnam War and their general discontent with political leadership, as well as to socialize and mingle with peers."²³⁵ In the 60s, a Dutch immigrant named Alfred Peet decided to open a whole-bean coffee shop where he roasted, sold, and distributed coffee imported from many regions of the world. "Before coming to the Bay Area in 1955 at the age of thirty-five," Bryant Simon writes, "Peet had worked in the tea and coffee business in Europe and Asia for more than a decade. He couldn't believe what Americans drank. Why, he wondered, were people in the richest country in the world willing to settle for weak Folgers coffee made from stale, preground beans?"²³⁶ Peet's shop at the corner of Vine and Walnut streets close to the UC-Berkeley campus utilized some of the same older European methods of grinding and percolating techniques Pasqua Rosée pioneered in his shed. Of course,

²³⁴ Ellis, *The Coffee House*, 202.

²³⁵ Kieran Delamont, "Coffee and Counterculture (Or, How to Caffeinate Beatniks, Hippies, College Kids and War Vets, and Make Some Money While You Do It," *The Mirror: Undergraduate History Journal*, 35.1 (2015), 50–70.

²³⁶ Bryant Simon, *Everything but the Coffee: Learning about America from Starbucks* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2009), 27.

Peet's shop drew the attention of many anti-establishment crowds, authors, musicians and artists, "including a fresh-faced Bob Dylan."²³⁷ Three young academics were also drawn to the darker-roasted coffee that drew those crowds: Jerry Baldwin, Zev Siegl, and Gordon Bowker. In 1970 they approached Peet about his gourmet coffee and asked if he could supply them with his gourmet coffee beans so they could open their own business.

After Peet agreed to supply beans and train the three young men himself on the older European art of percolation, the trio settled on the name of their business. It was inspired by their dream film company, Pequod, a company named after the whaling ship in Melville's maritime novel *Moby Dick*. Apparently, "their friend Terry Heckler torpedoed this idea by reminding them that 'there's no way anyone's going to drink a cup of PEE-quod.'²³⁸ After tossing around a few ideas, Clark recalled that Bowker thought "that words beginning with *st* suggested confidence and power—think strong, strapping, stellar, stupendous – so they contemplated calling it 'Steamer,' which kept the maritime connotation, but this unfortunately "sounded perhaps a bit too much like a bathhouse."²³⁹ Heckler then blurted out "Starbuck," the name of the small son of the Pequod's chief mate and his young wife Mary in Melville's novel. The pluralized name, Starbucks, stuck. "It's easy to pronounce, and the explosive k sound at the end makes it pop; this also worked for Coke, Nike, and Kinko's. The word manages to evoke the vaguely mystical, hint at an antique tradition, and subtly remind customers what they're there to spend."²⁴⁰ To complement the new name that conjured up a seafaring romance of early coffee traders, the trio consulted with Terry Heckler to decide on a logo. Heckler chose a double-tailed mermaid (or siren, to be more exact) pulled from fifteenth-century Norse woodcut and, "after removing some

²³⁷ Clark, 33.

²³⁸ Ibid., 41.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

unsightly stomach bulging and making the image slightly less scandalous, he placed her in the middle of a chocolate brown, cigar-band-style logo, encircled by the words *Starbucks* and *Coffee, Tea, Spices* in white.”²⁴¹ Allegedly, Heckler found the imagery of the siren singing to sailors (customers) amusing and appropriate, since caffeine encouraged alertness when tired or lost. This newly branded siren would now seduce seventies beatniks into consuming a cup of coffee.

Just like Peet’s shop, Starbucks at Pike Place Market in Seattle offered whole-bean coffee and beverages to customers who appreciated darker roasts and “authentic”, down-to-earth interiors and also longed for a culture untouched by a looming corporate America. However, the trio’s offered an element that Peet could not deliver: the dream of impeccable customer service that would, albeit in a diluted form, become a hallmark of the “Starbucks Experience.” Clark ascertains that the team at Starbucks had an “attitude [that] only made their coffee seem more desirable. People were proud to drink Starbucks coffee; the cultivated, uncompromising demeanour of the proprietors gave customers a feeling of validation and refinement.”²⁴² In addition to providing protestors a place where they were acknowledged and could find a common ground, Bryant Simon notes how Starbucks educated them. “Starbucks employees—foodie friends of Baldwin, Bowker, and Siegl—also took people through the steps of making coffee at home. Like the staff at Peet’s, they essentially sold coffee knowledge. You paid a premium to get a bit of what they knew. Servers taught customers how to grind beans, how much coffee to use, and the right water temperature for the perfect cup.”²⁴³ As Starbucks opened up more stores in the area, Baldwin eventually purchased Peet’s coffeeshop which put the company

²⁴¹ Clark, 42.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Simon, *Everything but the Coffee*, 29.

into debt. Baldwin was connected with a man from Brooklyn named Howard Schultz, a business school graduate whose job was to find new ways to market the company. Schultz was sent Italy to “ground” himself in European coffee culture and attend a conference but had his “epiphany”²⁴⁴ while sitting at a coffee house in Milan in 1983. The annunciation came from an Italian barista:

“*Buon giorno!*”²⁴⁵

Reflecting on this experience, which tied in performances from the barista behind the counter while opera softly played in the background, Schultz writes: “The thrill that met this epiphany was visceral. My body felt electric and my mind swam with ideas. Nothing on par with Italy’s cafés existed in the America I knew, but I intuitively believed that people would respond to the espresso bar experience just as I had, with curiosity and delight. I became convinced that translating that experience in America was the next step for Starbucks.”²⁴⁶ Schultz’s infatuation with the place and the taste of espresso recalls the Ethiopian legend, the caffeinated joy of Kaldi the goat-herder.

Although the scales fell from Schultz’s eyes, upon Schultz’ return to the States Baldwin and Bowker “didn’t fall for his epiphany,” as Kim Fellner writes: “Their passion was finely roasted coffee beans; and the opportunity to purchase Peet’s, the legendary East Bay coffee roaster, seemed far more enticing than a harebrained venture to bring coffeehouse culture to the masses.”²⁴⁷ Schultz started his coffee empire by leaving the company to create Il Giornale in 1985, a start-up beaming with a promise that its “cafés and espresso bars would become a daily

²⁴⁴ Howard Schultz with Joanne Gordon, *From the Ground Up: A Journey to Reimagine the Promise of America* (New York: Random House, 2019), 16.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁴⁷ Kim Fellner, *Wrestling with Starbucks: Conscience, Capital, Cappuccino* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 26.

ritual for people in Seattle, and eventually in other cities.”²⁴⁸ Only a few years later, however, Il Giornale merged with Starbucks. “A new type of store – a cross between a retail coffee bean store and an espresso bar/café”²⁴⁹ was born. With Schultz at the helm, a new Starbucks experience – spectacle and mythology – was crafted, complete with a revamped Siren, elaborate corporate rituals, pseudo-Italian menu, exotic coffee descriptors, immersive experiences, aquariums and “Odysseys.” The mythology of the siren invites play, although its iconography also ushers in the fear of the unfathomable depths and monstrous creatures. But as former-refugee storyteller Tamara Omazic writes in “Siren Song” it is not sinking into the inky abyss or monstrous creatures that is stressed: “Like the melodic tune of a mythical fish-tailed woman luring in unsuspecting sailors on the open ocean, the siren of Starbucks’ famous logo beckons the masses toward the promise of quality, of familiarity, of a ubiquitous yet iconic American coffee experience.”²⁵⁰

Schultz famously christened this new lounge café culture built on ritual behaviours, a mythology of the sea, and intimacy, a “third place.” As we will discuss in subsequent chapters, Starbucks not only adopted a Siren as its logo, outfitted its first store in Seattle with nautical décor and fixtures and took refuge in an aquatic literary figure from Melville’s *Moby Dick*. Starbucks’ new lounge version of the literary café—with its Siren blends, CD label, community literacy projects and quotes on cups since its inception ostensibly seeks to curate a warm and inviting space for collective discourse, while simultaneously circulating “cool images” of “cultural capitalism” as Slavoj Žižek has argued, arguably “greenwashing” concerns about over-

²⁴⁸ Schultz, *From the Ground Up*, 21.

²⁴⁹ See Arthur A. Thompson, “Case 7: Starbucks: Evolving into a Dynamic Global Organization” in particular the section “Starbucks as a Private Company, 1987-1992,” in *Crafting and Executing Strategy: The Quest for Competitive Advantage: Concepts and Cases* (London: McGraw-Hill/Irwin, 2013), 545.

²⁵⁰ Tamara Omazic, “Siren Song: Experts weigh in on Starbucks’ recent growth and diversification strategy,” *QSR* (May 2014): <https://www.qsrmagazine.com/growth/siren-song>

consumption, waste and labor inequality, both baristas and coffee farm workers and growers. It is worth noting here that Brazilian labour inspectors found evidence of modern slavery on C.A.F.E (Coffee and Farmer Equity) certified coffee farms in 2018 and 2019. Starbucks, after the report was released, suspended further coffee sourcing from these farms.²⁵¹

As the chain and its charges of corporate theft grew, Starbucks started to rely more heavily on a corporate rhetoric of sustainability, also incorporating recycled shipping containers into their eclectic design.²⁵² This greenwashing rhetoric of sustainability, however, masks the bitter fact that coffee, the most widely traded commodity in the world, has a heavy social and ecological footprint. A cruise ship-shaped Starbucks which opened in 2021 in Taiwan and stores in malls or greenhouses with views of domesticated aquariums symbolizes the other Starbucks, Cathedrals of Consumption that do not always adhere to a green capitalist mission. In a post-pandemic world, the corporation has also cautiously moved away from a “third place” rhetoric, instead privileging drive-thru experiences and “Starbucks Mobile Order & Pay” stations inside their cafés over the coffeehouse intimacy of the past. Cultural critics like Bryant Simon have long noted that Starbucks intimacy is itself contradictory; it “bills itself” a “third place” for “respite, socializing, and community building”—yet in this carefully curated environment one often sits alone.²⁵³ Starbucks’ branding of its café culture as a “home away from home” in the

²⁵¹ See Anna Canning, “Starbucks has a Slave Labor Problem,” *Fair World Project* (June 17, 2019): <https://fairworldproject.org/starbucks-has-a-slave-labor-problem>

²⁵² See IB Insight 10.4 “Starbucks C.A.F.E.” in Hinrich Voss, “Corporate Social Responsibility,” in *International Business*, ed. Peter J. Buckley, Peter Enderwick, and Hinrich Voss (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 298.

²⁵³ Simon erroneously attributes a quote about Starbucks “a place for people who want to be alone, but need company for it” to Alfred Polgar, but the Austrian columnist died on April 24, 1955. In the footnotes, Simon references Clark’s *Starbucked*. Clark notes that Polgar wrote this, but only spoke of coffee houses in general (Clark, 77). Simon also cites *New York Times* columnist, Anemona Hartocollis, who notes that “Maybe, like the absinthe drinkers, we only wish to drown our sorrows in a strong cup of coffee in cushy chairs surrounded by strangers who will grant us the illusion of community yet respect our privacy.” See her “Coping; Gazing Into a Coffee Cup and Seeing the World,” *New York Times* (September 29, 2002): <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/09/29/nyregion/coping-gazing-into-a-coffee-cup-and-seeing-the-world.html>

wake of COVID-19 (after new protocols and more “socially distanced” take-away service was introduced) has now become even more contradictory. On the one hand, the corporation also vehemently opposes unionization of its “partners,” also opposing a local tax to address homelessness in Seattle; on the other hand, the corporation has been lauded for hiring social workers to stop by stores or praised for its “Partnership for Zero (PFZ)” public-private initiative to combat homelessness.²⁵⁴ Our goal in the chapters to come is to tease out this contradiction and forge a new critical mythology to take stock of the shifting “Starbucks Experience” in a post-pandemic world.

²⁵⁴ See Michael Ko, “Starbucks to pilot new solutions in key Seattle stores to help unsheltered community members find housing,” *Starbucks Stories & News* (February 27, 2023): <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2023/starbucks-to-pilot-new-solutions-in-key-seattle-stores-to-help-unsheltered-community-members-find-housing/>

Chapter Two: Towards a ‘Third Place: The Starbucks Experience Reloaded

1. Sticks & Stones & Sharpies & Lattes: Performative/Theatrical/Ritualistic Labour of the Barista

As economists and cultural critics alike have often noted, key to the success of Starbucks and the rapid growth of its upscale café experience has been how it “offers the individual ‘cultural materials to fashion an identity’ in an environment designed to put people at ease with spending time and money.”²⁵⁵ George Ritzer perceptively brands Starbucks a performative space, arguing that “Starbucks’ major innovation has been in the realm of theatrics.”²⁵⁶ In other words, consumers or prosumers step up as “unpaid actors,” who “act out the illusion of an old-fashioned coffee house.”²⁵⁷

In his first book co-authored by Dori Jones Yang, *Pour Your Heart Into It: How Starbucks Built a Company One Cup at a Time*, Schultz famously christened his multi-million (now multi-billion) dollar café theatre a “third place” stating that “[p]eople connect with Starbucks because they relate to what we stand for. It’s more than great coffee. It’s the romance of the coffee experience, the feeling of warmth and community people get in Starbucks stores. That tone is set by our *baristas*, who custom-make each espresso drink and explain the origins of different coffees. Some of them come to Starbucks with no more skills than my father had, yet they’re they ones who create the magic.”²⁵⁸ A welcoming and warm “third place” especially

²⁵⁵ Barry et al, 2000; as quoted in Pollyanna Ruiz, “Manufacturing Dissent: Visual Metaphors in Community Narratives,” in *Notions of Community: A collection of Community Media Debates and Dilemmas*, ed. Janey Gordon (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), 210.

²⁵⁶ George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society 6* (Los Angeles: SAGE/Pine Forge, 2011), 221,

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Schultz and Yang, *Pour Your Heart Into It*, 5-6.

curated by baristas is ostensibly where the magic appears. “At first, we figured it was simply because of the coffee,” he writes, “but as time went on, we realized that our stores had a deeper resonance and were offering benefits as seductive as the coffee itself. *A Taste of Romance...An Affordable Luxury...An Oasis...Casual Social Interaction.*”²⁵⁹ Twenty-two years later, when the Roastery opened, as Warnick continues, “Liz Muller translated that [magic] into the Starbucks Reserve Roastery in Seattle, which would transform the world of experiential retail.”²⁶⁰ This Starbucks Experience—through the Roastery lens—is now engineered right in front of the consumer’s eyes.

One Starbucks Store Manager, Bri Sternquist, observes that with the “Black Eagle espresso machines, customers hear us grinding the coffee and see us tamping every shot...It brings us closer to the craft.”²⁶¹ Mention of the taste of the coffee is noticeably omitted; instead, the fascination is largely concerned with tactility, visual, sonic, and olfactory awareness and “artisanal craft.” As Schultz identifies in *Pour Your Heart Into It*, “Starbucks’ fastest growing stores today are in urban or suburban residential neighbourhoods. People don’t just drop by to pick up a half-pound of decaf on their way to the supermarket, as we first anticipated. They come for the atmosphere and the camaraderie.”²⁶² One is not only seduced by the addictive properties of coffee as there is also the addictive nature of the space. Starbucks is known for providing customers with an elevated experience that we could link to Ritzer’s theory of implosion: “the spectacular manipulation of time is likely to lead to more customers and more expenditures. And the more time available for consumption, the greater the number of goods and services that will

²⁵⁹ Schultz and Yang, 119.

²⁶⁰ Warnick, “New Starbucks Reserve Roastery: A Love Letter to Chicago”

²⁶¹ As quoted in Bri Sternquist’s essay: “Coffee Brewing Tips from the Experts at Starbucks,” *QSR* (October 19, 2017), <https://www.qsrmagazine.com/news/coffee-brewing-tips-experts-starbucks>.

²⁶² Schultz and Yang, *Pour Your Heart Into It*, 121.

be sold. Furthermore, consumers who are disoriented in terms of time are likely to be disoriented in other ways, including their thinking about money.”²⁶³

In *Addiction by Design*, Natasha Dow Schüll theorizes the manipulative interiors and wandering pathways of casinos and the uncanny phalanx of gambling machines and comes up with a similar conclusion. She cites sociologist Nigel Thrift to conclude that “player-centric machine design follows a wider trend in user-centrism wherein product designers seek to extract value from enhanced consumer experiences, or to ‘mine a new phenomenological substrate’.”²⁶⁴ The interior design of casinos is precisely calculated to extract as much money from the gambler as possible. The design shapes the addicted consumer’s experience, just as casinos curate “the phenomenological requirements of the zone experience.”²⁶⁵ “‘I hate this place,’ a man complained while standing in a Starbucks line. ‘It’s expensive and crowded and I can’t speak the language.’ Yet he waited for a latte and returned later for another.”²⁶⁶ The Starbucks Experience at least in part correlates to the “job of the casino layout ... to suspend walking patrons in a suggestible, affectively permeable state that renders them susceptible to environmental triggers, which are then supplied.”²⁶⁷

A crucial aspect of the addictive nature of Starbucks as a hegemonic brandscape is, as Thompson and Arsel indicate, how it asymptotically provides a “palliative for the distressing feelings of isolation, inauthenticity, and depersonalization that can be precipitated by the conditions of postmodern consumer culture.”²⁶⁸ The familiar sights, sounds, and smells of the modern coffee shop, regardless of their local or glocal alignment, give consumers a sense of

²⁶³ Ritzer, *Cathedrals of Consumption*, 142.

²⁶⁴ Schüll, 53.

²⁶⁵ Schüll, 54.

²⁶⁶ Pendergrast, 379.

²⁶⁷ Schüll, 46.

²⁶⁸ C.J. Thompson and Zeynep Arsel, “The Starbucks Brandscape and Consumers’ (Anticorporate) Experiences of Glocalization,” *Journal of Consumer Research* vol. 31, no. 3 (December 2004): 631-642, 640.

security and predictability, which distracts from an element of risk that consumers seek to avoid. Neil Gains writes that “Starbucks is full of rituals, including writing names on the coffee cups, calling the order from barista to barista, and regularly grinding the beans and steaming the milk to create the sound atmosphere of a coffee bar.”²⁶⁹ From proper beverage sequencing to the person in the Customer Service Role (CSR) who wears a timer that beeps to notify when the coffee is “expired,” the integration of such rituals into a coffee shop is an attempt to theatrically curate a Starbucks Experience—not just for the global consumer, but also for the global labourers who rely on small indicators of measured time to complete important tasks within them.

Starbucks’ ritual behaviors dovetail in key ways with Ritzer’s McDonaldization thesis. These rituals involve four key elements: efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control. The person in the CSR, arguably the keystone to ensuring smooth barista operations and checking in on the customer experience—and coincidentally the first position new partners learn—has these four goals in mind as they maneuver around the café behind and in front of the bar. The time it takes to complete a cycle of tasks depends on how many blends of coffee one is brewing. If there are three (light, medium, and dark roasts), a 10-minute cycle begins with a coffee rotation that switches out older coffee for freshly percolated brews. Within those 10 minutes, the CSR changes garbage bins, replenishes chilled ice boxes with fresh ice, cleans countertops, stocks food and drink components, and checks in on the customers among other tasks. When the timer is up, the CSR drops all other tasks and starts over. The CSR cycle mimics and oversees all other ritualistic operations behind the bar. However, such mastery also creates a theatre of relaxation for the consumer and seamless experience for the workers, especially during busy times. Writing

²⁶⁹ Neil Gains, *Brand esSense: Using Sense, Symbol and Story to Design Brand Identity* (Kogan Page Limited, 2013), 197.

for *SmartCompany*, Myriam Robin explains how this paradigm of rituals has its lineage in Schultz witnessing the finesse of baristas in Milan “dancing” while they crafted lattes for customers. The mastering of these rituals, she implies, demonstrates passion not just for coffee but for the company and customer appreciation. This is, perhaps, however masking a more sinister view. “This isn’t easy,” she writes, “because most of the people employed by Starbucks do not necessarily come to the company with a love of coffee.”²⁷⁰ In their seminal research paper on the importance of rituals at Starbucks, Mi, Zhang, Zhang, and Du state that “in the context of psychology or behavior, the sense of ritual can be roughly described as the systematic repetitive behavior of individuals to self-suggest in order to overcome anxiety about uncertainty.”²⁷¹ New hires are enthusiastically encouraged to be passionate about coffee, a process that represents the beginning and end of the Starbucks ritual.

Some say that the pen is mightier than the sword. Baristas have Sharpies. At the point-of-sale terminal (POS), my task was to frivolously develop a transactional relationship with the customer ordering a beverage. The climax of that conversation would involve scribbling their name in black permanent sharpie on the side of the white (or transparent) cup, usually next to the Siren, and then filling out the modifications to the recipe down its side. That cup would be placed on the counter next to the barista who would then pick it up, attempt to recite the name out loud to the café while adding “I’m just working on your beverage now.” This declaration would then signal to the customer that their drink is in process, lessening the anxiety of waiting, but also allowing the opportunity to start a conversation as they proceed down bar line. The

²⁷⁰ Myriam Robin, “The power of ritual: How Starbucks uses coffee tastings to anchor its staff,” *SmartCompany* (September 24, 2013): <https://www.smartcompany.com.au/finance/economy/the-power-of-ritual-how-starbucks-uses-coffee-tastings-to-anchor-its-staff/>

²⁷¹ Bojing Mi, Tianshu Zhang, Jingwen Zhang, Hantao Du, “Research of the Starbucks’ Ritual Sense and Strategy of Sales,” *Advances in Economics and Management Research*, vol. 178, Jan 1, 2021, 86-92, 88.

espresso machines (called Mastrenas) are strategically positioned on the counter to allow a face-to-face interaction with the barista and the customer. The fourth wall of the theatre of Starbucks, usually represented the bar counter, is encouraged by corporate training to be broken so that the customer can feel as if they are part of the spectacle itself. This is further dramatized if the customer orders an iced beverage. These drinks require the barista to prepare them in plastic shakers with sweet syrups and scoops of ice added. The performance of the preparation is heightened by the movements and the noise created by the ice. When the beverage is complete, steamed or shaken, the barista is encouraged to recite the name on the side of the cup: “Half-decaf Venti Extra-Dry Cappuccino for Esmeralda!” or “Iced tall half-sweet Passion Tango Tea for Jimmy!” There are countless times when names are mispronounced, not pronounced (either due to illegibility or profanity), or situations where there are more than 3 drinks with the same name from different customers.

Although many Western Starbucks locations have transitioned to using printing technology and have subsequently discouraged Sharpies from the hands and pockets of baristas, the ritual of naming the cup is still an empowering experience for the consumer.²⁷² Naming humanizes the “factory line” and turns it into a ritual as the customer vicariously experiences the process of their order in the bar queue. When the customer provides their name (or a name), they entrust that the barista(s) will protect its integrity by the end of the process. In other words, by giving away this name, what may be called a kenosis, the consumer relinquishes or “empties out” an identity (onto/into the empty cup) and proceeds to wait in a liminal state. At the of the

²⁷² Mobile ordering introduces another element of play as users can change their registered name on the Starbucks Mobile app to any name they want. In some cases, their mobile name lists a modification to the drink. In rare cases, swear words not caught by the app are printed on the cup.

ritual, the customer's name is "sirenically" called out, the cup is filled, the consumer reconciled. This process of affirmation can be seen in a Starbucks video short called "Every name's a story," directed by Nicolas Jack Davies, and is collected by the hashtag #whatsyourname, which won the Channel 4 Diversity Award in 2019.²⁷³



Figure 6: Teenager sitting on a bed with laptop: Every Name's a Story, Dir. Nicolas Jack Davies, January 2020)
 [Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcSP1r9eCWw>]

The video begins with a teen sitting on a bed typing on a laptop covered in stickers (Figure 6). The next shot is an extreme close up of their face showing a nose-ring and peering intently at the monitor, their face blue-lit by the screen. The next shot is of a blue screen of what appears to be an application form with the fields next to "First Name," "Last Name," and "Gender" blank, the cursor flashing in the first textbox field after another extreme close-up of their eye. Throughout the video, we see the teenager interacting with various members of and spaces within the community that name her "Jemma Miller": a delivery person, at a doctor's

²⁷³ "Starbucks LGBT+ Channel 4 Diversity Award 2019 | Every name's a story," *YouTube*, uploaded by Starbucks UK, 2 Feb 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7TEg6q1a3DE>.

office, talking on the phone with a university registrar confirmed by a shot of their student card, and finally interacting with their Dad at what seems to be a night club, who introduces “Jemma” to “Carol” (Figure 7).



Figure 7: Teenager addressed as "Jemma" by their father: Every Name's a Story, Dir. Nicolas Jack Davies, January 2020)
 [Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcSP1r9eCWw>]

After every encounter, the teenager looks visibly distressed, discouraged, and reticent. “Jemma” is then finally shown languishing in their bed under a blue-plaid comforter and pillows, appearing defeated, in the same dimly lit bedroom. In the next shot, the teenager is shown sitting upright in their bed and reaches out to draw back the blue curtains to reveal the daylight. A close-up of their face is shown lit with yellow daylight. We hear a voice ask, “And what’s your name?” as it cuts to the teenager standing inside a Starbucks, the Siren logo visibly blurred in the background on curtains. The word “Starbucks” is written sideways on the Mastrena, framing the teenager in the shot. The teenager holds their leather bag over their right shoulder, looks up at the barista, and answers: “It’s James” (Figure 8). With a quick smile, James’ eyes turn down.



Figure 8: "It's James" with Starbucks Logo in background: *Every Name's a Story*, Dir. Nicolas Jack Davies, January 2020
 [Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcSP1r9eCWw>]

The next shot captures a close-up of a white Starbucks cup held in one hand by a barista who writes "James" onto it with a black marker. The camera then cuts to a barista steaming out the steam wand, indicating that James' drink is nearly complete. After cutting to James again, who appears on the other side of the bar, the barista calls out "James," who recognizes their name and accepts the beverage, smiling. The end of this video is an establishing shot of the interior of the Starbucks with a floor-to-ceiling window capturing the busy street outside (Figure 9). A budding tree outside indicates spring. Four customers are sitting in the dimly-lit Starbucks café either reading a book, on their smartphone, and drinking coffee from porcelain mugs. Centre-aligned at the top of the frame, the Starbucks logo hangs from two metal bars that guide to the two tails of the siren.



Figure 9: *The Starbucks Interior: Every Name's a Story*, Dir. Nicolas Jack Davies, January 2020
 [Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcSP1r9eCWw>]

In this cinematic world, the barista is the first person to perhaps recite the name that this teenager gives them.²⁷⁴ This annunciation has obvious theological trappings (Garden of Eden, Moses and the burning bush, and the Annunciation of Mary), but it is important to note the power of the Starbucks barista accompanied by the Siren (and soft, melodic piano). Both provide an ontological reorientation for the consumer whose name and gender identity are affirmed by the corporation through its philosophy of the third place without reaction. The café (and the world beyond the window) are unchanged. For the barista, perhaps, the name is but a label on the beverage, but for the consumer, the act of naming and recitation speaks to a larger political

²⁷⁴ Memorizing and reciting is also an inspirational moment in the “Starbucks Entertainment” drama *Akeelah and the Bee* (2006). To promote the film Starbucks sold Scrabble games in stores and debuted a new slogan: “changing the world one word at a time.” See Starbucks Corporation’s press release, “Starbucks invites customers to D-I-S-C-O-V-E-R the inspiring film ‘Akeelah and the Bee,’” *3BLCSR Wire* (April 4 2006). https://www.csrwire.com/press_releases/24568-starbucks-invites-customers-to-d-i-s-c-o-v-e-r-the-inspiring-film-akeelah-and-the-bee-

agenda that has gained tremendous momentum, especially in developing worlds where naming and gender expression can be condemned.

VMLY&R, an American marketing and communications company, put this naming into legal practice in Brazil, where “trans people often suffer prejudice when they don’t have their new names of official documents. The process for legally changing names is expensive and bureaucratic, and the registry offices where it happens are intimidating environments for this community.”²⁷⁵ In collaboration with VMLY&R, Starbucks Brazil decided to replace Sharpies and cups for legal documentation and “decided to invite trans people to have their names legally changed in a place where they are always welcome. The agency transformed a local Starbucks into a registry office, and participants were able to leave the store with official documents in their new names—free of charge.”²⁷⁶ A longer video was produced in commemoration of this moment in 2019 on the National Day of Trans Visibility called *Starbucks – I am*.²⁷⁷ The black and white video portrays members of the trans community from São Paulo reciting their names and occupations edited with vignettes of a Starbucks store with the colours of the trans flag standing out from the monochromaticism. “The action transformed the entire internal structure of the store,” the description of the YouTube video states, “bringing service windows, equipment, signage, teams, and processes typical of a registry office to rectify the names of trans people.”²⁷⁸

Inasmuch as the spectacle of Starbucks creates controversy, it has opened the doors through which marginalized communities can express what Adela Licona calls a “borderlands

²⁷⁵ “VMLY&R Brazil: Starbucks I Am: Transforming a local Starbucks into a registry office where trans people can change their name free of charge,” *WPP*: <https://www.wpp.com/featured/work/2021/06/vmlyr-brazil-starbucks-i-am>

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁷ See “Starbucks – I am,” *YouTube*, uploaded by VMLY&R, 2 Jul 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aTH_UIQbuvE

²⁷⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aTH_UIQbuvE

rhetorics.”²⁷⁹ Both “discursive and visual,” she notes, borderlands rhetorics “are those rhetorics that have the potential to reconstruct stories, identities, places, histories, and experiences in such a way as to not only expose misrepresentations but also to uncover or produce new perspectives and even new knowledges.”²⁸⁰ The cooptation of borderlands rhetorics, a place where coalitional identities are formed through political resistance, is unfortunately commodified for the visibility of Starbucks public relations. The emancipation of the trans communities in Brazil fail to capture these rhetorics in favour of again “lubricating” the Starbucks Experience, providing another spectacle to distract from the monochromatic union-busting tactics the corporation seems to evade to create another kind of customer-facing reality.

On September 13, 2022, *Starbucks Stories & News* publicly debuted the “Siren System,” a streamlined process that “features a custom ice dispenser, milk-dispensing system and new, faster blenders all located within reach of a barista, reducing bending and heavy lifting. It also eliminates the need to move back and forth behind the service bar and eases congestion in a crowded, busy space.”²⁸¹ The conflation of mythology (siren) and technology (system) in the title reflect the automation of the Starbucks Experience, departing from the company’s promise of providing intimate, hand-crafted beverages to consumers. Instead, efficiency of food and drink production is further maximized, cutting down on waste and increasing profits. The Siren System guides or slightly removes the barista’s involvement (her hands are metaphorically tied to the mast of the ship) in beverage creation. Barista rituals are technologically driven, which certainly aids in the amount of labour spent on creating beverages, but could this Siren System contribute

²⁷⁹ See Adela Licona’s powerful research on communities of resistance in *Zines in Third Space: Radical Cooperation and Borderlands Rhetoric* (State University of New York Press, 2012).

²⁸⁰ Licona, 6.

²⁸¹ “Recipe for reinvention: Starbucks unveils innovations for better customer, barista experiences,” *Starbucks Stories & News* (September 13, 2022): <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2022/recipe-for-reinvention-starbucks-unveils-innovations-for-better-customer-barista-experiences/>

to the obfuscation or deterritorialization of coffee—or consumer—itself? As we will discuss in the final chapter of the thesis, Starbucks partners complained that this automatization obscures the company’s link to hang-out communal culture.

2. Stories about a Third Place

Scrolling through the Starbucks Stories & News website, one finds that over half of the articles written are not about the beverages and food items that consumers purchase beyond or between their places of home and work. An unfathomable amount of digital space and coding is instead devoted to the stories of the events or people who drive the Starbucks community, whether barista, farmer, or customer. Carmine Gallo, senior contributor for *Forbes* and Harvard instructor, divulges a simple Starbucks storytelling secret to explain this trend: “don’t make the story about product; make the story about people.”²⁸² Schultz’s continuous reiteration of his sentimental, humble origins story, both on the website and through three co-written motivational books, has encouraged if not pushed partners to reflect on their journey through the coffee house ethos, so long as it aligns with brand-protected content related to the Starbucks Experience. On many occasions, testimonies from customers—sometimes mentioning the third place—appear directly in corporate training documents and manuals purportedly to help the barista find, create, or emulate stories one can “relate” to support third place development. “While other brands are creating content about their products,” Gallo continues, “Starbucks is building a stronger, emotional connection with its customers through stories that reaffirm people’s faith in humanity. The stories further cement the relationship between the brand and its loyal customers. At the same time, it attracts new customers who might see the brand in a different light. It’s a win-win-

²⁸² Carmine Gallo, “Starbucks’ Cool New Brew: Storytelling With A Digital Twist,” *Forbes* (December 11, 2017): <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carminegallo/2017/12/11/starbucks-cool-new-brew-storytelling-with-a-digital-twist/?sh=506d54477352>

win: Good for the community, good for the country, and good for the company.”²⁸³ These stories are similarly “brewed” or commoditized, however and are uncritically consumed by the *café flâneur* along with their daily espresso macchiato. Christine Schwobel-Patel discusses branding in the 1990s as creating a kind of sensory community that consumers buy into. In her 2021 book, *Marketing Global Justice*, she notes that the “brand expectation transcends the commodity and expands into the immaterial. Individuals could buy, and buy into, a Starbucks community. The industry turned towards means, including sounds and shapes, by which to appeal to the feelings of consumers, rather than basing its marketing strategy on ‘logical’ propositions.”²⁸⁴ But what feelings is the Starbucks third place harnessing?

Efforts to seek a ritualization under the spectacle of Starbucks conceals, more bleakly in the terms of Debord, a “unity of misery. Behind the masks of total choice, different forms of the same alienation confront each other, all of them built on real contradictions which are repressed.... The spectacle is nothing more than an image of happy unification surrounded by desolation and fear at the tranquil center of misery.”²⁸⁵ Laxman Narasimhan, Starbucks newest CEO since Schultz stepped down in March 2023, has reworked Starbucks’ company mission to fit with Debord’s critique. This tweaking addresses the adversity experienced by those effected by the pandemic. Starbucks is said to be the remedy, the antidote to a post-pandemic misery. “The mission is simple,” Heidi Peiper states on *Starbucks Stories & News*: “*With every cup, with every conversation, with every community – we nurture the limitless possibilities of human*

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Christine Schwobel-Patel, *Marketing Global Justice: The Political Economy of International Criminal Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 67.

²⁸⁵ Debord, paragraph 63.

connection.”²⁸⁶ She notes that Narasimhan replaces “neighbourhoods” with “communities” revising Schultz’s mission as the company now looks to expand their reach into digital worlds. This is interesting because whereas neighbourhoods imply a place where people cohabitate, communities on the other hand indicate multiple “elsewheres” imagining larger groups of people coming together for a purpose or goal. ““We live in a world that is highly disconnected,” Narasimhan observes, “there’s just a desperate need for togetherness. Loneliness, division and polarization have become far too common.... The everyday ritual of coffee is a powerful way to connect—with yourself and with others. With our global community of trusted green-apron partners, amplified by our beloved brand and digital experiences, we are uniquely positioned for this moment.””²⁸⁷ Though Narasimhan does not draw on the third place nomenclature, he nonetheless reassures that Starbucks provides an answer to loss of community but only by the appearance of it. As Debord writes, “The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.”²⁸⁸ These images are then played back to the consumer, as we shall see later, by Starbucks entertainment.

The community trope is not new; it has long been a part of how Starbucks thinks about—and imagines—the public. From 2004 to 2008, creative director, copywriter, and game designer Thomas Prowell led “The Way I See It” campaign, which included printing motivational quotations from author submissions, including submissions from Erykah Badu and radio talk-show host Michael Medved, on the sides of Starbucks paper cups. *Seattle Times* columnist Lornet Turnbull notes that this campaign “was hoping to inspire old-fashioned coffee-house conversations” but ultimately led to “discord than “discussion” because the conservative group,

²⁸⁶ Heidi Peiper, “A new mission for Starbucks,” *Starbucks Stories & News* (April 24, 2023): <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2023/a-new-mission-for-starbucks/>

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Debord, stanza 4.

“Concerned Women for America, which promotes itself as the antithesis of the National Organization for Women and boasts 8,700 supporters in Washington, says most of those quoted on the coffee cups are liberal.”²⁸⁹ Bryant Simon also pointedly returns to the debate, pointing out that “for one Baylor University faculty member, this quote was too long and too gay. In response to the professor’s protest, the Starbucks store on the campus of Waco, Texas, Baptist school stopped serving coffee in the Maupin cups. Lina Ricks, a university official, reported that the dining services agreed to ditch the offending containers out of what she called respect for ‘Baylor culture.’”²⁹⁰ Although this campaign is reminiscent of the penny university Habermas wrote about that Starbucks wanted to copy, the coffee giant pulled the campaign because, as Simon notes, “Starbucks did everything it could to disconnect the brand from the dangers associated with the coffeehouse.”²⁹¹ Ironically, the silencing of these and many more liberal voices from the community went directly against their mission. The same types of discourse that appeals to everyone similarly appeals to no one. How does Starbucks really create a common third place by silencing their community?

Columnist Chris Reed was invited to participate in the “Meet me in Starbucks” campaign, in which cameras followed him around on a “typical day” working at his Starbucks in Singapore: “The idea behind this great piece of content marketing was to capture how people across the globe use Starbucks in their everyday life for all kinds of things from business to pleasure.”²⁹² Reed describes the experience as cinema verité, filming real life: “sometimes the person I was

²⁸⁹ One quotation by “liberal” author Armistead Maupin that is quoted is “*I surrendered my youth to the people I feared when I could have been out there loving someone. Don’t make that mistake yourself. Life’s too damn short.*” See Lornet Turnbull, “Tempest brews over quotes on Starbucks cups,” *The Seattle Times* (August 30, 2005): <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/tempest-brews-over-quotes-on-starbucks-cups/>

²⁹⁰ Bryant Simon, *Everything but the Coffee: Learning About America from Starbucks* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2009), 112.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

²⁹² Chris Reed, “My part in the ‘Meet me in Starbucks’ campaign,” *Campaign* (September 30, 2014): <https://www.campaignasia.com/article/my-part-in-the-meet-me-in-starbucks-campaign/426238>

meeting and I had to say hello and goodbye many times for the film crew, which did feel like we were starring in Starbucks—The Movie.”²⁹³ He expected a ‘blooper reel’ to include cuts that depicted gaffes and ‘behind the scenes’ moments that were considered largely tangential but conducive to the themed “reality” of Starbucks spaces. Consumers could wander with the cameras behind the scenes and watch clandestine operations such as how to steam a latte or peer into cupboards that contain not-for-sale ingredients.

Though “Meet Me in Starbucks” was a global project, Simon notes how in its seemingly endless iterations it ultimately failed to produce “genuine” public space. What it does, rather, is simulate the coffeehouse. French cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard first developed the idea of simulacrum. “Based on an idealized version...the simulacrum is a reproduction. Over time, the reproduction becomes less and less like the imagined original, so even though it looks like the first cut of something, it doesn’t function in the same way, for the same purposes.”²⁹⁴ What is importantly consumed in campaigns such as “Meet Me in Starbucks” or the “Match Made over Coffee,” Starbucks’ 2003 Valentine’s Day contest, is location, the romance, storytelling, and, most importantly, an attempt to show authentic feelings that support those stories.²⁹⁵ Starbucks doesn’t want to be a copy; it wants to give off the aura of an original, although it creates and polices copycats (copycat trademarks, stores, beverages) on a daily basis.²⁹⁶

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ Simon, 118.

²⁹⁵ “On 8th January 2003, as Valentine’s Day approached, the company launched a national contest they called *Match Made Over Coffee* looking for couples whose relationship sizzled in Starbucks outlets. To participate, entrants had to submit a true, 250-word essay to www.starbucks.com, explaining how they found love at Starbucks. The most creative, romantic and coffee-rich, true-love story would receive an all-expenses-paid trip for two to Vienna, Austria, the coffee capital of the world.” See Klaus Fog, Christian Budtz, and Baris Yakaboylu, *Storytelling: Branding in Practice* (New York: Springer, 2005), 183.

²⁹⁶ Starbucks lost their lawsuit against the South Korean copycat brand Starpreya. When Starbucks Coffee pulled out of Russia after sending troops into Ukraine, an Ersatz company with a copycat logo *Stars Coffee* also opened in Russia almost overnight, jumping on the opportunity to recreate Schultz’s company—and the third place mindset: “The logo could be the separated-at-birth twin of the Starbucks mermaid, with flowing hair, a small enigmatic smile and a star atop her head—though instead of a Starbucks crown she wears a Russian headdress called a kokoshnik.”

Whether in Singapore, Rhodes, or Washington, the slight changes to the aesthetics of a Starbucks coffee shop conveys what Paul A. Taylor calls “integral reality,” a term that Baudrillard uses to denote “an interpassive world in which there is a surfeit of representational exposure but a deficit of meaning.”²⁹⁷ The repetition of Starbucks with slightly different cultural trappings suggests that all Starbucks belong to the same world it dreams up. By removing campaigns that have gone sour, such as “The Way I See It,” it would appear that Starbucks fashions a clear, frictionless world that still claims to be a *café par excellence*. Just as Simon suggests, the company “stamped out the real essence of the original ideal of the coffeehouse and, through proliferation and endless insistence, became itself the real thing for many boho and creative class types.”²⁹⁸ The rhetorical aim for a glocalized Starbucks is, then, to establish a space of least resistance.

The “Meet Me in Starbucks” campaign showed the public an illusion of transparency. By depicting the day in the life of a barista from all corners of the world, Starbucks unveiled the real lives behind the counter. You could be a barista, too. “Saying that it had nothing to hide,” Simon says, “Starbucks stores usually stand at street level and have floor-to-ceiling windows. You can see inside and know at a glance that this is a safe place. The lights are bright, not glaring like at McDonald’s or the diner, but not dimmed like at a roadhouse tavern or beatnik coffeehouse.”²⁹⁹ This form of retail tourism, of peering behind the counters to peek at baristas and the production of coffee, encourages consumers to adopt a similar strategy to view the world. Michael Smith in his powerful essay “The Empire Filters Back” observes that the openness of Starbucks design

See “Russia gets its caffeine fix with Starbucks copycat stores,” *CBC News* (August 18, 2022): <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/russia-starbucks-copycat-1.6555480>

²⁹⁷ Paul A. Taylor, “Participation and the Technological Imaginary: Interactivity or Interpassivity?” in *The Participatory Cultures Handbook*, ed. Aaron Delwiche and Jennifer Jacobs Henderson (New York: Routledge, 2013), 254.

²⁹⁸ Simon, 119.

²⁹⁹ Simon, 113.

positions the consumer behind these floor-to-ceiling windows, on the “counters and rows of elevated stools” that provide “a perfect and legitimized vantage point for the individual voyeur. Patrons are meant to watch when at Starbucks, to take in the streetscape as they sip their coffee.”³⁰⁰ Smith argues that this is symbolic of the coffee giant’s gentrification strategies. Consumers are “integrally connected to those ‘landscapes of leisure’ where people with disposable income, not to mention cultural capital, go to consumer, display themselves, and watch others; as such they are part and parcel of the cultural geography associated with the ‘recolonization’ of North American inner cities by the yuppie shock troops of a putatively post-industrial capitalism.”³⁰¹ The Starbucks spectacle simultaneously inverts the consumer gaze in the ethos of what Tara Emelye Needham calls a “*nothing-to-hideness*”³⁰² as patrons peer through glass windows or “screens” to consume the world around them. The “beyond” to which a third place invites consumers is not committed to the obligations of first or second places; instead, through the act of looking, it grants permission for users of the space to commodify and colonize them.

In some Starbucks locations around the world, the floor to ceiling windows, lack of decoration, i.e., exposed support beams, catwalks, minimal plant life, duct fans, and brick walls, create the illusion of a transparency. Needham argues that “by decorating with an industrial interior, Starbucks wants its consumers to determine that they have in fact not decorated at all. This is an attempt at neutrality. To lose all origin, in a sense to signify nothing...to resist meaning, identification with anything, to elude interpretation. The industrial interior allows for

³⁰⁰ This quote is attributed to Michael D. Smith; as quoted in Neil Wrigley and Michelle Lowe, *Reading Retail: A Geographical Perspective on Retailing and Consumption Spaces* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 6.

³⁰¹ Smith, “The Empire Filters Back: Consumption, Production, and the Politics of Starbucks Coffee,” *Urban Geography* 19.6 (1998): 502-525.

³⁰² Tara Emelye Needham, “High Ceilings, Seductive Shrines: Inside Starbucks,” *TechKnowledgies: New Imaginaries in the Humanities, Arts, and TechnoSciences*, ed. Mary Valentis with Tara P. Monastero and Paula Yablonsky (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007). 307.

Starbucks to be unlocatable, yet everywhere at the same time.”³⁰³ Although it is similar in design to a factory, a second place (i.e., place of work), this space is scratched clean of messy original labour and is instead replaced with aromatic steam pillowing up from espresso machines. Instead of noisy hooks and pulleys, one hears the noise of the gears that grind the beans. “Starbucks does not seek to transform the condition of the space, only its function. A second concept is achieved through the use of the industrial interior—*conversion*...this once unique space of abandoned, perhaps failed, production has been given a new purpose—it has been revitalized, put to use, saved from ruin.”³⁰⁴ This space, once a place that *produced the commodity* through technological advancements, is now a ritualized space to *commodify and consume*.

Historian and Starbucks critic Ann Rippin approaches the corporation through the Marxist lens of Henri Lefebvre’s theory of space to expose the larger sociopolitical structures Starbucks engages with. She suggests that the coffee conglomerate’s expansion around the world is endangering many forms of cultural memory by changing the tone of the spaces in which stores appear and further points to how subjects are influenced by them. In her article “Space, place and the colonies: Re-reading the Starbucks story,” she critically revises Starbucks’ relationship to empire, suggesting three things. The first is that the “spaces that the organization creates...in some way lay claim to the consumer’s inner world. To create, in effect, a Starbucks of the mind is a subtle process of intra-personal colonisation.”³⁰⁵ Second, she observes that “there is, then, a transformation of space in Schultz’s mind from retail coffee shop to an idealized space of luxury and romance.”³⁰⁶ Starbucks is imagined through the lens of Italian romance,

³⁰³ Ibid., 309.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 307.

³⁰⁵ Ann Rippin, “Space, Place and the Colonies: Re-Reading the Starbucks’ Story,” *Critical Perspectives on International Business* 3, no. 2 (2007): 148.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 145.

filtered through an American context and then flows back into international landscapes. “The final element of this space of the mind,” Rippin observes, “is that of travel. By visiting the ersatz Milano of Schultz’s imagination or the great coffeehouses of Vienna or Venice pastiched in the Starbucks store, the coffee drinker can vicariously travel the world without ever leaving home, or at least leaving the third place.”³⁰⁷ The idea Schultz suggests that the third place is a mental space beyond work and home seems to paint it out as a realm of transition, perhaps a rite of passage—a mental pilgrimage that Starbucks hosts. Coffee tastings are another way the company asks its baristas to facilitate this immersive “experience,” inviting the customer to take a fantasy Odyssey and imagine a place by locating tasting notes of flavour profiles in blends of Sumatran, Latin American, Kenyan, or Australian Gold Coast coffee. Graduates of their coffee master program submit completed coffee passports to demonstrate proof of their capabilities as a global coffee connoisseur.

Coffee is not only symbolically used to perceive landscapes through taste profiles and blends of the beans. It is a multi-sensory medium through which many flavour “profiles” appear and Starbucks is aware of its ideological potential. Here we heed the words of Slavoj Žižek who, despite the fact that he claims he is a loyal Starbucks consumer, sits in front of a white poster that reads “NO THOUGHT” in his short film, *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology* (Fiennes, 2012), and states that:

when we buy a cappuccino from Starbucks, we also buy quite a lot of ideology. Which ideology? You know, when you enter a Starbucks store—it’s usually always displayed by some posters there their message which is yes, our cappuccino is more expensive than others but (and then comes the story) we give 1% of all our income to some...water supply to some Sahara farmers...to enable organic growing....What Starbucks enables you is to be a consumerist...without any bad conscience because the price for the countermeasure for fighting consumerism is already included in the price of a commodity. Like you pay a little bit more and you are not just a consumerist, but you do

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

also your duty towards the environment, the poor starving people starving in Africa, and so on and so on. It's, I think, the ultimate form of consumerism.³⁰⁸

Žižek's comments not only point to the *pharmakon* in the commodity but also reveals how the third place mindset today is itself steeped in enchanted consumerism. On the one hand, discerning the nutrients in the soil by tasting where the coffee beans grew could conjure up dreams of sustainability, global citizenship and ethical sourcing, but beneath the philanthrocapitalism lies a darker story. Starbucks' greenwashing campaigns and social justice initiatives make the consumer feel good about over-consumption. Starbucks' coffee-house social justice is a watered-down copy of actual philanthropy.³⁰⁹

Bryant Simon turns to Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulacra to help describe how Starbucks envisions their "third place," pushing Žižek's observations on Starbucks' cultural capitalism even further. Simon's approach is helpful because he incorporates Baudrillard's literary criticism to describe how the simulated culture of Starbucks is successful, not because of the sheer number of stores and increasing profit margins, but because Starbucks can persuade consumers to emulate a personality recapitulated by the "Starbucks Experience." In *Everything but the Coffee*, Simon interrogates Starbucks culture by saying that with every renovation "the coffeehouse has become something to consume more than an actual public gathering place. You rent out space for work or a meeting or pay for a chair for twenty minutes of relaxation, or maybe you use it as a place to show off your good taste.... In other words, it is the appearance of the coffeehouse that matters. Go to this place with art on the walls and jazz flowing out of the speakers, and you turn yourself into a witty, handsome, and urbane character from the TV show

³⁰⁸ *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*, Sophie Fiennes, Zeitgeist Films, 2012.

³⁰⁹ For more on philanthrocapitalism, see Gavin Fridell and Martijn Konigs, *Age of Icons: Exploring Philanthrocapitalism in the Contemporary World* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

Friends.”³¹⁰ The influence Starbucks has on its customers, inside and outside of their stores, Simon observes, is profound. That the third place is said by Schultz to be as boundless as a mindset suggests that there can be a continuity of this “urbane character” outside of the lofty coffeehouse. It is, as Baudrillard states, an exercise in consumer culture, but is also “a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real.”³¹¹ With Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra in hand, Simon diagnoses Starbucks as a consumer culture that, like the architectures the company duplicates, is endlessly refracted:

But this isn’t necessarily who you are; this is an image you pay a premium to display. You spend money to say something about yourself. At the classic coffeehouse or at a real third place, you participate by talking and listening; you don’t just sit there, and it isn’t just about you. At Starbucks, the coffeehouse quotes are there to sell Starbucks and to lend out, for a price, a sophisticated, cool image, but not really to promote free exchange, artistic engagement, or lasting community connections.³¹²

According to these critics, the amplification of beliefs about identity reinforced by endless confirmation biases painted on their walls represents the empty world of Starbucks as an ideological spectacle of the neoliberal imagination—as Ann Rippin suggests below, a prison of consumerism near implosion.

“Where is Starbucks?” Rippin asks. “And this décor, doesn’t it look very Robert Rauschenberg? This looks like his photo-montage work. Oh, but no, it’s actually ALMOST RAUSCHENBERG BUT NOT QUITE! But his studio was right here on Bond Street. No this is LIKE the neighbourhood, it is IN the neighbourhood, but it IS NOT the neighbourhood. It’s Starbucks, where is that? Where is Starbucks? IT’S NO PLACE.”³¹³ Rippin references Marc

³¹⁰ Simon, 118.

³¹¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1-2.

³¹² Simon, 118-119.

³¹³ Rippin, 147. This quote is attributed to a well-known “Starbucks anti-globalisation critic/activist, Bill Talen, in his incarnation as the Rev Billy. The Rev Billy disrupts businesses at Starbucks by introducing an entirely inappropriate set of spatial practices through conducting staged meetings of the Church of Stop Shopping in a

Augé's work on the non-place as a product of hypermodern realism, further demonizing Augé's theory of places of transit, the frontier of travel experiences.³¹⁴ What is interesting here is that, by declaring Starbucks as a nonplace, the possibility to suggest its ontological inverse appears. It is also an everywhere space that infiltrates all neighbourhoods and is always recognizable by the public. Within and outside its recognizable walls, however, what kind of community is envisioned?

One key aspect of how Starbucks envisions community relates to its integration of "fair trade" rhetoric into its advertising brandscape. As of writing this dissertation, the only Fair Trade Certified coffee available to purchase at a Starbucks store in one-pound bags is "Starbucks Fairtrade Certified Italian Roast."³¹⁵ The deep brown bag that features a golden vespa on the front includes the Fair Trade logo at the top right. It also boasts itself as one of the darker roasted beans, alongside Espresso and Verona blends, and is itself a blend of Latin American beans. This may come as a surprise since Starbucks prides itself on inclusion, diversity, and equality. Shouldn't all Starbucks coffee blends be Fair Trade Certified, sourced from farmers who deal directly with the company? Furthermore, isn't that why Starbucks coffee is more expensive?

Fair Trade coffee is not as self-explanatory as one might expect. Ideally, Fair Trade coffee symbolizes a negotiation that is equitable to the farmers who grow and supply the coffee to Starbucks. It promises an increase in the amount of money paid for their services compared with other cooperations while developing a closer relationship with the farmers that allows them

Starbucks store. These activities are so disruptive that Talen takes the title of his book from an internal memo at the company, *What Should I Do if Reverend Billy is in my Store?*" (146-147).

³¹⁴ The abundance of Starbucks locations in airports, hotels, trains is not surprising. In 2013, Starbucks opened a store on a train in Geneva, Switzerland. Now Starbucks coffee is served on airplanes and available at kiosks in grocery stores. See Alex Davies, "There's Now a Starbucks Store on a Train," *Business Insider* (November 14, 2013), <https://www.businessinsider.com/starbucks-on-train-switzerland-2013-11>

³¹⁵ See an image of the bag here: "Starbucks Fairtrade Certified Italian Roast," <https://www.starbucks.com.cn/en/menu/coffee/whole-bean/dark-roast/starbucks-fairtrade-certified-italian-roast/>

access to other amenities like credit to purchase larger tractors and tools and benefits to help families. Additionally, ensured that their coffee is sourced ethically by monitoring poor working conditions and/or malpractice that have been known to many underdeveloped coffee farms. In other words, Fair Trade humanizes the trade by removing the transactional framework and dispel the notion that coffee farmers are nonhuman. Or, as Bryant Simon puts it, “fair trade tries to politically, economically, and psychologically connect producers in the underdeveloped world to consumers in the developed world in a transnational relationship built around human needs ahead of supply and demand.”³¹⁶ With Fair Trade coffee, Starbucks can get to know their names and introduce them to the wider consumer culture through “corpumentary”³¹⁷ storytelling.

Though Fair Trade coffee stories and logos lubricates the Starbucks Experience for the consumer, fewer Fair Trade coffees rarely make it to the shelf. There are at least three reasons for this. According to Taylor Clark, farms that are under Fair Trade agreements are usually locked into a price well-above farms that do not participate in the program. “Fair Trade certifiers refuse to interfere with merchants’ market practices, which gives greedy retailers a free pass to take advantage of well-meaning consumers by charging ridiculous margins....what happens to Fair Trade farmers when the market price exceeds \$1.26 per pound? [T]he moment another massive first strikes and coffee soars to \$4.00 a pound, don’t expect growers to happily take their \$1.26.”³¹⁸ The second reason is linked to an ideological battle between quality versus philosophy. “Within the industry,” Clark continues, “it’s an open secret that Fair Trade beans have historically been much lower in quality than their unsanctified cousins.”³¹⁹ Businesses are

³¹⁶ Simon, 208.

³¹⁷ “Corpumentary” is a portmanteau for “corporate” and “documentary,” films designed to praise the business in a more sentimental, uplifting way but hopes to be more interesting.

³¹⁸ Clark, 192.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

less likely to trust that the beans sourced from farmers who earn wages at a fixed rate are of the same quality as those in other cooperatives who might be competing with each other. This trickles down to the dilemma of the consumer. Is my coffee ethically sourced?

A curious letter posted to *Starbucks Stories & News* on March 1, 2020, prompted readers to a show called *Dispatches*, a British current affairs program that identified Starbucks as one corporation involved with purchasing coffee from farms in Guatemala that enforced child labour.³²⁰ This is at least the second time Starbucks has been charged with this claim, the first occurring in 2004, when they condoned child labour because of pre-existing ethno-racial structures that permitted children to work alongside their families on the farm. According to Gavin Fridell's research, these "structures and attitudes persist today, and are often used by elites in the North and South to justify extreme class exploitation and inequality within the industry. Often this is done under the guise of respect for 'cultural differences.'"³²¹ In a strangely pre-emptive response to their more recent charge, Michelle Burns, Senior Vice President, Global Coffee & Tea, writes: "We immediately launched an investigation and confirmed that **we have not purchased coffee from the farms in question during the most recent harvest season.**"³²² Though these coffee beans are not explicitly listed as fair-trade certified, Starbucks notes how their own ethical sourcing program called C.A.F.E. or Coffee and Farmer Equity Practices, is

³²⁰ Jamie Doward writing for *The Guardian* notes that "Channel 4's *Dispatches* filmed the children working 40-hour weeks in grueling conditions, picking coffee for a daily wage little more than the price of a latte. The beans are also supplied to Nespresso, owned by Nestlé. Last week, George Clooney, the advertising face of Nespresso, praised the investigation and said he was saddened by its findings. The *Dispatches* team said some of the children, who worked around eight hours a day, six days a week, looked as young as eight. They were paid depending on the weight of beans they picked, with sacks weighing up to 45kg. Typically, a child would earn less than £5 a day, although sometimes it could be as low as 31p an hour." See Doward, "Children as young as eight picked coffee beans on farms supplying Starbucks," *The Guardian* (March 1, 2020): <https://amp.theguardian.com/business/2020/mar/01/children-work-for-pittance-to-pick-coffee-beans-used-by-starbucks-and-nespresso>

³²¹ Fridell, *Fair Trade Coffee*, 131.

³²² "A message from Starbucks svp, global coffee: Zero tolerance for child labor," *Starbucks Stories & News* (March 1, 2020): <https://stories.starbucks.com/press/2020/a-message-from-starbucks-svp-global-coffee-zero-tolerance-for-child-labor/>. Original bold.

sufficient for auditing standards.³²³ Fridell notes how this is another one of Starbucks' "watered-down alternatives to the fair trade network,"³²⁴ which testifies to the company's evasion of answering to equitable practices established by third-party auditors.

This ethical dodging and exploitation of labour is inherently linked with colonizing patterns. Fridell notes that the expansion of Starbucks as the world's largest coffee chain business, whose aim is to increase profit margins and decrease budget lines, is ethically damaging and, furthermore, has phenomenological consequences to the global consumer. As Fridell observes, "when 'ethical consumers' purchase their trade coffee from a giant TNC [transnational corporation] like Starbucks, they are not connecting with Southern producers in a substantially different manner than when they purchase any other conventional commodity: consumer and producer remain abstract, anonymous individuals with no real knowledge of each other or their communities."³²⁵ And when the Starbucks "corpumentary" displays the lush fields of Guatemala to new hires, the ethical dissonance might be felt as the same romance Schultz experienced one afternoon in Milan. "Colonization is complete when people no longer 'see' it," Ann Rippin concludes as she compares Starbucks to a colonizing machine.³²⁶ Fair Trade logos, like the one seen on the auspicious brown bag of Italian Roast, seek to dispel the magic. However, it is up to the consumer to determine how much deeper they are willing to explore its significance if the price is right.

³²³ Starbucks provides scores for each of their investigations and users can learn more about their C.A.F.E. practices online at <https://www.scsglobalservices.com/services/starbucks-cafe-practices>. Interestingly, as of writing this dissertation, the link to their policy on global human rights, "which underscores [their] commitment to treating everyone with dignity and respect" is broken.

³²⁴ Fridell, 21.

³²⁵ Ibid.

³²⁶ Rippin, "Space, place and the colonies," 139.

3. Oldenburg's "Third Place"

Again, what exactly is "the third place," and why would Schultz want to promote his business in this way? Schultz would have readers of his three co-authored memoirs believe that the third place coincides not just with a building but with innovation in social development, community-building, and good management practices. Forget the coffee; the third place is an extension of his international empire.

The third place is a term that has become synonymous with maintaining what Schultz has called the "Starbucks Experience," that sense of retail wonder and fervor the company is famous for all around the world. For example, the same Starbucks in Toronto is imagined to sell the same cup of coffee while instilling the very same sensation in a Starbucks in Rhodes, Greece or in Kamakura, Japan; Bali, Indonesia, or Poas Volcano, or even in Tukwila, Washington are also cities where a customer can rely on the same customer service and the same third place sensation.³²⁷ Though all store blueprints are different, every Starbucks must undergo careful planning to elicit the Starbucks Experience consumers of the brand have come to trust and want. Schultz opines, "[p]eople connect with Starbucks because they relate to what we stand for. It's more than great coffee. It's the romance of the coffee experience, the feeling of warmth and community people get in Starbucks stores."³²⁸ The sociologist Ray Oldenburg would agree that the third place is about feeling a sense of community; however, he has had trouble accepting Schultz's claims. In a casual interview with Bryant Simon, Oldenburg insists that the third place instead belongs to environments in mostly modest locations, generally independent, not-for-profit, that foster a sense of camaraderie through chance informal gathering. Most notably, "with

³²⁷ This is a partial list reported by online journalist, Cameron Dwyer. See "15 Unusual Starbucks Stores Around the World," *When on Earth*, <https://whenonearth.net/15-unusual-starbucks-stores-around-world/>

³²⁸ Schultz and Yang, *Pour Your Heart Into It*, 5.

its ‘overriding concern for safety,’ predictability, and reassurance, Starbucks ‘can’t achieve the kinds of connections I [Oldenburg] had in mind.’”³²⁹ Simon also observes the importance of clean bathrooms in third places.³³⁰

Differences in the semantics pertaining to the third place spawn phenomenological inconsistencies. On the one hand, the third place could correspond to the sensation of a towering retail experience such as the Starbucks Roastery or comparable destinations like Disneyworld and Atlantis; on the other, the third place might describe a local dusty bookshop or a seedy bar that, as Oldenburg observes in a compendium of third place examples, “are being replaced by mammoth, impersonal chain operations.”³³¹ This shows that there is a difference in how the third place is conceived in public imagination. Are third places eclipsed by international operations like Starbucks or McDonalds, or are they merely evolving from an equally musty definition? If so, can the aesthetic qualities of a third place be separated from the Starbucks Experience as its American front porch imagery continuously extends?

There seems to be fragments of each term embedded in their semantic charge. In their attempt to provide voice to marginalized cultures, like 2SLGBTQIA+ communities, participating in #blacklivesmatter campaigns, and drawing from Latinx speakers, Starbucks seems to find some resonance with the critical literature involved with thirdspace theory.³³² While reference to

³²⁹ Simon, 102.

³³⁰ Bathroom accessibility and cleanliness, Simon notes, is crucial to the Starbucks Experience: “Bathrooms represent another public void that Starbucks fills to its own private money-making advantage. They are, in many ways, an essential part of the company’s value proposition, especially for urban customers.... With its spacious, sparkling clean, and nicely appointed bathroom, the coffee company informs customers that it cares, even if it costs a little extra to keep these places spick-and-span. In this equation, customers repay Starbucks’ kindness with coffee purchases and word-of-mouth praise.” See *Everything But the Coffee*, 90 & 91-92.

³³¹ Ray Oldenburg, *Celebrating the Third Place: Inspiring Stories about the “Great Good Places” at the Heart of our Communities* (New York: Marlow & Co., 2001), 43.

³³² For a brief survey of thirdspace theory, please see Soja, Edward W. *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*. New York: Verso, 1989 and Bhabha, Homi K.. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

thirdspace is not made entirely explicit, there are hints in Schultz's latest autobiography, *From the Ground Up: A Journey to Reimagine the Promise of America* that points to the evolution of Starbucks as a borderless, philanthropic brand. To provide example of how Schultz is mildly incorporating thirdspace theory into his sense of the third place is in the way he references the Philadelphia incident occurring on April 12, 2018, when two black men were wrongly arrested at a Philadelphia Starbucks café. I argue that this represents a critical turn in the history of Starbucks, not from a business standpoint, but for the articulation of third place aesthetics and phenomenology. Furthermore, this incident prepared Starbucks for its most daring proposal: the third place *mindset*.

Handcuffed without resistance. The racial bias incident caught the attention of many major news stations as video evidence of the two men arrested was uploaded to social media by customers who then instigated the hashtag, #BoycottStarbucks.³³³ How could Starbucks, an international coffeehouse known for their achievements in meritorious customer service—the third place—allow this to happen? The *Guardian* reports that the “Seattle-based Starbucks has said the location where the arrests occurred has a policy that restrooms are for paying customers only. Nelson and Robinson spent hours in a jail cell with no outside contact and no sense of what would happen next. They were released after midnight, when the district attorney declined to prosecute them for trespassing.”³³⁴ Upon investigation, the store manager was later terminated from Starbucks and corporate teams quickly initiated a racial bias educational workshop that was to be taken together, nationally.

³³³ Schultz and Gordon, *From the Ground Up*, 303-304.

³³⁴ “Black men arrested at Philadelphia Starbucks feared for their lives,” *The Guardian* (April 19, 2018): <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2018/apr/19/starbucks-black-men-feared-for-lives-philadelphia>

This unique training module posed as an event required every corporately owned Starbucks location in North America to close for one full afternoon in May 2018: one day for all stores in the United States, and one for those in Canada. Stores were shipped brand new iPads which were locked and linked to video sessions of CEO at the time, Kevin Johnson, and his corporate team discussing the incident and ways in which all partners of the company could dispel racial bias and offer points on accessibility and diversity. Though not actively a part of the company at that time, Schultz reflects on this incident in *From the Ground Up*, stating that “Starbucks is an organism that grew up around an idea—an ideal really. Customers could come together over coffee in our stores and our company could grow, sharing its prosperity with its people and the neighbourhoods it served. We wanted to do good and perform well for shareholders. ‘Performance-driven by humanity’ is how I have long described how we needed to go about our business.”³³⁵ The Philadelphia Incident was abrasive to their immaculate image. What needs work, according to him, is the spaces Starbucks creates because, he alludes, it is part of the company’s mission.

This plan has evolved over nearly thirty years of envisioning at corporate drawing boards. Schultz realized in 1997 that Starbucks “stores had a deeper resonance and were offering benefits as seductive as the coffee itself”³³⁶ that ran parallel to roasting coffee, providing benefits to part-time employees including tuition rebates. These compensations that were exclusive to the company became uniquely tied up with the Starbucks Experience, which then was folded into how the third place was felt and perceived. Schultz echoes his view of the third place again in *From the Ground Up* as he discloses its ephemeral nature:

³³⁵ Schultz and Gordon, *From the Ground Up*, 312.

³³⁶ Schultz and Yang, *Pour Your Heart Into It*, 119.

I've never through of the third place just as a physical environment. For me, the third place has always been a feeling. An emotion. An aspiration that all people can come together and be uplifted as a result of a sense of belonging. This is the cornerstone of our business, yes, but 'belonging' is also a basic human right, which should be afforded all members of a society. Because creating a sense of belonging is central to Starbucks' story, the company was compelled to respond to the events in Philadelphia with serious self-reflection and substance. Much more than apologize, we sought to examine bias in our own company, and also in the country, and explore ways to combat it.³³⁷

Schultz's provocative vision of Starbucks as an emotional and aspirational third place imbues experiential retail with a philanthropic edge, empowering it to continuously monitor their reputation and prevent future incidents from occurring inside their stores. Today, Schultz asks his fellow partners and stakeholders a few rhetorical questions: "*How does Starbucks serve the public today?*", "*How could we bring hundreds of thousands of partners along the journey—quickly?*" and "*How could we ensure lasting change?*"³³⁸

When restrictions from the first lockdown partially lifted in certain regions of North America, CEO and President at the time, Kevin Johnson, issued a letter dipped in corporate optimism to all Starbucks partners and customers on May 4, 2020. The letter reads:

As so many in our family of partners come back this week, responsibly re-opening stores across the United States, we are poised to adapt very rapidly, in meaningful ways that enhance the Starbucks Experience for our partners, customers, and the communities we serve. We are accelerating many forward-looking initiatives to address the realities of the current situation. We do this to provide a safe, familiar, and convenient experience for our customers. These adaptations will reinforce the concept of *the third place*—a warm and welcoming place, outside of our homes and our workspaces, where we connect and build community. We think of the *third place* as a mindset—a feeling of comfort that uplifts customers everywhere, and in every way, they experience Starbucks. And the *third place* has never been more relevant than now, as communities seek to reconnect and heal.³³⁹

³³⁷ Schultz, *Ground Up*, 317.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, 319.

³³⁹ "Starbucks CEO: The third place, needed now more than ever before," *Starbucks Stories & News* (May 4, 2020): <https://stories.starbucks.com/press/2020/starbucks-ceo-the-third-place- needed-now-more-than-ever-before/>.

This message, still available to read on their Starbucks Stores, a subpage of their main corporate website, accomplishes three things. Johnson first ensures all customers that Starbucks can resist full closure amid global catastrophe and continue typical business operations without further interruption. He also reassures us that the third place remains a vexing component for the company and an equally powerful concept to understand community building through the lens of retail. The third component to this letter is unusual. Johnson announces that the third place is synonymous with the Starbucks Experience, thereby collecting all third places into one wholistic term. Examining this comment through literary criticism, Johnson encourages that the third place as a mindset be thought of as an exercise in critical phenomenology. The sentiment reaches an apogee with Schultz's vision stated above, that a third place was never just a physical environment but rather an emotion; a romance. That is, it took a pandemic for the company to realize its influence on the public. Their corporate vision sublimates into a perceptual experience. Maurice Merleau-Ponty writing in *Phenomenology of Perception* could perhaps describe this as a "phenomenal field" through "sense experience...that vital communication with the world which makes it present as a familiar setting of our life."³⁴⁰ The third place is certainly a familiar sensation, for those who have entered into a Starbucks, but with an even better romance promised to be found here than a citizen's first (home) or second (work) place.

Before explaining what a third place is, the readers of Starbucks Stories, the company's stakeholders, and employees are obliged to model it. Yet, the question now relies on complex and ambiguous cognitive, behavioural, and theoretical structures: forget the coffee, and the physicality of the third place. What is the third place *mindset*? How do baristas embody it and how does this translate to the customer? From a location to an ethos, the third place proceeds

³⁴⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 52-53.

through yet another layer of cultural interpretation far beyond Oldenburg's original study in 1984. That is, the third place as a largely assumed term is now not only how it is perceived through the interior design of a given Starbucks location. It is now also about how the ideology of the third place spills into perceptions of everyday life which can elicit a certain type of behaviour in the subject or consumer. It is a question for the future of Starbucks, for the integrity of first and second places, and for the comprehension of all future third places that seek to emulate it because of its tremendous influence on the public.

Although Starbucks has been the target of many other questionable tactics, it was the Philadelphia incident that spawned thousands of discussions calling into question the integrity of Starbucks as Schultz envisions his contemporary coffeehouse. Both the racial bias training and the pandemic has notably pushed the business to reconsider how it operates and how it presents itself as a public coffeehouse. It is a sentiment that Schultz promises his clientele, as reflected in the company's mission statement, quoted here again: *To inspire and nurture the human spirit—one person, one cup and one neighbourhood at a time.* Such questions have signalled corporate analysts to make company intentions as transparent and their services as accessible as possible—including the third place.

The term third place is still relatively new to urban and social theory. It was first coined by urban sociologist Ramon Oldenburg and his colleague Dennis Brissett in a formal study published in 1982 in *Qualitative Sociology*. For Oldenburg and Brissett, a "third place" offered Americans a way to combat a "general malaise" in society."³⁴¹ The sociologist defined the "third place" as a social environment outside of the home ("first place") and work ("second place"). While they fail to mention which social groups they observed in their study, the two sociologists

³⁴¹ Ramon Oldenburg and Dennis Brissett, "The Third Place," *Qualitative Sociology*, vol. 5, no. 4 (1982): 265.

nonetheless cite the “American people”³⁴² as their sample group, forcing readers to monochromatically imagine busy yet depressed citizens of metropolitan centres spending more time locked in a stifling routine consisting of isolation at home and insulation in the office.

The sociologists argued that the demands of a taxing “two-stop model of life,”³⁴³ vacillating between these often exhausting first and second places (home/work), often left little room for quality of life and socialization. The taxing “two-stop model” led to social lethargy they diagnosed, and social failure. Oldenburg and Brissett argue that “idealization,” a North American ideal, lurks behind and contributes to this despair:

In fact, this idealization has served to rationalize the decline. This is particularly true of the broad middle-class, where work and home increasingly dominate the individual’s time, interests, and energies. The home has become the highly private ‘sanctum sanctorum’ of the ‘togetherness marriage’ and its progeny. The transformation of work in the industrialized society brings together people of ever more narrow interests and abilities in settings which are becoming more impersonal. The quality of many people’s lives has come to depend almost exclusively on the quality of their families and jobs.³⁴⁴

Put bluntly, they argue that middle-class citizens are unhappy. They suggest that seeking out “third places” could provide citizens with alternative opportunities, supporting a wider range of interests, enabling diverse groups of people to break away from automatization, isolation, rote topics and quotidian environments. For both sociologists in the early 1980s, it was “the tavern, or bar” that they highlighted as the “dominant third place in our society... Be it saloon, cocktail lounge, pub, or whatever—place it among the golf links and call it a clubhouse, put it at the water’s edge and call it a yacht club, or organize a fraternal order around it and call it a lodge—the bar is nonetheless at the core of the institution.”³⁴⁵

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Ibid., 267

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 266-267.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 269.

When Oldenburg returned to and revised his thinking on the third place, which piqued the interests of social geographers and businesses alike, publishing his single-authored widely accessible and “inspirational”³⁴⁶ book, *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Community Centres, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts and How They Get You Through the Day* the coffeehouse or café had displaced the bar as the primary “third place.” In both studies, he echoes his and Brissett’s earlier research claim, citing that the problem remains in “the absence of an informal public life.... Multitudes shuttle back and forth between the ‘womb’ and the ‘rat race’ in a constricted pattern of daily life that easily generates the familiar desire to ‘get away from it all.’”³⁴⁷ Instead of championing retreating to self-help industries for a solution to marital or employment problems, since these so-called “solutions” would only reinforce age-old “confining principles,” Oldenburg and Brissett in 1982 focused more on place-based activities that would free subjects from daily repetitive tasks and toxic environments.³⁴⁸ Their research suggested that seeking out a “third place” could revive American social life, creating more vibrant communities. “Since the thirties,” they claimed:

observers in the social scene have decried the growth of specialization and the insularity of American life. Most of the commentary has focused on the decline, eclipse, or disruption of a sense of community. However, we feel it is not the loss of community *per se*, for community brought havoc, as well as happiness, to people’s lives; rather, it is the loss of certain conditions of social life which community allowed.... abandonment has occasioned, in large part, the poverty of experience and relationship that people

³⁴⁶ A few reviews of his book are included in the third edition of the book: “Ray Oldenburg is inspirational. He is the first to recognize and articulate the importance of the greeting place (third place) for the well-being of the individual and society at large,” “Examines gathering places and reminds us how important they are. People need the ‘third place’ to nourish sociability.” And “A book that should be read by everyone in North America over the age of 16.” See the first opening pages to Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons and other Hangouts at the Heart of the Community*, (New York: Marlow & Company, 1999).

³⁴⁷ Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, 9.

³⁴⁸ Oldenburg and Brissett, 265. The entrepreneurial reliance on “personal service experts in efforts to ‘feel better,’ ‘get it together,’ and somehow achieve a more satisfying and rewarding life existence.” In their critique, such focus on self-help contributes to “an era where personal troubles are increasingly converted into social issues resolvable only through legal apparatus or social support agencies.” Placing demands on those support systems to exhaustion and consulting self-help industries, they believe, is not a viable solution.

apparently feel in their everyday lives.³⁴⁹

Oldenburg and Brissett's sentiment is echoed by sociologist Charles Montgomery, who in *Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design*, notes that "since 1940, almost all urban growth has actually been *suburban*. In the decade before the big bust of 2008, the economy was driven to a large extent by the boundless cul-de-sac-ing, tract housing, and big-box power centering of the landscape at the urban fringe. For a time, it was impossible to separate growth from suburbanization. They were the same thing."³⁵⁰ While Montgomery ultimately contributes this civic unhappiness to the financial crisis of 2008, he points out that "[w]e have reached a rare moment in history where societies and markets appear to be teetering between the status quo and a radical change in the way we live and the way we design our lives in cities."³⁵¹ The central argument of these three sociologists suggests that the design and infrastructure of the city largely contributes to the failure or successes of the citizen's access to sociability and perceived happiness.³⁵² Montgomery goes back to Greek culture to argue that those Athenians blessed with citizenship had enough leisure time to coin their own term "eudaimonia" which they used to discuss the art of "human flourishing" or being guided by a "good spirit."

For Oldenburg, in particular, a "third place" is imagined as an antidote to isolation and alienation. The "third place" is a new way to "mediate" between the individual and society. This

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 267.

³⁵⁰ Charles Montgomery, *Happy City: Transforming Our Lives through Urban Design* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2013), 11-12.

³⁵¹ Ibid., 12.

³⁵² In his chapter, "The City Has Always Been a Happiness Project," Montgomery invokes an Aristocratic analysis of the city, citing that "Although only a small fraction of the Athenian population actually enjoyed the rights of citizenship, those who did experienced enough wealth, leisure time, and freedom to spend a lot of time arguing about the good life. It was wrapped around a concept they called *eudaimonia*, which can be translated literally as 'to be inhabited or accompanied by a good *daimon*, or guiding spirit,' though it's best understood as a state of human flourishing." While the concept of *eudaimonia* was heavily debated because of its ability to corrupt youth, Montgomery suggests that there is a "tension between free speech, shared space, and civic stability [that] has continued to inform urban design ever since." See pages 17 and 19.

is a tale that starts with loss, just as Starbucks has also been described as an alienating environment.³⁵³ Oldenburg laments that “The most inclusive American third place ever was the soda fountain and it is near extinction.”³⁵⁴ *The Great Good Place* is a eulogy to this traditional touchstone of modern public vitality, the mid-century iconic soda fountains or “malt shops” that were tremendously popular places in 1950s booming American culture where people of all ages bounced on bar stools, sipped on ice-cream floats, shared French Fries, and, over the course of the years, “put another dime in the jukebox, baby”³⁵⁵ Oldenburg’s reference to this cinematically nostalgic, well-documented part of American vintage history invites us to reminisce further and recall similar shops and watering holes once ringing with social vitality. Early American quality TV shows, enhanced with laugh tracks and filtered through wholesome sarcasm, often celebrate the range of spontaneity and inclusivity in the bars and fountains that were once a lively place:

Where everybody knows your name
And they’re always glad you came
You want to be where you can see
Our troubles are all the same
You want to be where everybody knows your name.³⁵⁶

The theme song of Primetime Emmy Winner television series *Cheers* by Gary Portnoy and Judy Hart-Angelo captures a similar nostalgic pull, although it shifts locales, now centred around

³⁵³ For example, Simon observes how round tables are used in most Starbucks cafés to encourage socialization with other consumers of the brand. However, furniture is “laid out to enhance a safe, alone-in-public feeling—a way to be out without having to talk or interact with strangers, just in the case the wrong sort of person did slip through the door. At the old penny universities, customers sat on benches at long wooden tables. Not at Starbucks. . . . The signature furniture at Starbucks, then, makes cocooning in public easy and creating public spaces difficult.” See *Everything but the Coffee*, 114.

³⁵⁴ Ray Oldenburg, “The Café as a Third Place,” *Café Society*, ed. Aksel Tjora and Graham Scambler (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 20.

³⁵⁵ Alan Merrill and Jake Hooker, “I Love Rock ‘n’ Roll,” *I Love Rock ‘n’ Roll*, RAK, 1975. Originally recorded by the Arrows, this song would be later popularized by Joan Jett & The Blackhearts in 1981 and later by Britney Spears in 2001.

³⁵⁶ Gary Portnoy and Judy Hart-Angelo, “Where Everybody Knows Your Name (Cheers Theme), *Songs Along the Way*, Applause, 1983.

consuming alcohol or bartending at a local pub.³⁵⁷ The rest of the lyrics, it should be noted, are not that “cheerful.”

Oldenburg suggests that “third places” are a cross-cultural phenomenon, arguing that every culture on every continent has its own version of the third place, but where, exactly, are they he asks?³⁵⁸ To envision this social space, he conjures up nostalgic visions of older coffeehouses, bars and taverns:

Third places the world over share common and essential features. As one’s investigations cross the boundaries of time and culture, the kinship of the Arabian coffeehouse, the German *bierstube*, the Italian *taberna*, the old country store of the American frontier, and the ghetto bar reveals itself. As one approaches each example, determined to describe it in its own right, an increasingly familiar pattern emerges. The eternal sameness of the third place overshadows the variations in its outward appearance and seems unaffected by the wide differences in cultural attitudes toward the typical gathering places of informal public life. The beer joint in which the middle-class American takes no pride can be as much a third place as the proud Viennese coffeehouse.³⁵⁹

Oldenburg argues in numerous publications that coffee shops and a locally-owned buzzing “café society” in America modelled on the “stimulating” café culture of London and Vienna could radically reshape the trajectory of contemporary urbanization. Yet Starbucks increasingly does not seem to be this place. Bryant Simon recalls that in an interview Oldenburg once “admitted that Starbucks has done some ‘good things,’ but he scoffed at the notion Starbucks could be a third place. ‘It is an imitation,’ he said as he took a bite of his ham and eggs, adding, ‘It’s all about safety for them.’”³⁶⁰

³⁵⁷ One could argue that watching third places flicker by on the screen or interacting with them in video games also creates desire to participate in such places as a consumer, prosumer or even as a worker. Consider Habbo Hotel or Sims Online, or in other Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games like Final Fantasy XIV, or World of Warcraft.

³⁵⁸ Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, 20.

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

³⁶⁰ Simon, *Everything but the Coffee*, 101-102.

Tjora and Scambler's collection of essays on café culture entitled *Café Society* explores the café as "an important social space," considering "its parameters, usage, changing role as what Oldenburg calls 'a third place' ... and what that *means* not only to its citizens-cum-consumers but also to those whose labor allow it be what it is."³⁶¹ Their example, and by extension the book itself, shows the relevancy of continuing to explore what Oldenburg called the third place today, as it transcends both architectural and thematic form and is filtered through decades, debris, and digitization. Furthermore, this essay collection demonstrates how important participation is to the creation of a "third place," inviting the reader to more closely consider what it takes to operate and participate in a third place and to assume agency in it.

From the dizzying thrills of third place retail experience centres to the locally owned intimate coffee shops and taprooms, the third place according to cultural theorist Christian Mikunda is still a modern spectacle of urban space development and, most of all, societal progress. Inasmuch as the third place reaches an unfathomable scale architecturally, recent studies also suggests that this sociological phenomenon has shaped the digital architecture of social media platforms including gaming streaming services like Twitch. The digitization of the third place has been discussed in current research by Scott Wright, Todd Graham, and Daniel Jackson, who take Oldenburg's idea of the third place and investigate it through the potential of growing online communities. Using his sociological foundations, they claim that third places can facilitate discussion that undoubtedly blends both political and personal worlds on a global scale "and can potentially help bridge the gap between the everyday lives of participants and formal politics. [Their] initial investigations of such spaces suggest that much of the talk that takes place in these for a constitutes political talk that is reciprocal, reflexive and (often) deliberative and of

³⁶¹ Tjora and Scambler, "Introduction," in *Café Society*, ed. Aksel Tjora and Graham Scambler (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1.

a kind that could inform devolved, autonomous, self-representation potentially activating people to mobilize and organize (collective) political action.”³⁶²

“Going back for seconds, or thirds” is an unapologetic colloquial statement to indicate obtaining an additional portion (of foods, experiences) that is similar in nature to the first and second portions. But for Oldenburg and Brissett, “third” is given a place-based connotation but is disconnected from an immediate serial continuity. Third places do not proceed from second places (or first places, for that matter) but instead refer to distinct locations that “exist outside the home and beyond the ‘work lots’ of modern economic production.”³⁶³ On one hand, a “third place” could be the final instance in a series of three, implying the presence of a first or second. As an adjective, “third” describes progression or rank; a “third gear” when driving; authority, presence, or musically as a noun in the interval of three degrees in a diatonic scale, i.e., major third. To help visualize the thirding of place, Oldenburg shows that these social arenas are “used to signify what we have called ‘the core settings of informal public life.’ The third place is a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work.... It is neutral, brief, and facile. It underscores the significance of the tripod and the relative importance of its three legs.”³⁶⁴ In other words, the function of the “third” in third place fractures the first and second place binary and extends the dichotomy to a trichotomy of place. In this view, the third place introduces social and structural stability to public life as citizens move between these three realms fluidly. But as it is repeatedly emphasized by scholars, this tertiary quality of the

³⁶² Scott Wright, Todd Graham, and Dan Jackson, “Third Space, Social Media, and Everyday Political Talk,” in *The Routledge Companion to Social Media and Politics*, ed. Axel Bruns, Gunn Enli, Eli Skogerbø, Anders Olof Larsson, and Christian Christensen (New York: Routledge, 2018), 75.

³⁶³ Oldenburg and Brissett, 269.

³⁶⁴ Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, 16.

third place in its abstractness can be defined spatially as a *beyond*, not an in-between nor in succession of, the places of labour and the domestic. They distinctly appear outside of first and second places as a separate arena that is, by the laws of public space, unrestricted and accessible to everyone. The third place according to multiple scholars has a tertiary, “open” quality.

First and second places are, by contrast, restricted places of everyday life that have their respective semiotic codes and etiquette. For Oldenburg, first places are first and foremost “the home—the most important place of all. It is the first regular and predictable environment of the growing child and the one that will have greater effect upon his or her development. It will harbour individuals long before the workplace is interested in them and well after the world of work casts them aside.”³⁶⁵ The “firstness” of place, or rather its code, is indicated by three shared qualities: the sense of privacy, a nurturing environment, and the formation of routine. The “secondness” of place, it follows, is conferred by a rite of passage and into “the work setting, which reduces the individual to a single, productive role. It fosters competition and motivates people to rise above their fellow creatures. But it also provides the means to a living, improves the material quality of life, and structures endless hours of time for a majority who could not structure it on their own.”³⁶⁶ However, first and second places do not sufficiently contribute to sociability in a way that Oldenburg here describes as “the advent of the Industrial Revolution...[which] put considerable distance between the home...and the workplace...both in terms of physical and social separation. Both the home and the workplace are relatively small worlds and both constrain individuals to play the social roles those settings require. Those two settings may be said to anchor our lives. Taken together, however, they are adequate neither to

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

the development of community nor to the broadening of the individual.”³⁶⁷ Third places are located beyond and not between the characteristics of the first and second places. This conceptualization offers an alternative to the pedantic structures of time at work and the often predictable and quotidian rituals involved with making a home.

Oldenburg also evaluates the thirdness of place using a ranking system. This proposed ranking “corresponds with individual dependence”³⁶⁸ on these spaces or places. “We need a home even though we may not work, and most of us need to work more than we need to gather with our friends and neighbours. The ranking holds, also, with respect to the demands upon the individual’s time. Typically, the individual spends more time at home than at work and more at work than in a third place. In importance, in claims on time and loyalty, in space allocated, and in social recognition, the ranking is important.”³⁶⁹ By providing the example that the soda fountain is going extinct, along with “the gristmill or grain elevator...malt shops, candy stores, and cigar stores—places that did not reduce a human being to a mere customer,”³⁷⁰ Oldenburg again nostalgically situates the third place in an epic game of emotional piques and valleys. Oldenburg is perhaps providing a commentary on how third places in America have fared less favourably than the “*strong*”³⁷¹ ranked third places of a few notable European countries. In sharp contrast, Oldenburg argues that American “[t]hird places have never since been as prominent. Attempts at elegance and grand scale continued to be made but with far less impact.”³⁷² The

³⁶⁷ Oldenburg, “The Café as Third Place,” 7-8. This is also a point he makes in *Great Good Place*: “Before industrialization, the first and second places were one. Industrialization separated the place of work from the place of residence, moving productive work from the home and making it remote in distance, morality, and spirit from family life. What we now call the third place existed long before this separation, and so our term is a concession to the sweeping effects of the Industrial Revolution and its division of life into private and public spheres.”³⁶⁷

³⁶⁸ Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, 16.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁷² *Ibid.*

problem, he argues, depends on what form and where third places are permitted to operate. Since third places are largely informal by nature, urban centres may be “increasingly hostile to and devoid of informal gathering places, [where] one may encounter people rather pathetically trying to find some spot in which to relax and enjoy each other’s company.”³⁷³

Although Oldenburg and Brissett’s initial research recognized that “the ‘escape’ theme is prevalent and use descriptions of the tavern and the coffee houses in novels, documentaries, travelogues, and community case studies” to flesh out their third places,³⁷⁴ together they indicate that such joints or parlours or coffeehouses are not places in which to abscond. While idealistic, they are careful to note that third places “provide enabling, not escapist, experiences for their inhabitants. They are a forum for ‘play’ in a society interfused with a stubborn commitment for work and purposiveness.”³⁷⁵ While third places offer the choice of solitude and allow one to be alone among strangers, one important function of the third place is rather to “provide opportunities for important experiences and relationships in a sane society, and are uniquely qualified to sustain a sense of well-being among its members.”³⁷⁶ Such inclusivity demonstrates the capacity to host informal community gatherings as an opportunity for citizens to benefit from a politically engaged and pluralistic society. As such, all third places appear as “a forum of association which is beneficial only to the degree that it is well-integrated into daily life.”³⁷⁷

These third places, in other words, help give value to a “the most purely democratic experience

³⁷³ Ibid.

³⁷⁴ Oldenburg and Brissett, 268.

³⁷⁵ Ibid, 282. Oldenburg and Brissett cite Georg Simmel’s essay, “The Sociology of Sociability” published in *American Journal of Sociology*, trans. Everett C. Hughes, vol. 55, no. 3 (1949): 254-261. They find that “Sociability is thus the delight, or the ‘play-form’ of association, as Simmel preferred to call it. The basis of the ‘play’ or the delight in association is not found in what sociologists call the ‘role requirements’ inherent in the job to be done, but in the sense of individuality which emerges from these roles and the interplay between them.” (270-271).

³⁷⁶ Ibid, 269.

³⁷⁷ Ibid, 270.

life can offer”³⁷⁸ by allowing space for civic participation and the chance for all individuals, who can access third places, to belong to a social structure. The promise of civic participation, as Oldenburg concludes, suggests that “a third place is needed, one in which people from a diversity of backgrounds combine to expand one another’s understanding of the world and, out of the bonds formed there, community takes root.”³⁷⁹ To tie in a discussion of community from Jean-Luc Nancy, community in third places is *exposed* to cultural and socioeconomic difference.³⁸⁰ In other words, third places provide the opportunity of participating in a courageous and inspiring—yet informal—intracultural exchange.

Through informal discourse, and what Oldenburg and Brissett refer to as “nondiscursive symbolism [which is] not contractual bonds between people but spiritual ones,”³⁸¹ the opportunity for casual chatter on politics, commerce, and religion comprise the subject matter of third places and furthermore “gives individuals a sense of continuity.”³⁸² In Oldenburg’s book, however, he shows that these opportunities can allow engaged citizens a little taste of that “spiritual tonic”³⁸³ or, more technically, “flow association,”³⁸⁴ as popularized by Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi’s 1975 study, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*. They are also settings in which

³⁷⁸ Ibid, 271.

³⁷⁹ Oldenburg, “The Café as Third Place,” 8.

³⁸⁰ Jean-Luc Nancy defines community in *The Inoperative Community* as follows: “Community is made of what retreats from it: the hypostasis of the “common,” and its work. The retreat opens, and continues to keep open, this strange being-the-one-with-the-other to which we are exposed.... [C]ommunity does not consist in the transcendence (nor in the transcendental) of a being supposedly immanent to community. It consists on the contrary in the immanence of a “tran-scendence”—that of finite existence as such, which is to say, of its “expo-sition.” Exposition, precisely, is not a “being” that one can “sup-pose” (like a sub-stance) to be in community. Community is presuppositionless: this is why it is haunted by such ambiguous ideas as foundation and sov-ereignty, which are at once ideas of what would be completely suppose-tionless and ideas of what would always be presupposed. But community cannot be presupposed. It is only exposed” (xxxix). Does this complicate Oldenburg’s universality? Or do third places produce “communities”? See Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor, trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holand, and Simona Sawhey (Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

³⁸¹ Oldenburg and Brissett, 272.

³⁸² Ibid.

³⁸³ Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, 55

³⁸⁴ Oldenburg and Brissett, 276.

the individual can experience “*pure sociability*,”³⁸⁵ as Oldenburg and Brissett borrow a term from sociologist Georg Simmel writing in 1949, producing a condition in the subject wherein “the surrender of outward status is rewarded by unqualified acceptance into human fellowship.”³⁸⁶ Third places harbour a promise to cure a monotony experienced in a two-dimensional public life by investing a place beyond work and home with this social value.

Finding value in third places, they suggest, is not meant to be an idiosyncratic endeavour; rather, this value is practical and can strengthen both first and second place commitments and responsibilities. As Danielle Littman succinctly puts it by echoing Yi-Fu Tuan’s understanding of the relationship between space and place in 1977, “there is a transformation process which occurs for space to become place: *space plus value equals place*.”³⁸⁷ The initial research by Oldenburg and Brissett attest to this claim, suggesting that “the majority of public places in our society fail to become actual third places. Upon entering many of these establishments, one finds intense devotion to the business at hand. One opens the door to a bar, coffee shop, or sauna, and finds people at work, either at their job or at their leisure. There is no lovely conversation in these places, no suspension of the usual and typical, no joy of association. The ‘ingredients’ of third place are simply not there.”³⁸⁸ As a trained sociologist discussing a typology of place, it is surprising that Oldenburg never refers to Jurgen Habermas’s writings particularly on “the public sphere.” In an encyclopedic article, Habermas clearly states that “[b]y ‘the public sphere’ we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in

³⁸⁵ Ibid, 270.

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 271

³⁸⁷ Danielle Maude Littman, “Third Place Theory and Social Work: Considering Collapsed Places.” *Journal of Social Work*, vol. 21, no. 5 (2021): 1227.

³⁸⁸ Oldenburg and Brissett, 269.

every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body.” Although Oldenburg and Brissett do not theorize the social building blocks of a public sphere, they do envision the art of conversation itself as powering a third place and its values. Perhaps Simmel’s dream of “pure sociability” and all the forms of association by which a mere sum of “separate individuals” could be made into a “society” could be translated into what Oldenburg and Brissett envision as “the benefits of third place involvement.”³⁸⁹

Oldenburg’s celebratory model and Starbucks’ own refracted use of the term has been challenged and re-evaluated by myriad scholars. Bryant Simon, an American sociologist, critiques how a larger corporation like Starbucks operates their business under the label of a third place. After interviewing Oldenburg himself, Simon finds that Starbucks’ use of the third place is illusory. Over the years, both Oldenburg and Starbucks have started to respond to such criticism. Just as store policies change and adapt to address complex social issues and developments, so have Oldenburg’s characteristics of the third place. In an essay published in *Café Society* in 2013, fourteen years after the third edition of *The Great Good Place*, Oldenburg again revised his criteria and provided a modern update to account for the shifting qualities or “functions” of emerging third places that:

1. Unify neighbourhood
2. Join friends by the set
3. Celebrate the joys of camaraderie
4. Create intellectual forums
5. Maintain a port of entry
6. Perceive a Staging Area
7. Generate social capital
8. Serve as mutual aid societies
9. Enliven the public domain
10. Contribute to democracy³⁹⁰

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 265

³⁹⁰ I have adapted these “functions” from Oldenburg’s article into an active tense. For a full account of these functions please see “The Café as a Third Place,” 10-20

4. The Desecration of the Third Place

The question remains: Does Starbucks fulfill any of Oldenburg's ten criteria today? As Vito Acconci reminds us, public spaces are “constructed” heterotopias, products or spectacles that glorify the corporation or the state. As he succinctly writes: “Public space is the domestication of war and sex.” Furthermore, he notes:

Public space is made and not born. What's called ‘public space’ in a city is produced by a government agency (in the form of a park) or by a private corporation (in the form of a plaza in front of an office building, or an atrium inside the building). What's produced is a ‘product’: it is bartered, by the corporation, in exchange for air rights, for the rights to build their building higher—it's granted, by the government agency, to people as a public benefit, as part of a welfare system. What's produced is a ‘production’: a spectacle that glorifies the corporation or the state, or the two working together (the two having worked together in the back room, behind the scenes, with compromises and pay-offs).³⁹¹

In other words, public space is always a bartered good, a negotiated product. Public space first and foremost represents a treaty between state and corporation that contours the perimeter of a hypermodern marketplace; it is a constructed built spectacle, misunderstood by the public as natural.³⁹² In this way, public space is built on back room deals and, in the view of Acconci, it is “loaned to the public, bestowed on the public – the people considered as an organized community, members of the state, potential consumers.... The agreement is that public space belongs to them, and they in turn belong to the state.”³⁹³ Participation in public space is contingent on further deals, a transactional nature.

³⁹¹ Vito Acconci, “Making Public: The Writing and Reading of Public Space,” in *Hétérotopies// heterotopias*, ed. Lionel Bovier and Mai-Thu Perret, trans. Simone Manceau, *JRP* (2000): 119. In an essay called “Of Other Spaces,” Michel Foucault describes the heterotopia as the opposite of utopia, a “virtual” space that counteracts real space: “their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well as arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled. This latter type would be the heterotopia, not of illusion, but of compensation.... The ship is the heterotopia *par excellence*. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police takes the place of pirates.” (47-48). See Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” in *Hétérotopies/Heterotopias*, trans. Jay Miskowicz, ed. Lionel Bovier and Mai-Thu Perret Genève: *JRP*, (2000): 39-48.

³⁹² Perhaps, gothic: the agreement between God and the builder.

³⁹³ Acconci, 119.

Today, the value of a physical place has been called into question after the COVID-19 pandemic forced business owners and governmental operations to close or restructure commercial buildings and public centre operations in effort to prevent the virus from spreading by social propinquity, a vital yet nascent feature in Oldenburg's study. A new problem of place arises as the public retreats to suburban lifestyles again, but this time by complying to strict lockdown measures. As these restrictions gently lift and precautionary measures are continuously implemented into business operations, including compulsory sanitization for health safety, masking, and social distancing, these third places, however, still do not feel entirely safe for the public to visit. Additionally, general mental health and emotional wellness are at an alarming risk. Government-mandated vaccination passports, too, serve as admission tickets to enter the premises of any third place. Gaining access to them is, furthermore, constrained as individuals of the public who do not present supporting documentation are denied sojourn with guests. With taking such precautionary measures, although beneficial for the physical health and recovery of the global population and markets, the newly inherent laws of third places implemented for a pandemic have interrupted the enthusiasm of Oldenburg's utopic vision. To invert Littman's equation, place *subtract* value *equals* space.

Current literature on third place studies considers the disruption caused by pandemic restrictions not a barrier but instead a unique opportunity to rethink Oldenburg's thesis in such a way that provides owners and caretakers of third places with a model to increase accessibility and value for citizens who are either visibly marginalized (Littman, 2021) or for those who have been barred by owners or operators of various third place businesses and public centres (Mimoun and Gruen, 2021). Simone Fullagar, Wendy O'Brien, and Kathy Lloyd note that Oldenburg's conceptualization of space over thirty years ago is doubly problematic because of its inherently

gendered tone as it imagines “a white, masculine, and largely middle-class world view that is assumed to be the ‘norm’ against which other racialized identities and meanings are defined or ignored. The example of pubs as visible third places highlights this point in relation to the normative assumptions about masculinity, heterosexuality and whiteness (also in terms of religion where alcohol is not consumed).”³⁹⁴ If traditional third places blur public and private sectors, conventionally held apart as a distinction between masculine and feminine worlds, their study attests to the intersectionality of “(in)visible”³⁹⁵ non-white, queer, and gender fluid identities. Additionally, they observe a gap in Oldenburg’s work as he “did not explore the materiality and entanglements of the human and non-human that affect women’s experience of third places. Immersion in nature, interacting with various surfaces, plants, animals, and lighting allow us to think through the material and embodied dimensions of third places.”³⁹⁶ Attention to the elder demographic and their relationship with the third place also presents constraints for perceived value as ease of social interaction is obstructed by physical barriers that can contribute to increased isolation. For example, Sara Alidoust and Caryl Bosman explore gerontological trends for the social health of older populations in third places citing the formation of strong, weak, and absent social ties.³⁹⁷ On the other end of the spectrum of age, Geoff Woolcock explores the relevance of outdoor third places for children in the maintenance of physical activity, citing “increasing signs in asthma, obesity, diabetes, child abuse, binge-drinking, drug

³⁹⁴ Simone Fullagar, Wendy O’Brien, and Kathy Lloyd, “Feminist perspectives on third places,” in *Rethinking Third Places: Informal Public Spaces and Community Building*, ed. Joanne Dolley and Caryl Bosman (Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019), 24.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁹⁷ Sara Alidoust and Caryl Bosman, “Planning for healthy ageing: how the use of third places contributes to the social health of older populations,” in *Rethinking Third Places: Informal Public Spaces and Community Building*, ed. Joanne Dolley and Caryl Bosman (Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019), 44.

abuse and mental health problems”³⁹⁸ without strategic implementation of interactive and safe places for them to play or, as businesses look to newer marketable strategies, complete schoolwork tasks. Reflecting on his own experiences of homelessness—that is, without a first place—David Purnell notes that “[t]he loss of place... can be devastating.... By discussing how these strategies motivate us to think about the ways in which public spaces might cater to the homeless in an era of urban renewal, we can then focus on how we design and re-design ‘public’ spaces.”³⁹⁹

If we turn to self-proclaimed “trend scout” and German critic Christian Mikunda, we learn that third places are now less about finding camaraderie in people than they are about idiosyncratic efforts to gain brand new and beyond-work-and-home experiences. In *Brand Lands, Hot Spots & Cool Spaces*, he traces that familial sense of social cohesion from Oldenburg’s inception of the third place to understand the vertiginous prominence of supercentres and how they are engineered to absorb attention. “[W]e will never do without experiences again. The emotional added value of entertainment in marketing has stood the test of time, both long term as an image-building factor and immediately at the point where things happen; because experiences increase attention levels, residence time and immediately promote sales.”⁴⁰⁰ Bombastic retail centres, citing Nike and Lululemon, are among many locations he calls third places but they are arduously “staged habitats” to ensure implosion. For example, Mikunda elaborates on “[t]he lobbies of Phillippe Starck hotels [that] register a high density of pretty models who come here with their cliques to spend an evening out. Starck’s design hotels

³⁹⁸ Geoff Woolcock, “Child-friendly third places,” in *Rethinking Third Places: Informal Public Spaces and Community Building*, ed. Joanne Dolley and Caryl Bosman (Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019), 69.

³⁹⁹ David Purnell, “Public Parks: Third Places or Places Eliciting Moral Panic?” *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. 25, no. 6 (2019): 533.

⁴⁰⁰ Christian Mikunda, *Brand Lands, Hot Spots, and Cool Spaces: Welcome to the Third Place and the Total Marketing Experience* (London: Kogan Page, 2004), 7.

offer a dramatic entrance like that of a catwalk—at the Delano in Miami Beach it’s a deep gorge formed of white, towering tulle curtains spanning the hotel hall—and a host of staged bars, restaurants and gardens.”⁴⁰¹ Light-speed attraction third places like Indigo, Lindor, or Apple, requires that a “successful experience concepts of the present combine the longing for entertainment with true, big feelings, with genuine materials and high-quality design, and help with our problems in everyday life, with quick massage of the soul for stressed-out customers. In a nutshell: the experience society has grown up.”⁴⁰² Namely, they are the adolescent fragments of Oldenburg’s sentiment for spots that promote genuine yet informal human connection. The challenge narrows down further for Starbucks: not necessarily how to maintain its enchantment but rather its integrity as the ideal third place that provides answers to both Oldenburg’s pre-millennial spots and Mikunda’s postmodern malls.

Grafe concludes his essay on coffee house culture with a photograph of a Starbucks interior that depicts a lone customer placing an order underneath a brightly-lit “Starbucks Coffee” sign. Tables are missing. Grafe laments that “the customers of the lounge no longer perceive the stylistic references to comfortable domesticity and the espresso machine, the emblem of a sanitized version of ‘traditional’ urbanity, as our of place in environments designed to be unspecific.”⁴⁰³ Grafe’s observations closely follows the critiques of authors, including Kim Fellner, Bryant Simon, and Taylor Clark who also comment on the ambiguous nature of Starbucks aesthetics and operations. There is a symptom Grafe cautions which is wrapped up in semantics and consumerism: “the phenomenon of the coffee lounge as a global brand and as

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁰² Mikunda, 6. Italics not mine.

⁴⁰³ Grafe, 41.

another type of generic spatial condition entirely fits a culture that has repressed many forms of public display.”⁴⁰⁴

The absence or loss of the domestic ties to the first place in homelessness and housing instability or second place through unemployment, as Littman observes, opens a dialogue concerning pathways of accessibility to the third place.⁴⁰⁵ Her recent study reviewing the trends of place-based social work with incarcerated and homeless individuals reveals large assumptions in Oldenburg’s work: middle-class citizens have the freedom or fluidity to move easily and quickly between first, second, and third places. Littman points out that the increase in the visibility of marginalized groups, who do not have middle-class privileges of finding consistent employment or affordable housing, demands a restructuring of his theory for the future of intercultural civic engagement. In cases where first, second, and third places overlap, such as in prisons, shelters, or even as she cites the COVID-19 pandemic stay-at-home orders, Littman proposes a “collapsed place theory”⁴⁰⁶ wherein “individuals and groups who are unable to access varied physical spaces or relationship cocreate subspaces which serve purposes aligned with Oldenburg and Brissett’s description of first, second, and third places. For some, accessing traditional first, second, and third places would be illegal, for some physically impossible, and for others, implausible given their social milieu.... By recognizing how individuals build social worlds within collapsed places, social workers may better understand the lived realities of place for the clients and communities with which they engage.”⁴⁰⁷ In a “collapsed model,” the overlapping of place (home, work, and leisure) can show how incarcerated or homeless

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ Littman refers to the dislocation of first and second places as “root shock” to describe “splintered relationship and social ties, as well as the literal disintegration of ecosystems.” See page 1229.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 1232.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

individuals construct meaning and find value in a space that does not align with the compartmental trifecta of Oldenburg’s working-class routine: “how else do they experience and negotiate the power structures, control, and covert or overt surveillance?”⁴⁰⁸ By adapting Oldenburg’s model to fit the results of her observations as a social worker in compromised environments, Littman’s research begins to conceptualize the possibility of third places not only for citizens who cannot readily or easily separate place. Her study points to a comprehension of the trends of newer generations, particularly youth, as they navigate the sprawl of socioeconomic structures in urban life that forces them to actively blend work and leisure environments.

Mimoun and Gruen’s 2021 research on an emerging group of customers using third places for productivity demonstrates another type of collapse. The demand for third places to function simultaneously as an office space where work or school tasks are completed and as a place where people informally meet has not only collapsed the conceptualization of such informal places but, in their observations, “transformed the market, encouraging its differentiation.”⁴⁰⁹ As such, Mimoun and Gruen propose differentiating between four different third places based on the business models offered by shop owners and customer interactions: “archetypal, status quo, compromise, and productive—that differ on the nature of their targeting strategy (undifferentiated versus differentiated) and the adaptation of their servicescape (to traditional customers vs. to customer workers).”⁴¹⁰

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 1238.

⁴⁰⁹ Laetitia Mimoun and Adèle Gruen, “Customer Work Practices and the Productive Third Place,” *Journal of Service Research: JSR*, vol. 24, no. 4 (2021): 564.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

Svetlana Hristova argues that public space interaction in our modern world is motivated by risk society, drawing on a concept made popular by the sociologist Ulrich Beck:⁴¹¹

The transition from *class* to *risk* society is accompanied also by a value change. These are two totally different value systems because while class society is centred on the ideal of equality, the ‘motive force’ of risk society is safety. For Beck this is a move from the ‘solidarity of need’ to ‘solidarity, motivated by anxiety.’ The solidarity based on anticipated risks is ‘*negative* and *defensive*.’ Basically, one is no longer concerned with attaining something “good,” but rather with *preventing* the worst; *self-limitation* is the goal which emerges. The *commonality of anxiety* takes the place of the *commonality of need*. *Sensu stricto*, no ‘common good’ is possible any more, but only a ‘common bad’ that creates the ground for solidarity, stemming from anxiety, that arises and becomes a political force.”⁴¹²

Preventing the worst instead of searching for a “greater good” in the third place is a radical shift in the way third places operate. A third place mindset, then, is reactionary to crisis. “Belonging” in a risk society operates on a model of prevention. The third place can be considered escapist in today’s society in the sense that it lessens the amount of risk felt at home and work. It is a lament or loss of this class society—the siren (now available as unique NFTs in a digital brandscape) both embodies the risks and giddy promises of a new, anxious technological reality: a dialectics at a standstill. As part of this perpetual crisis what is created, as Maurizio Lazzarato notes in his Deleuzian analysis is a new debt culture and the “dividual,” the “indebted man.” As Lazzarato notes, it is also impossible to distinguish private ownership of publicly accessible buildings.⁴¹³

⁴¹¹ For brief survey of his work on risk society, see Beck, Ulrich. “From Industrial Society to the Risk Society: Questions of Survival, Social Structure and Ecological Enlightenment,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 9, no. 1 (Feb. 1992), 97–123; *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage Publications, 1992, and *What is Globalization?* Translated by Patrick Camiller. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000.

⁴¹² Svetlana Hristova, “Public space in a global world: after the spectacle,” *Public Space: Between Reimagination and Occupation*, ed. Svetlana Hristova and Mariusz Czepczyński (New York: Routledge, 2018), 36.

⁴¹³ See Lazzarato, Maurizio. *Governing by Debt*. South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2013.

5. An Alternate Digital Third Place

In 2022, Starbucks launched a digital campaign to respond to a crisis of the third place and a pressing “need to reinvent Starbucks for the future,”⁴¹⁴ Schultz writes on Starbucks Stories. “Today, we find ourselves in a position where we must modernize and transform the Starbucks experience in our stores and recreate an environment that is relevant, welcoming and safe, and where we uplift one another with dignity, respect and kindness.”⁴¹⁵ In addition to ordering lattes and baked goods through a smartphone, one way the company is envisioning their future is through the landscapes of binary code. Heidi Peiper writing for Starbucks Stories reminds us of Schultz’s corporate vision: “The Third Place has never been defined solely by a physical space, it’s also the feeling of warmth, connection, a sense of belonging Starbucks. Digital technology is helping augment and extend that feeling of connection with customers – whether they are in Starbucks stores, in their cars, on their doorsteps.”⁴¹⁶ Though third places can be found in online forums, social media platforms, and in gaming, the third place according to Starbucks forges connection over consumption.⁴¹⁷

And one of the ways in which this connection is secured today is by increasing their image as a sustainable corporation. Peiper continues: “One of the strategic shifts Schultz

⁴¹⁴ “Reinventing Starbucks, Together,” *Starbucks Stories & News*, <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/reinventing-starbucks/>

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

⁴¹⁶ Heidi Peiper, “Reimagining the Third Place: How Starbucks is evolving its store experience,” *Starbucks Stories & News* (September 13, 2022): <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2022/reimagining-the-third-place-how-starbucks-is-evolving-its-store-experience/>

⁴¹⁷ While Starbucks claims to take pride in attempting something new, digitizing the third place is not. Sony Entertainment launched commercials that described their video game systems as the third place: “Even Ron Lakos, the Head of Marketing Germany for Sony, refers to the Third Place in the PR for Sony’s Playstation 2. It says there: ‘Free yourself from order and logic and enter into a new place. It is not the workplace. It is not your home. No one has ever spotted it on a map. Nothing is secure. Everything is possible. *Welcome to the third place.*’ This slogan refers to the special flair of PS2 video games, their high degree of reality, as a third place. Besides that, the slogan is also an allusion to a debate led in the United States, whether the Internet world and other virtual realities are not the genuine third places – temporary places of refuge, accessible to everyone and high on emotion.” See Mikunda, *Brand Lands, Hot Spots & Cool Spaces*, 5.

announced is to ‘reimagine our store experience for greater connection, ease and a planet positive impact.’ Starbucks purpose-built store design approach will help modernizing physical stores to serve the increasing demand while creating an environment that is inclusive and accessible, through the lens of sustainability. To help drive innovation, Starbucks has turned to the team of R&D experts and baristas working side-by-side in Starbucks Tryer Center, to help streamline the work behind the counter, and enable more time for genuine human connection.”⁴¹⁸

Though Starbucks stores continuously generate high levels of food waste daily, and has been accused of passively killing turtles with their plastic green straws, Schultz nonetheless puts pressure on the image of the third place to be not only accessible by technology but more environmentally sustainable than other places. Eviscerating corporate materialism looms in third place aesthetics.

In just a short period of time, from 2018 to 2022, the third place mindset has collapsed the physical barriers of its location and sublimated it into digital spaces. As Christian Mikunda observes, “Sony and Starbucks explicitly mention in their public relations material what many other companies practice just the same way. They use the emotional added value of a temporary home as a marketing tool.... It must be admitted, however, that the personal presence of a bookseller to chat with, or of the bar tender who knows the customers – both of which species are seriously decimated due to globalization – must be replaced with staging measures.”⁴¹⁹ In other words, the third place can exist entirely without community but operates merely by the presence of it.

Efforts to take the Starbucks affair with space and place into an alternate reality also appear in the form of AR or “augmented reality” technology, which presents a layer or screen

⁴¹⁸ Ibid.

⁴¹⁹ Mikunda, 5-6.

through which consumers can expose new information. In the first Starbucks Reserve Roastery in Shanghai, customers can walk around a large copper vessel “adorned with nearly 3,000 hand carved traditional Chinese chops, or stamps. But hold your phone up to it, and new worlds reveal themselves. Suddenly, it’s as if you’ve gone through the looking glass. Via your phone, you’ll be able to peer inside the cask. You’ll be able to watch an animated version of newly roasted beans dropping into the cask. You can virtually see them resting before they are whisked through copper pipes to the coffee bars. You can read about the process a bean goes through on the way to becoming a cup of coffee. What’s more, you can have that experience all over the Roastery.”⁴²⁰ The immersive play elements not only assist in the consumer experience and increasing their contingency but also to expand the reach of the third place. As AR develops and VR “virtual reality” technology dovetails into the corporation, international visitors can without physical barriers log into or navigate to a Starbucks third place. Starbucks has even introduced immersive touch screen “chalkboard” technology into Disney parks as a way to connect with one another: “The screens are 70-inch digital display panels and they use built-in cameras to create chalk sketches of guests and their surroundings in the store. And, guests are able to interact with guests in the other store. It’s coast-to-coast Disney and Starbucks magic.”⁴²¹ The collapsing of worlds through this technology shrinks the third place inasmuch as it expands it. As digital integration increases, does its immersive interactivity place higher value on the commodity, distancing it from the natural world?⁴²²

⁴²⁰ Linda Dahlstrom, “Through the looking glass: Starbucks’ first in-store augmented reality experience,” *Starbucks Stories & News* (December 6, 2017): <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2017/starbucks-first-in-store-augmented-reality-experience/>

⁴²¹ Traci C. “New Starbucks Locations at Disneyland and Walt Disney World Using Interactive Touchscreens,” (June 16, 2014): <https://www.wdwforgrownups.com/articles/new-starbucks-locations-disneyland-and-walt-disney-world-using-interactive-touchscreens>.

⁴²² For example, Starbucks has opened a greenhouse at Yomiuriland’s Hana Biyori garden, “which is part of a larger garden managed by the popular amusement park, Yomiuriland.” The Starbucks sign is made with living plants and

Developments in AI (artificial intelligence) technology have nonetheless challenged Starbucks corporate teams to think about how it could help “amplify the human connection,” Gerri Martin-Flickinger, Starbucks chief technology officer says.⁴²³ Beyond AI’s function to automatize barista functions, quicken repairs, and diagnose troubleshooting, relying on AI, she claims, can create pockets of time for the barista to engage with the customer: “these moments...can be an antidote to loneliness and have a positive effect on our mood.”⁴²⁴ Frank Taylor’s time-motion study engineers (husband and wife team Frank and Lilien Gilbreth) referred to the surplus time created through work efficiency “happiness moments.” But AI doesn’t make everyone happy. Although one can laud Starbucks’ aspirations, the reliance on AI technology—or even VR for that matter—is still naïve. Howard Bryman writing for *Daily Coffee News*, reports that baristas who trained over VR technology “tended not to follow instructions regardless of how the instructions were presented; complications arose in tracking the myriad different paths a user could take based on the order in which they made their choices; and that the technology itself simply wasn’t quite there yet to support an activity as physically demanding and potentially hazardous as making coffee.”⁴²⁵ One has to ask: Does VR distract from the theatre of the third place or enhance it through playful technologies?

In this chapter I have discussed Starbucks’ corporate rhetoric and “stories” around a third place and have looked at how the term has been used and wielded, from Oldenburg’s first

sits above a live fish aquarium. See Tabea Greuner, “In photos: Tokyo’s newest Starbucks is set inside a blooming greenhouse,” *TimeOut* (June 19, 2020): <https://www.timeout.com/tokyo/news/in-photos-tokyos-newest-starbucks-is-set-inside-a-blooming-greenhouse-061920>.

⁴²³ Jennifer Warnick, “AI for humanity: How Starbucks plans to use technology to nurture the human spirit,” (January 10, 2020): <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2020/how-starbucks-plans-to-use-technology-to-nurture-the-human-spirit/>

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

⁴²⁵ Howard Bryman, “What Google Learned From Its Experiments in Virtual Reality Barista Training,” *Daily Coffee News*, (August 9, 2017): <https://dailycoffeenews.com/2017/08/09/what-google-learned-from-its-experiments-in-virtual-reality-barista-training/>

sociological studies in the 1980s to today. While third places are often associated with informal gatherings, these spaces are certainly contextual and are dependent on who is using them in any given cultural milieu. In the next chapter we will consider how Starbucks has chosen a unique mythological model and almost occult-like icon for their third place symbol: a siren. The revamped siren icon is itself negotiated cultural capital, a constructed “shared” mythology; like the Roastery’s vertiginous architecture it involves play, enchantment, and distraction.

Chapter Three: The Starbucks Siren, Resurrected

1. The Seductive Siren: A Tale of Dramatic Doom

Even if sirens are not real creatures lurking in bathypelagic waters, the entertainment industry has nonetheless preserved them in our swirling, collective imagination. Although depictions of sirens in popular culture and mythology can drastically differ, they nonetheless share common traits: sirens are typically found near water and are almost always female. Furthermore, the siren is an obstacle a protagonist must destroy or evade (as an objective) lest they suffer the pain of their abrasive screeching voices that cause mental paralysis or a debilitating mania (unlike mermaids, sirens are not harbingers of childlike curiosity or innocence). This chapter of my dissertation will focus on the cultural reception of the siren and examine her rebirth as the quintessential Starbucks icon or logo.

Today, literary vestiges of the seductive sirens of ancient mythology from Homer to Ovid are playfully inscribed into American pop-culture largely as a threatening symbol. In Robert Eggers' psychological horror film, *The Lighthouse* (2019), a menacing black-haired creature in the deep waters of New England with the tail of a whale haunts retired timber-man Ephraim Winslow (Robert Pattinson), torturing him with maddening song and sexual vice, luring him to his eventual death. Sirens are also explicitly included in the "lore" of the critically acclaimed action role-playing video game released by Polish developer *CD Projekt Red* in 2015, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, graphically coded as ferocious flying feathered creatures soaring along coastlines with large blue-gray bat wings, heaving busts, and long serpentine tails covered with green and silver scales (Figure 10).



Figure 10 (Left): Mythological Siren with Wings (*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*)

[Source: https://witcher-games.fandom.com/wiki/Siren?file=Tw3_concept_art_siren_by_bartlomiej_gawel.jpg]

Figure 11 (Right): Mermaid Siren in *The Lighthouse* (Dir. Eggers, 2019)

[Source: https://i.ytimg.com/vi/GhHCa_5asAM/maxresdefault.jpg]

Although she is credited as a mermaid, the frightening creature in Eggers' film (played by Valeriia Karaman), closer to a siren. When he first starts to experience the effects of isolation and inebriation from consuming alcohol, Ephraim finds her entangled with seaweed on the rocks near the ocean (Figure 11). Her laughter becomes an ear-piercing shriek as Ephraim frees her from the seaweed and caresses her tail. He abandons the creature and runs back to the lighthouse; her voice fades, morphing into the cry of seagulls. These mythological figures, the film suggests, are figments of an atrophying sanity that signifies hallucination, sexual deprivation and tension, loss, and melancholia. Esther Zuckerman asks "whether or not Karaman's character" endowed with "extremely large outer labia" or pelvic fins "is a figment of Ephraim's imagination is up to the viewer to determine: Is she a product of his deranged, horny mind? Or is she a personification of the sea, luring him to his demise?"⁴²⁶ In *The Witcher*, sirens are not indicative of dream like imagery or part of a sexual fantasy, but are instead randomly encountered as ferocious and combative flying monsters, fantastical beasts that screech when harmed or intend

⁴²⁶ Esther Zuckerman, "The 'Lighthouse' Mermaid Vagina Scene, Explained," *thrillist* (October, 21 2019): <https://www.thrillist.com/entertainment/nation/the-lighthouse-mermaid-scene-vagina>

to harm. They are hunted down and killed by the male protagonist using carefully strategic means or harvested for their medicinal or poisonous properties.

Siren lore first surfaced nearly 3000 years ago. One of the most spectacular and earliest Siren tales is a story found in Homer's Greek epic *The Odyssey*. Odysseus famously sails by three sirens without succumbing to their beguiling voices on his journey across the Aegean Sea. Since Homer's "siren song", many poets, artists, and filmmakers (in addition to cafés) have been fascinated by the creature's beauty and deathly hold and have elaborated in intriguing ways on her literary symbolism.⁴²⁷ In new historical bestiaries, religious texts, folklore, fairytales, and modern-day superstitions, the siren has evolved over the course of two millennia to arrive at her current form: the personification of beauty and ruin. As a literary trope, however, she is sometimes squashed and flattened. As we read in the online encyclopedia *Reference.com*, "sometimes the siren archetype is so diluted but also universalized that it can be found not in a person but in an object or idea, such as the Ring of Power which tempts Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*."⁴²⁸ In such instances, a pop-culture protagonist is lured into reaching a near-impossible objective often propelled to do so by a seductive internal dialogue and as a result has a near brush with death. On *This Mortal Coil*'s debut album of cover songs, singer Elizabeth Fraser from the Cocteau Twins reinterprets the sonic seduction of songwriter Tim Buckley's "doomed romance" ballad, "Song to the Siren," with an entrancing vocal performance, laced with Robin Guthrie's vaporous guitar reverberations: "And you sang, 'sail to me, sail to me; let me enfold

⁴²⁷ A fuller account of "siren songs" in the transnational literary imagination would have to address medieval Spanish lyric and texts like Margaret Atwood's humorous "Siren Song" (1974), Marie-Thérèse Colimon-Hall's 1979 Haitian short-story compilation *Le Chant des sirènes* (Song of the Sirens), Franz Kafka's "Das Schweigen der Sirenen" (The Silence of the Sirens) posthumously published in 1931 or Chinese-Malaysian author Zhang Guixing's 2002 novel *Sailian zhige* (Siren Song) in more depth. Due to space constrictions, here I can only briefly reference some of these texts.

⁴²⁸ "What Are Examples of a Temptress or a Siren Archetype in Movies or Stories?" *Reference.com* (March 27, 2020): <https://www.reference.com/world-view/examples-temptress-siren-archetype-movies-stories-cfa79a533d9d2b2b>

you. Here I am, here I am, waiting to hold you.”⁴²⁹ In Buckley’s song, the siren is the beloved who charms the lover into reciprocating with their own devastating song. The lyrics also convey isolation (“shipless oceans”) and the sirens tease the singer with a failed promise—a death that Buckley personifies as their “bride.”

In these pop-cultural fantasies and outlets, the siren is a seductive spin-off of an older Greek mythological symbol. It is important to note here that different translations of Homer’s epic *The Odyssey* (originally written around 750 BCE) have reinterpreted and reframed the Siren symbol. Although early translators of *The Odyssey* depict the Sirens as sexualized mermaid-like figures, a new translation by classicist Emily Wilson amplifies the creature’s connections to the avian realm. In Homer’s tale, the hero Odysseus is forewarned by the enchantress Circe that he will inevitably encounter three sirens on his journey by boat. These creatures, Circe says, “sit in a meadow, and about them is a great heap of bones of mouldering men, and round the bones the skin is shrivelling.”⁴³⁰ When he sails near their island, Odysseus hears the harrowing cry of the three sirens who promise him arcane knowledge as he swiftly approaches. In an earlier translation provided by A.T. Murray, “sweet” seduction pours from their collective “lips”:

Come hither, as thou farest, renowned Odysseus, great glory of the Achaeans; stay thy ship that thou mayest listen to the voice of us two. For never yet has any man rowed past this isle in his black ship until he has heard the sweet voice from our lips. Nay, he has joy of it, and goes his way a wiser man. For we know all the toils that in wide Troy the Argives and Trojans endured through the will of the gods, and we know all things that come to pass upon the fruitful earth.⁴³¹

⁴²⁹ The semi-comprehensible sentences Fraser uses suggest the beguiling properties of a song sung by siren. The “Song to the Siren” by *The Chemical Brothers* amplifies this seduction, layering the blare of a sped-up air raid siren over a sample of a woman’s wailing. Tim Buckley’s “Song to a Siren” was a musical version of a poem written by his writing partner Larry Beckett, first released on his 1970 album, *Starsailor*. Also see Martin Aston “Song to the Siren’s irresistible tang,” *The Guardian* (November 17, 2011): <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/nov/17/song-to-the-siren-classic>

⁴³⁰ Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. A.T. Murray (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann, Ltd, 1919), lines 45-47.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*, 184-193.

In Wilson's new translation, we see the "lips" replaced with menacing maternal "mouths," in keeping with the avian otherworldly imagery to which Wilson believes Homer was alluding: "Now stop your ship and listen to our voices. All those who pass this way hear honeyed song/poured from our mouths. The music brings them joy/and they go on their way with greater knowledge."⁴³² Heeding Circe's advice to avoid (or circumvent) their deception, and to prevent his crew from steering towards their island, Odysseus in Homer's epic uses his "cunning" to tie himself to the ship's mast and plugs the ears of his sailors with wax so they can focus on directing the course of the ship away from the menacing meadow. It is only Odysseus who hears their song and succumbs to their call, but he is unable to act because he is tied to the mast of the vessel his crew are steering.

A plethora of visually striking and audibly horrifying incarnations of the siren circulate in popular culture; Homer, however, gives us only a brief glimpse of the island where they reside. He does not describe their physical bodies; nor does he give a full account of their song. Greek scholar D. Felton observes that only "post-Homeric tradition gives them a genealogy and claws so that even now they are thought of as monstrous, dangerous, hybrid, cliff-dwelling female creatures that lure men to their deaths with beguiling song." As Felton argues, the sirens not only reflect and refract "the male/female conflict (...) the Sirens also, perhaps more mundanely, represent the dangers of sea travel and [the Homeric] episode points out how sailors must not allow themselves to be distracted."⁴³³ For some, the moral of Homer's epic could simply mean that to heed the call of a siren—or come close to seeing one—signals the loss of all rational capacities (navigation, mapping, etc.). The call is interpreted as a practical warning to those at

⁴³² Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Emily Wilson (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2017), 230.

⁴³³ D. Felton, "Rejecting and Embracing the Monstrous in Ancient Greece and Rome," *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, ed. Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2012), 103-132: 120.

sea, reminding them that experiencing dehydration, malnourishment, lapsing into absentmindedness, or neglecting crucial nautical operations can result in fatal capsizing or a collision with islets. If Homer's story is a practical tale, it contains within it useful moral precepts for the inexperienced traveller at sea or on land. The mast and the ropes are allegories for self-control. Literary scholar Paul Murgatroyd also argues that Greek and Latin story writers would invoke the siren conflict to convey "the personification of flattery or the dangers of pleasure or knowledge or poetry; they (sirens) were said to be prostitutes who ensnared and reduced to poverty passing strangers and thus 'shipwrecked' them, or prostitutes with charming voices and musical talent who devoured not the hearers but their money and after ruining them quickly departed (hence the birds' legs for them in the story)."⁴³⁴ In the mid 1800s at the peak of the "mermaid resurgence in the age of reasoning"⁴³⁵ pirates were warned of engaging in any sexual relations with the fantastical creatures on their sea voyages. The creatures were tied to fear of plunder or the fear of transmittable diseases and death when visiting port towns. As Benjamin scholar Celeste Olalquiaga writes, "until the nineteenth century Spanish sailors had to swear to a magistrate they would not have sex with mermaids"⁴³⁶ "Relations" with a "siren" implied the threat of a woman devouring/consuming a male figure—the Siren herself symbolizing corruption, loss, bankruptcy, or death or even worse, the dissolution of identity. In

⁴³⁴ Paul Murgatroyd, *Mythical Monsters in Classical Literature* (London: Duckworth, 2007), 48.

⁴³⁵ Celeste Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom: On the Kitsch Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 252.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*, 252-253. Drawing on Meri Lao's research in *Las Sirenas*, she writes that this "mermaid resurgence" took place "just when the allegories that represented the unconscious should have been exiting through the back door, an unprecedented number of mermaid sightings took place on the European coasts, witnessed and legally certified by highly respected professionals and community members. Since underwater exploration...did not seriously commence until the mid-1800s, when it began bringing to the surface previously unsuspected forms of life and providing a more complete picture of the unknown depths, the range of submarine possibility was very wide and allowed for almost anything. In an ocean populated with giant squids, multi-tentacled octopi and voracious sharks, the presence of sea serpents and mermaids, two of the most popular aquatic creatures of this time, was quite plausible."

Lacanian terms, as Williams Simms writes, it is male fantasy, however, that creates or reproduces this siren Song incessantly...her seduction “threatens death, but also helps to maintain the symbolic life of the male subject. It maintains his desire.”⁴³⁷

Persephone Braham also notes how in the Latin American literary imagination, the siren became a colonialist figure; known as a “denizen of both the Caribbean and Mediterranean seas,” she “embodied the lure of exploration and conquest.”⁴³⁸ As Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley reminds us, carved onto the masts of ships carrying African slaves on traumatic transatlantic voyages, sirens were more than mere myth; they are haunting material remnants of colonialist exploitation and loss.⁴³⁹ The siren has become a symbol of the enchanted American voices that lured Haitians into exile and impoverishment in Francophone post-colonial literatures, for example in Marie-Thérèse Colimon-Hall’s collection of short stories on the painful impact of the Haitian diaspora, published in 1979 *Le Chant des sirens* (Song of the Sirens).

Siren songs also abound in modernist literature. James Joyce devotes an episode in his novel *Ulysses* (first published in book form in 1922) to “Sirens”; it begins with a series of non-words that “seduces” the reader to sound them out. According to Nicole Bracker, “Sirens’ tempts the reader to experience the generation of new meaning through language.” She argues that the siren scene in *The Odyssey* is valuable for Joyce because it “stages the narrator, the story, and the reader, as fragmented and suspended figures, and Odysseus becomes a trope, serving as a model

⁴³⁷ William Simms, *Obscenity, Psychoanalysis and Literature: Lawrence and Joyce on Trial* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 39. Olalquiaga also argues that “as grantors of wishes or rescuers of drowning men, mermaids” also lack any agency for themselves, acting always in function of a male other.” Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, 251.

⁴³⁸ Persephone Braham, “The Monstrous Caribbean,” *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, ed. Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2012), 34. Also see Braham, “Song of the Sirenas: Mermaids of Latin America and the Caribbean,” in *Scaled for Success: The Internationalisation of the Mermaid*, ed. Philip Hayward (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018).

⁴³⁹ See Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, *Ezili’s Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018). Tinsley is indebted to Karen McCarthy Brown’s research. Brown argues persuasively that the “mermaid incarnation” of Iwa Lasireen in Haitian Vodou “transculturates the Sirens that Africans saw carved on slave ships’ masts.”

for the figure of the reader in the text.”⁴⁴⁰ Joyce’s episode plays with this suspension, Bracker continues, by creating a gap or “utopia” between form and content: “The utopia is that of a music of meaning. Words can never be the sound they express, they lose their music in transcription. The chapter is turned over to sound by reducing the sound to its written equivalent. The very rhythm of the stunted, grudging phrases seems to enact the desire to make as little as possible on the immaculacy of silence, to leave no unnecessary stone turned in its itinerary to non-being.”⁴⁴¹ Bracker concludes that reading Joyce’s text is more of “a performance rather than a commentary on Homer’s Sirens.”⁴⁴² It ultimately “calls for a similar performance on the reader’s part,” inviting the reader “to become a producer of the text.”⁴⁴³ Joyce reminds us that the siren story involves the desire for continuous reinvention—the promise of new ways of knowing; it also puts the power of continuous recanting, retelling, reinventing and rewriting in the hands of the literary consumer or prosumer, a theme we will return to at the end of this chapter.

To explain the continuous ebb and flow of sirens throughout literary and visual history, Lawrence Kramer peers beyond popular interpretations and structural critiques. In a persuasive article called “Longing/dying call,” Kramer notes that “the sirens were called back to life in the nineteenth century not simply to cope with modern forms of identity and desire, but to help cope with the form of modernity itself. In a multiplicity of versions and variants, the sirens and their song represent precisely what modernity and modern subjectivity have lost, precisely that which

⁴⁴⁰ Nicole Bracker, “The Signifier as Siren—Kafka, Brecht, Joyce and the Seduction of the Text,” *Intertexts* vol. 4, no. 2 (2000): 168.

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*, 193.

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*, 193. Modernist studies and animal studies scholar Rasheed Tazudeen also claims this performance is also “a means for distraction, [as] sound takes us away from the plot of the episode, from the dramas loved out by the human characters, and this is part of the seduction of the Sirens: to remove the characters (at least momentarily) from the world of interpersonal relations.” Tazudeen, “Eat It and Get All Pigsticky’: The Spinozist Body and Contagious Metaphor in ‘Circe,’” *The James Joyce Quarterly* 51 (2014). 2-3 & 7. Thank you to my second reader Allan Pero for pointing out that some Joyce scholars performatively read “Sirens” excerpts at Joyce conferences and Bloomsdays. He once performed a section of “Sirens” to improvisational musical accompaniment.

they must lose or alienate from themselves to become modern. For that very reason, the sirens also represent that which the modern must fantasize about regaining, even only in treacherous glimpses.”⁴⁴⁴ Kramer’s article draws on a rich history of Marxist critique involving industrialism as a caution symbol, a point of no return.

In his reading of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s seminal *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Kramer shows how the Frankfurt School critics situate Odysseus as a figure who has no control over the direction of the ship that sails.⁴⁴⁵ He is isolated from his group and cannot act impulsively. Instead, Odysseus drifts by distracted from the charted course, drifting into new territories by the temptation of hearing the sirens sing of his glory. This visual image conveys Horkheimer and Adorno’s thesis that Odysseus is “the prototype of the alienated, overrationalized subject of Enlightenment, and the sirens episode of *The Odyssey* as his prototypical moment. The allure of the sirens is the prospect of losing oneself in a past prior to the social and technological domination of nature; the sirens’ song inevitably destroys the alienated subject who hearkens to it by promising, falsely, a ‘happy return’ to the pre-enlightened state.”⁴⁴⁶

This destruction has been interpreted by Rebecca Comay as the price for the “omniscience” the sirens use to tempt Odysseus. She analyzes *Dialectic of Enlightenment* through a psychosexual lens claiming that their promise is “a ‘masculinity’ so total it would end up paradoxically reducing its bearer to a heap of bones.... What would it mean to seduce through song? Was the threat of the song not precisely that it assailed the passerby through the ear,

⁴⁴⁴ Lawrence Kramer, “‘Longindyingcall’: Of Music, Modernity, and the Sirens [2006]” *Song Acts*, vol. 16, Brill, 2017: 286.

⁴⁴⁵ Adorno and Horkheimer’s text was written during the second world war and first circulated privately among friends and colleagues in 1944.

⁴⁴⁶ Kramer, 291.

reducing his body to an open orifice, impregnated by whatever calls?”⁴⁴⁷ Comay’s interpretation opens up the possibility for a queer reading of *The Odyssey*, bringing it into a dialogue with the “penetrating” aspects of the entertainment industry. “Understandably,” she continues, “Odysseus’s only counter-spell to the Sirens’ magic involves an emphatic reassertion of the phallic position.”⁴⁴⁸ The authority of the song battles with the authority of the captain; the crew is impervious to this confrontation.⁴⁴⁹

Embedded in this critique of Enlightenment thinking and this description of a conflict between Odysseus, his crew and the sirens is a genealogy of two types of labour. Adorno and Horkheimer suggest that “Odysseus is represented in the sphere of work. Just as he cannot give way to the lure of self-abandonment, as owner he also forfeits participation in work and finally even control over it, while his companions, despite their closeness to things, (also) cannot enjoy work because it is performed under compulsion, in despair, with their senses forcibly stopped. The servant is subjugated in body and soul, the master regresses.”⁴⁵⁰ If Odysseus’ crew perform joyless instrumentalized tasks, interestingly it is the sirens who demonstrate creative freedom in their cacophony of vocal ranges that disturb authority. “The rowers, unable to speak to one another,” as Adorno and Horkheimer write no doubt also thinking of fascism, “are all harnessed to the same rhythms, like modern workers in factories, cinemas, and the collective. It is the concrete conditions of work in society which enforce conformism—not the conscious influences which additionally render the oppressed stupid and deflect them from the truth. The powerlessness of the workers is not merely a ruse of the rulers, but also the logical consequence

⁴⁴⁷ Rebecca Comay, “Adorno’s Siren Song,” *New German Critique*, vol. 81, no. 81, 2000: 26-27.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴⁴⁹ Odysseus, we could argue, clings to the representation of masculinity, the ingenuity of industrialism or “Enlightenment thinking.” But he does not cover his ears like his crew, which leaves him susceptible to the instrumentality of the Sirens’ own cunning.

⁴⁵⁰ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 27.

of industrial society, into which the efforts to escape it have finally transformed the ancient concept of fate.”⁴⁵¹ Unable to hear the tonality of the siren’s songs, the crew steer forward knowing that art and entertainment not only introduces self-reflexivity, but also threatens the idea of labour and progress. Adorno would later write in a famous essay to Walter Benjamin that distraction, “which engenders fears and anxiety about unemployment, loss of income, war, has its ‘nonproductive’ correlate in entertainment.”⁴⁵² The crew cannot hear the sirens, nor can they hear themselves; they are deaf to the world around them and unable to produce coherent sounds themselves. Horkheimer and Adorno’s fear lies in their final thought that “through the mediation of the total society, which encompasses all relationships and impulses, human beings are being turned back into precisely what the developmental law of society, the principle of the self, had opposed: mere examples of the species, identical to one another through isolation within the compulsively controlled collectivity.”⁴⁵³

2. The Technological and Mythological Starbucks Siren: A Feminist Critique

As we have seen in the previous section, the siren story has been continuously reinvented and rearticulated. Embedded in the tale itself is the curse or perhaps promise of new ways of knowing. The siren song is not only about controlling the collective or rote industrialized rhythms against the cries of spontaneous and creative labour; it is also a powerful tale/tail of continuous recanting, retelling, reinventing, and rewriting. Ultimately, in pop-culture today the consumer, artist-prosumer or spectator becomes a new producer of the siren text. The Starbucks Siren is also continuously spinning.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., 29.

⁴⁵² Theodor W. Adorno, “On Popular Music,” in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. John Storey, trans. John Storey (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1998), 205.

⁴⁵³ Horkheimer and Adorno, 29.

The Starbucks logo has been a cultural enigma since the company's inception in 1971.⁴⁵⁴ The religious right has accused Starbucks of embedding devilish symbols into the logo; fake online news reports spoofed the new 2011 logo, claiming a logo had been released with a pentagram on top of her head and inverted crosses below her eyes.⁴⁵⁵ As we read on *Starbucks Stories & News*, Starbucks designer Terry Heckler originally claimed his siren logo—an image of a two-tailed mermaid with flowing hair surrounded by the words Starbucks coffee, tea and spice, was inspired by a sixteenth-century Norse woodcut.⁴⁵⁶ The original woodcut perhaps, like the name Starbucks, spoke to the mysteries of the deep and the trading journey itself, traversing treacherous commercial waters between North America and Asia on the exotic spice trade. The siren was according to Heckler a foreboding “metaphor for the allure of caffeine, the siren who drew sailors into the rocks.”⁴⁵⁷ The alluring metaphor might stand, but sixteenth-century Norse woodcuts do not exist. It turns out the siren icon or image has a longer history, going back at

⁴⁵⁴ Religious groups quickly called for a boycott of an attempt to revive the original “bare-breasted” Starbucks Siren. See Niall Firth, “Christian Group calls for Starbucks boycott after chain relaunches bare-breasted mermaid logo,” *Daily Mail* (May 30, 2008): <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1023054/Christian-groups-Starbucks-boycott-chain-relaunches-bare-breasted-mermaid-logo.html>

⁴⁵⁵ See J.B. Smitt's fake news report, “New Starbucks Logo,” *Weekly World News: The World's Only Reliable News* (January 6, 2011), <https://weeklyworldnews.com/headlines/27163/new-starbucks-logo/> and Yicheng Wu, “Behind the Starbucks Logo I,” *Drawing Across Disciplines*, (February 12, 2020): <http://blog.ocad.ca/wordpress/gart1040-fw201702-02/2020/02/behind-the-starbucks-logo-i/> and Wu, “Behind the Starbucks Logo II: The Hidden Message,” *Drawing across Disciplines* (February 9, 2020): <http://blog.ocad.ca/wordpress/gart1040-fw201702-02/2020/02/behind-the-starbucks-logo-ii-the-hidden-message/>

⁴⁵⁶ Michelle Flandreau, “Who is the Starbucks Siren,” *Starbucks Stories & News*, December 23, 2016: <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2016/who-is-starbucks-siren/>. Martine Mussies also notes that the symbol must have been taken from another book, writing: “According to Adams (2008), the design was based on an image of a ‘twin-trailed mermaid,’ although it’s unclear which one in particular. On their websites and in their books, Starbucks officials claim that their logo was based on a ‘sixteenth-century Norse woodcut’ (Schultz 1997). However, by the time woodcut images on paper arose, no people identifying as ‘Norse’ were settled in medieval Europe. A little exploration reveals various look-a-likes of the Starbucks siren, such as in J.E. Cirlot’s *Dictionary of Symbols*, *Das Buch von einer Frawen genant Melusina* (an early German translation of Jean d’Arras’s *Roman de Melusine*), the *Hortus Sanitatis*, *Le Ballet Comique de la Reine Louise*, several bestiaries and some historical maps, but no woodcuts, let alone sixteenth-century Norse woodcuts.” See Martine Mussies, “The Siren’s Lure-A Starbucks Influencer Marketing Case Study” *Better Marketing* (March 18, 2020), <https://medium.com/better-marketing/the-sirens-lure-or-how-starbucks-engages-its-online-influencers-89227f34f9a3>

⁴⁵⁷ “In Person: Terry Heckler, who drew Starbucks mermaid, can’t stop sketching,” *Seattle Times* (September 19, 2011): <https://www.seattletimes.com/business/in-person-terry-heckler-who-drew-starbucks-mermaid-cant-stop-sketching/>

least to the Byzantine era, the seventh century. Angelica Calabrese writes that the Starbucks siren “was born in seventh-century Italy,” tracing the imagery of the twin-tailed mermaid back to a mosaic on the floor of a cathedral in Pesaro. As Calabrese writes, “With her roots (or rather, her tails) in the Mediterranean basin, she is the inevitable production of the countless cultural interactions and exchanges that took place in the region-like coffee itself.”⁴⁵⁸ The original Starbucks logo designed by Heckler does bear striking resemblance to the twin-tailed Melusine Siren symbol reproduced in the English language edition of J.E. Cirlot’s *Dictionary of Symbols* (originally published in 1958). This symbol was taken from an early German best-seller, Johannes Bamler’s 1480 *Buch von einer Frawen genant Melusina*, a translation of Jean d’Arras’s *Roman de Melusine*. In medieval French fiction, the beautiful Mélusine is the daughter of a fairy mother and royal father. She entombs her father in a mountain and as punishment, is condemned to transform into a serpent or fish from the waist down one day every week. Mélusine, infused with the mystique of maritime animals, was described as having a haunting beauty, glimmering white garments and long, flowing hair.⁴⁵⁹ As Howard Schultz relates, “bare-breasted and Rubenesque, [the siren] was supposed to be as seductive as coffee itself.”⁴⁶⁰ Schultz’ first company Il Giornale also had a logo featuring a mythological symbol for speed and efficiency, the Roman messenger god Mercury’s head (Figure 13). When the companies merged, the two logos also merged: the Siren now sings a song of technology/efficiency. Again, we go back to Starbucks’ nautical theme. Starbucks took its name from Moby Dick’s first mate aboard the

⁴⁵⁸ Angelica Calabrese, “The Siren on your Starbucks cup was born in 7th-Century Italy,” *Atlas Obscura* (November 10, 2015): <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/the-siren-on-your-starbucks-cup-was-born-in-7thcentury-italy>

⁴⁵⁹ To be precise: “glimmering white dresses, with long waving golden hair, and faces of inexpressible beauty.” See Susan Reed’s European Studies British Library blog: “The Tale of Mélusine,” (October 26, 2015) <https://blogs.bl.uk/european/2015/10/the-tale-of-m%C3%A9lusine.html> and *Melusine’s Footprint: Tracing the Legacy of a Medieval Myth*, ed. Misty Urban, Deva Kemmis, and Melissa Ridley Elmes (Leiden and Boston, Brill: 2017).

⁴⁶⁰ Schultz and Yang, *Pour Your Heart Into It*, 33.

Pequod, Starbuck. According to Martine Mussies, Starbucks' own nautical "myth-making was combined with tales from Greek mythology, in which sirens enticed sailors to an island, and with the name of an island in the central Pacific: Starbuck Island, an uninhabited coral island that is part of the Central Line Islands of Kiribati."⁴⁶¹ Then the siren becomes technological, as her logo is coupled with Il Giornale's Mercury, the God of speed (Figure 14). Over time, she continues to shed her mythological connotations and surfaces in other sunlit regions of commerce: her body begins to change with each alteration of the logo that played down its foreboding, sexual connotations. *Forbes Magazine* columnist Ronald Holden observes this trend in the graphic alteration of the logo, noting that the "earliest version was brown and fierce-looking; her breasts had nipples, and her tail was forked. By 1992 the look had softened to a bright green; the nipples were discretely covered by her hair, and the tail became a wrap-around. And then, in 2011, the company completely removed the words 'Starbucks Coffee' from its logo. The mermaid became a stylized princess with a crown"⁴⁶² (Figure 12). In March 2023, Starbucks filed a trademark application for a new hybrid logo returning to the original more sensual presentation.

⁴⁶¹ Martine Mussies, "The Siren's Lure—A Starbucks Influencer Marketing Case Study," *Medium* (March 28, 2020).

⁴⁶² Ronald Holden, "Mermaid, Siren, Princess: How the Starbucks Logo Evolved," *Forbes* (March 4, 2017): <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ronaldholden/2017/03/04/mermaid-siren-princess-how-the-starbucks-logo-evolved/?sh=3712f7c658bd>



Figure 12: Four versions of the Starbucks Logo, 1971-2011 (Starbucks Logo Research)
 [Source: https://www.designevo.com/images/blog/starbucks-logo-design/starbucks_logos.png]



Figure 13 (left): Trademark Tale Siren meets Speed (Trademark 97842829 (filed by Starbucks on March 16, 2023, based on original company logo)⁴⁶³
 (right): Trademark application 73597509 (filed by Il Giornale on May 8, 1986)
 [Sources: <https://uspto.report/TM/97842829> and <https://uspto.report/TM/73597509>]

From mythological beauty to cultural “cutie” and then to royalty or digital non-fungible token or NFT, the evolving Starbucks Siren transforms the post-Homeric imagery or symbol of chimeric beasts into a perfectly symmetrical and collectible creature (in earlier versions encased by concentric circles). Mussies points out another detail: “[o]ften, the logo is accompanied by stars, hinting at the (Royal top-notch) quality and perhaps referring to the virgin Mary, whose

⁴⁶³ Trademark application details: “The mark consists of a concentric circle design with the word “STARBUCKS” and a circular seal containing the design of a siren (a two-tailed mermaid) wearing a crown.”
<https://uspto.report/TM/97842829>

allegorical title ‘Star of the Sea’ can be regarded as a Christianized mermaid or siren.”⁴⁶⁴ The Starbucks logo, a valuable trademark and visual representation of the company’s ethos, is no longer the nautical monster who tried to seduce Odysseus and his crew; today she smiles at the spectator, a friendly “expressive” face of commerce. The “Starbucks Creative Expression” manual for baristas defines the logo and Siren as “our muse, the face of our brand.” [The trademark lingo on their 1992 USPTO trademark application is far more bland, defining the siren mark as “consisting of the wording “Starbucks Coffee” in white inside a green circular seal containing two white stars and the design of a siren (a two-tailed mermaid) wearing a crown in black and white”].⁴⁶⁵

Several attempts to simplify and modernize the trademark, also unlocking the image from the “wordmark” (Starbucks Coffee or Starbucks Coffee, Tea and Spices) and “liberating” the figure from the concentric circles gave “the Siren greater prominence,” while also further decontextualizing the figure. The graphic redaction of the talons and feathers framing her face also eclipses the mythological details. We might even question if the figure in the revamped logo is a siren at all, although in corporate rhetoric (for example Michelle Flandreau writing on the corporate website “Starbucks Stories”) we read that the symbol has “stayed pretty consistent. She’s still the siren.” Flandreau, however, still asks, “But what does that really mean to us?” and then quotes Steve Murray, Creative Director at Starbucks, who predictably responds that the siren symbol stands for *consistent quality*: “I hope that when people see the siren on their cup, of course it’s going to stand for what they’re going to get from Starbucks.... If the siren is on that cup of coffee, it’s going to be awesome.’ She also stands for everything that we stand for.”⁴⁶⁶

⁴⁶⁴ Mussies, “The Siren’s Lure—A Starbucks Influencer Marketing Case Study”

⁴⁶⁵ See the USPTO report filed 2020-08-20: <https://uspto.report/TM/90127284>

⁴⁶⁶ Flandreau, “Who is the Starbucks Siren?”

Unfortunately, these sweeping claims end here; neither Murray nor Flandreau elaborate on the history of the siren nor can they place their finger on what the siren stands for, except a great consistent cup of coffee.

On the shelf at cafés worldwide, however, the Siren is not silent. One thing she stands for in corporate rhetoric is indispensable female labour. On September 24, 2019, Starbucks introduced the “Siren’s Blend” to their wall of core coffees alongside the infamous Pike Place blend. The content of the newest medium roast added to the shelves of stores across North America was a calculated blend of beans sourced from East African and Latin-American regions. Like many of their core coffees, Siren’s Blend harmonized different tasting points but also showcased the company’s experience in sourcing beans from diverse geographical areas and working ethically with farmers from those regions. If we look closer at its lustrous copper packaging, we will see a brief statement embossed in silver writing under a woman’s head on the “Siren’s Blend” package, paying homage to “the trailblazing women of the coffee industry,”⁴⁶⁷ including those involved in every step of the way in coffee farming, refinement, and distribution.

The release of “Siren’s Blend” can be seen as example of how Starbucks portrays itself as a company that seeks to build community by empowering those who are marginalized, this time paying homage to labour feminism. In 2018, the corporation announced that it had achieved pay equity for women and minorities.⁴⁶⁸ One of the first female coffee producers at Starbucks, Mary Williams, reminisces about her part in the creation of another unique blend of coffee she called “Siren’s Note” in 1998. “In years past,” she remembers, “I was very surprised by how many

⁴⁶⁷ “New Starbucks Siren’s Blend supports women in coffee growing communities,” *Starbucks Stories & News* (September 24, 2019): <https://stories.starbucks.com/press/2019/new-starbucks-sirens-blend-supports-women-in-coffee-growing-communities/>

⁴⁶⁸ D. Elizabeth, “Starbucks Says It’s Achieved Pay Equity For Women and Minorities,” *Glamour* (March 21, 2018): <https://www.glamour.com/story/starbucks-says-its-achieved-pay-equity-for-women-and-minorities>

women were employed in fields and mills and plant nurseries but very few in other areas of the supply chain. Male-dominated is an understatement. Today things have really changed.”⁴⁶⁹ An example of how the multinational corporation seeks to commodify social justice, the revival of “Siren’s Note” as “Siren’s Blend” rhetorically promises the company will assuage labour conditions within and outside the company. As we read on *Starbucks Stories & News*, with every cup sold of Siren’s Blend during its launch week across North America locations donated a share of proceeds to “organizations championing women in coffee-growing communities,”⁴⁷⁰ such as International Women’s Coffee Alliance (IWCA) and Days for Girls. Although the Starbucks Story reserved for Siren’s Blend celebrates “ethical sourcing” (dedicating the blend to “one of Starbucks first women of coffee, Mary Williams” who “established the path for economic transparency and Starbucks Coffee and Farmer Equity (C.A.F.E.) Practices, the cornerstone of our ethical sourcing approach to buying coffee, in all of Starbucks supply chain,”⁴⁷¹ Starbucks has not always sung this siren song. The company initially refused to sell Fair Trade coffee and only agreed to do so after a letter writing campaign and several protests.⁴⁷² Starbucks, as Gavin Fridell writes, ultimately decided to develop “its own set of standards (called ‘C.A.F.E. standards’)” enabling it “to claim that 99 percent of its coffee is ‘ethically sourced,’” although actually only “8% of Starbucks coffee beans are fair trade certified.”⁴⁷³ As Ian Hussey and Joe Curnow write, “as a business that claims it sells ‘Fair Trade’ beans and brews, Starbucks is

⁴⁶⁹ “Introducing Siren’s Blend,” *Starbucks Stories & News* (September 20, 2019):

<https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2019/women-in-coffee-sirens-blend/>

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁷¹ “Introducing Siren’s Blend,” *Starbucks Stories & News EMEA* (March 1 2022),

<https://stories.starbucks.com/emea/stories/2022/sirens-blend/>

⁴⁷² See Gavin Fridell, *Fair Trade Coffee: The Prospects and Pitfalls of Market-Driven Social Justice* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 72.

⁴⁷³ *The Fair Trade Handbook: Building a Better World Together* Ed. Gavin Fridell, Zack Gross, and Sean McHugh (Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2021). Also see the podcast with Gavin Fridell and Joe Fish: “How a cup of coffee explains global inflation” (March 3, 2023), <https://thebigstorypodcast.ca/2023/03/03/how-a-cup-of-coffee-explains-global-inflation/>

commodifying social justice (Fridell 2007b), morality (Fisher 2007; M'Closkey 2010) and consciousness in order to market them through images and discourses that render producers' lives and landscapes "knowable" and "authentic" to middle-class consumers (Wright 2004). Fair Trade products," moreover, "are personified, often touted in advertisements, packaging, and campaigns as having a conscience and the capacity to speak to consumers."⁴⁷⁴ The Siren—in keeping with the corporation's rhetoric of being socially responsible—had to be made more ethical, more relatable.

Senior designer at Starbucks, Tiffany Hsu, one of the three women responsible for its branding, suggests that "[s]ince this is a story around women, we wanted to take the Siren and make her more human, more relatable [...]. You can still see the waves in her hair and her star crown, but we wanted to keep those details more honorary, not literal."⁴⁷⁵ Corporate censorship played down her nipples and navel in favour of promoting her wavy hair and smile; over time the monstrosity of the mythological siren (feared to incite a pathological response in the Western imagination) became unsustainable for Starbucks marketing. The strong mythical feminine creature lost her visual potency. The Starbucks Siren became more universal and more "humane." Maggie Hess, senior content writer at Starbucks, states that "[w]e ended up loving the name Siren's Blend because the Siren is an incredibly powerful, mythical, 'feminine' creature. It makes a strong statement to say that the blend that's named after our logo, the heart of our brand, is the blend that honors women."⁴⁷⁶ Until Siren's Blend, the logo's clandestine meaning had come close to being an empty signifier. Now this graphic redaction and explanation generated heated discussions from the public and literary scholars alike.

⁴⁷⁴ Ian Hussey and Joe Curnow, "Fair Trade, neo-colonial developmentalism, and racialized power relations," in *Interface: a journal for and about social movements*, vol. 5, no. 1 (May 2013), 40-68: 50.

⁴⁷⁵ "Introducing Siren's Blend," *Starbucks Stories & News*.

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

Both the Starbucks corporate logo and the hermeneutically layered Siren (herself a product of multiple retellings and redactions of cultural folklore) need to be continuously read and re-read. Yet, as sound theorist Michael Bull reminds us in *Sirens*, these mythological beasts also “cannot be properly explained by recourse to merely shining a light onto the Sirens themselves.”⁴⁷⁷ Bull argues that these creatures “can only be “properly understood in the context of their general role in Greek thought and in their subsequent adoption into Western thought to the present day.”⁴⁷⁸ He argues that when reading or re-reading the sirens “it becomes necessary to focus upon who it is that constructs and listens to the Sirens,” heeding the voices precisely of those “who give them their meaning,” rather than listening only to ...

the Sirens themselves—who are after all—merely the construction of a Western male psyche. In following this line of reasoning Sirens become a product of male imagination—in effect, they tell us more about men than women despite the taking of up of the mantle of sirens by some women in the popular culture of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This proposition is in turn problematic as it appears to silence the voices of the sirens in the very act of critiquing the nature of their origin.⁴⁷⁹

While “Siren’s Blend” uses the symbol of the siren ostensibly to both promote its brand and support the emancipation of women, new historians Mary Phillips and Ann Rippin demonstrate that Starbucks also profits from its erasure of the abject. They invite us to more closely consider how Starbucks “celebrates” the feminine. Beginning with a survey of sirens and their emergence throughout literary history, their critique of the history of the Starbucks Siren employs a Kristevian psychoanalytic lens to show how the treatment of the siren goes hand in hand with the

⁴⁷⁷ Michael Bull, *Sirens* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., 2020), 9.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid. “In embodying the Sirens of myth, the choice of one form of Siren myth over another and its movement from the acousmatic ‘voice’ to ‘body’ represents a dominant cultural trajectory moving the place of the Siren to the forefront of an ‘iconography of misogyny’ alive and well in contemporary writing and culture as Inna Naroditskaya and Linda Phyllis Austern somewhat unreflectively claim, ‘In western cultures, where the siren is most often seen as a dangerous seductive water-woman whose song envelops its listener in an open void, both space and the immaterial art of music have often been conceived as feminine. The woman musician becomes a siren, becomes sexually available.’ See “Introduction: Singing Each to Each,” in *Music of the Sirens* ed, Linda Phyllis Austern and Inna Naroditskaya (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 4. As quoted in Bull, 24.

company's gentrifying operations. The most recent rendition of this siren, they claim, has lost its vital quality to threaten and destroy—what has been traditionally symbolized by the monstrous, chimeric body that they associate with the abject, “the place where meaning collapses.”⁴⁸⁰ They claim that the Starbucks Siren's “stylized and anodyne nature” negates its mythological origins and “obscures the richness of the mermaid tradition and iconography in general, and of two-tailed sirens in particular.”⁴⁸¹ In its diluted form, they argue the Starbucks Siren “has become a goddess in her starry crown, the crown a symbol of phallogentric authority, and any association with sex, sexual difference or the messy business or parturition has been eliminated.”⁴⁸² The gradual erasure of the explicitly “abject” from the logo is an act of censoring, as Starbucks both claims to emancipate and “honor” women, but also distances itself from the Siren's abject “female sexuality, signified by her beauty, her reproductive body and her horrifying yet fascinating tails, and death. She is what men would both want and yet fear, as the abject she ‘beseeches, worries and fascinates’ and therefore must be punished and cast away.”⁴⁸³ Like the additional graphic redactions of the siren found in the most recent evolution of the Starbucks logo (removal of the breasts, tails, and details of the face), such alterations to the iconographic face of the company shape the way the brand and the space are represented and the way Starbucks and the Starbucks Siren are read and perceived by the public.

The redacted Starbucks Siren icon on the one hand has enhanced maternal qualities, offering a womb-like structure for the public in which to gather. On the other hand, she is “defeminized”; her threatening sexuality is erased. This redacted Starbucks Siren on signage

⁴⁸⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.

⁴⁸¹ Mary Phillips and Ann Rippin, “Howard and the Mermaid: Abjection and the Starbucks' Foundation Memoir.” *Organization* vol. 17, no. 4 (2010): 484.

⁴⁸² *Ibid.*, 495.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid.*, 490.

promises a safe space for consumers like the function of the nineteenth-century church bell that provides what Michael Bull calls “‘a protective shell’ over the community.”⁴⁸⁴ We see the Starbucks Siren reverberating in a familiar soundscape: coffee, accessible washroom facilities, free internet access, free refills, branded-merchandise walls, and immaculate interiors with comfortable seating and round tables. The “sonic inclusivity”⁴⁸⁵ provided by the Starbucks siren has a frontier quality to it; Bull invokes Schafer’s analogy of the train whistle as he “waxes lyrical about the allure of the American frontier with the sound of the train.... ‘The train’s whistle was the most important sound in the frontier town, the solo announcement of contact with the outside world.’”⁴⁸⁶ Like the shrill train whistle in Westerns which symbolize Manifest Destiny and the security and urgency of capitalist conquest, the imagined sonics, smile, and stare of the Starbucks Siren (housed in cafes with exposed industrial interiors) subliminally speak to our own desire for what Ritzer calls “Starbuckization”; the no longer shrill Siren beckons us to explore the “safe” spaces of “coffee colonialism” and “café capitalism.”⁴⁸⁷

Although this cafe siren does not produce noise herself, the curated jazz playlists and anonymous muzak playlists that spill out into the public are her cry. Starbucks Entertainment, a subsidiary of Starbucks, not only sold “siren song” CDs; it also continuously “repackaged” female artists on Starbucks’ own Hear Music record label, a partnership between Starbucks and Concord Music Group.⁴⁸⁸ The repackaged “siren” vocals and ambient Starbucks soundscape

⁴⁸⁴ Bull, 78.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid., 78.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁷ Here I echo Robin Wagner-Pacifici’s arguments in her article “Habermas at Starbucks: Customers, idlers and stragglers in the capitalist third place” about Starbucks’ “ambiguous” third places. See Robin Wagner-Pacifici, “Habermas at Starbucks: Customers, idlers and stragglers in the capitalist third place,” *Les Politiques Sociales* 1.2 (January 2021): 27-53.

⁴⁸⁸ Jake Hall, “From Sonic Youth to Sia, the surprising history of Starbucks’ record label,” *Dazed* (January 22, 2018), <https://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/38713/1/from-sonic-youth-to-sia-the-surprising-history-of-starbucks-record-label>. Though “Hear Music” is now defunct, the record label helped launch the careers of many

would become, following what Brian Kane writes in *Sound Unseen*, the phantasmagoria or “magic” of the company’s world “where the dazzling dreams of commodity culture could be frozen by the allegorical gaze of the critic and interpreted from the perspective of its catastrophic results.”⁴⁸⁹ While Starbucks’ CDs frequently pay homage to women and minority artists, the songs are also often understood by the café-going public as mundane “background music... for everyday explorers,” as Bryant Simon and Anahid Kassabian write, amplifying and building on Schultz’s longing to capture the romance of Milan for American culture.⁴⁹⁰ Schultz’ dream wish, while he was CEO of the company, was to sample, brew, and ultimately own, trademark and encase the “elsewhere,” borrowing a term Marko Teodorski takes from Donna Haraway, in the siren and in a crystal café globe.⁴⁹¹ For Teodorski, a voiceless siren signals the mythological figure’s demise, from chimeras into commodities: “Once they had lost their voices, the main vehicle for their seduction, the allure of irresistibility transgressed to the sphere of the object, of silent seduction, moulding the modern subject by the rules of the capitalist commodity-fetish. Sirens finally gain an entrance into the commodified space of advertisement and marketing.”⁴⁹²

At the previous turn-of-the-century, sirens were put on display in the same arcades Walter

artists like Sia and exposed indie artists like Sonic Youth to mainstream coffeehouse culture. However, Hall writes that overall CD sales were poor and notes, quite bluntly, “the music was shit. *Really* shit. It’s unsurprising, especially considering the fact that Starbucks is literally a company which sells the idea of homogeneity, a nice cosy [*sic*] cappuccino in an environment that’s familiar no matter where in the world you are. The music was always bound to be bland, and reviewers were quick to implicate Starbucks’ involvement when discussing unadventurous original releases.”

⁴⁸⁹ Brian Kane, *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 98.

⁴⁹⁰ See Bryant Simon’s chapter “Hear Music for Everyday Explorers” in his *Everything but the Coffee: Learning about America from Starbucks* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009) and Anahid Kassabian’s chapter, “World Music with your Latte,” in *Ubiquitous Listening* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013). Anahid Kassabian shows how, as “Japanese cultural critic Mihoko Tamaoki argues in her work on coffeehouses, Starbucks transforms its consumers not into a public, but an audience. Moreover, she argues ‘Starbucks now constitutes a meta-media corporation. It stands at once in the traditional media role, as an outlet for both content and advertising. At the same time, it is actually selling the products therein advertised. And these, in turn, are themselves media products: music for Starbucks listeners.’” (35)

⁴⁹¹ Marko Teodorski, “Reflecting the Monster’s Future: The Commodification of Sirens,” in *Monstrosity from the Inside Out*. Ed. Cutler-Broyles, Teresa, and Marko Teodorski (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 20.

⁴⁹² *Ibid.*

Benjamin visited in Berlin, used to lure visitors into sightseeing attractions like the *Passage-Panoptikum*. Of course, as scholars who visited the arcades were quick to note, the figures on display were not live, singing specimens, but dead ossified halicore.⁴⁹³ The commodified Starbucks Siren may also be silent; but the music pouring out of the CDs and her pedigree makes up for this: she is sovereign.

Since the late 90s, Starbucks' iconic logo's trademark definition clearly labels her halo a star-studded "crown."⁴⁹⁴ With this sovereign symbol at the helm, Starbucks since the 80s has not only attempted to trademark and encase the "elsewhere"; as David Bollier has argued it has also entered into a new era of "coffee colonialism," fighting trademark wars with Ethiopian farmers and government officials over "ownership" of names for coffees like "Sidamo."⁴⁹⁵ Howard Schultz in his own poetic account of his adventures at the company of course prefers to speak of coffee romance and mystery, not trademark wars. Like a modern-day Odysseus himself, Howard Schultz writes he once heard the call of Milan and was seduced by the romance of espresso and the bravado of the labourer, the *barista*:

⁴⁹³ They also were not female, but male halicore (or walruses). See Dr. Th. Zell, "Der Ursprung des Sirenen-Mythos," *Berliner Tageblatt und Handelszeitung* (09.06.1902). Also see Zell's book-length legal and natural science study of Homer's *Odyssey Polyphem ein Gorilla: Eine naturwissenschaftliche und staatsrechtliche Untersuchung von Homers Odyssee Buch*, published in 1901 and the 1876 "Siren" entry in the British *Popular Encyclopedia, or Conversations Lexicons* which claims that the "stories of 'mermaids' and 'sirens', which sailors are so fond of relating" might have been inspired by these mammals who sit up "in a semi-erect position in the water". I am indebted to my supervisor Janelle Blankenship for pointing to these German and popular science sources. Celeste Olalquiaga's analysis of mermaid sightings and fake ossified mermaids in seventeenth-century aesthetics also demonstrates how the desire to manufacture, capture, and collect mermaids, sirens and other strange curiosities and artifacts in emerging modernity symbolizes an epistemological retreat, looking for interconnections in an alienated culture impacted by the progress of rapid industrialization. We might also see this desire to continuously re-invent, classify and display the mermaid and siren as a modern melancholic longing for a connection to what Adorno and Horkheimer described as "the vanquished primeval world and its imaginary happiness." (Adorno and Horkheimer, 10).

⁴⁹⁴ See the 11-08-1997 trademark application record recorded with the serial number 75386496: "The mark consists of the wording "STARBUCKS COFFEE" in a circular seal with two stars, the color green which is in the nature of emerald green, PMS Color 3425(c), and design of a siren (a two-tailed mermaid) wearing a crown." <https://www.gerbenlaw.com/trademarks/food-companies/starbucks/>

⁴⁹⁵ See David Bollier's persuasive post, "Starbucks, Trademarks and Coffee Colonialism," *On the Commons* (March 6, 2007): <https://www.onthecommons.org/starbucks-trademarks-and-coffee-colonialism>

The energy pulses all around you. Italian opera is playing. You can hear the interplay of people meeting for the first time, as well as people greeting friends they see every day at the bar. These places, I saw, offered comfort, community, and a sense of extended family.... As I watched, I had a revelation: Starbucks had missed the point—completely missed it. *This is so powerful!* I thought. *This is the link....* What we had to do was unlock the romance and mystery of coffee, firsthand, in coffee bars.⁴⁹⁶

Such esprit is captured in the title of Schultz's 2008 book, *Onward*, an intimate business memoir that tracks the emotional and corporate hurdles he encounters while restructuring the business (also making a slight sentimental pitch for his presidential candidacy). *Onward*, too, is a siren's song to its readers. The nautical figurehead of Schultz's corporate vessel, a modernized two-toned green-brown redacted version of the original icon, also graces the book's cover; the defeminized two-tailed siren sails smoothly through uncharted waters, guiding Schultz onward, ostensibly protecting the company from harm during the tempest of economic upheaval. The rebranding of the siren as a sigil to ward off evil, however, again runs against the classical trope of the sea monster as draconian woman who portends doom.⁴⁹⁷

Yet the Starbucks Siren, long divested of her devouring ways, in some global markets still breathes fire. At the Cambodian flagship store, for example, she has been reimagined as a hybrid creature, re-read through a local folkloric lens. In Phnom Penh local artists inspired by Southeast Asian folklore depicted the Siren on a hand-painted mural as Sovanna Maccha, a Cambodian Siren Princess with a tail. This new hybrid Starbucks Siren was designed in a graffiti

⁴⁹⁶ Schultz and Yang, *Pour Your Heart Into It*, 51-52.

⁴⁹⁷ The term "onward" appears as a signature in one of Schultz' first letters to his employees: "In it, I outlined the company's mission and the goals I expected us to achieve, as well as how we should achieve them. I was confident, especially because my passion was backed by conviction. I *believed*. The memo's tone captured the ambition and enthusiasm of the young entrepreneur I was: *Il Giornale will strive to be the best coffee bar company on earth. We will offer superior coffee and related products that will help our customers start and continue their work day. We are genuinely interested in educating our customers and will not compromise our ethics or integrity in the name of profit.... Our coffee bars will change the way people perceive the beverage, and we will build into each Il Giornale coffee car a level of quality, performance and value that will earn the respect and loyalty of our customers.*" See Howard Schultz and Joanne Gordon, *Onward: How Starbucks Fought for its Life without Losing its Soul* (New York: Rodale, 2011), 10-11.

style informed by the local Khmer street art aesthetic (Figure 14). The siren princess glitters with golden colours on the mural that wraps around the café’s staircase; her own body according to the artists blends with the sweeping lines and forms of the venomous Naga dragons (also known as “spectacle serpents”).⁴⁹⁸



Figure 14 - “Sovanna Maccha” Mural (Siren Princess at the flagship store in Phnom Penh, Cambodia)
[Source: <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2017/12-local-art-collaborations/>]

If each Starbucks location “blends” a distinct urban soundscape, some also brew up unique Sirens, both borrowing from local surroundings and culture and simultaneously promising to raise the consumer above and beyond these surroundings.⁴⁹⁹ “Sovanna Maccha” hovers hypnotically over the staircase, giving the flagship store a unique flowing rhythm.

Phillips and Rippin observe that this suspension correlates to the powerful mythological narrative

⁴⁹⁸ Heidi Peiper, “12 stunning locally designed art collaborations at Starbucks,” *Starbucks Stories & News* (August 31, 2017): <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2017/12-local-art-collaborations/>

⁴⁹⁹ For a Freudian take on the apotropaic function of the medusa head, see Thomas Albrecht, “Apotropaic reading: Freud’s Medusa Head” *Literature and Psychology* 45, no. 4 (1999): 1-30.

itself: “The siren/mermaid will ensnare, beguile, seduce, and lead the unwary into a life of dalliance and away from normal duties...like Starbucks, which aims to be a third place that is neither home nor work, where the customer experiences a state of suspension.”⁵⁰⁰ While the Starbucks Siren on the cup is silent and cannot lure subjects through song, her branding mythology casts a wide net; her siren song informs how we perceive the café space. Bull notes how “our ability to place siren sounds have always been subject to the vagaries of atmospheric conditions, geographical and physical topology, our own placing and our own sense of hearing and experience.”⁵⁰¹ Just as an ambulance garners attention and commands space through its blaring siren, the interjection of a Starbucks Siren as global and local technology and mythology produces a whirling and commanding soundscape and symbolism. In her study of the “myth model” and modern culture, Arthur Asa Berger writes that “when we visit a Starbucks, we are, even if we don’t recognize it, acting mythically and are our actions are based on unconscious imperatives in the myths that shape our lives in so many different ways.”⁵⁰²

The Siren in any Starbucks Café conjures up wonder and spectacular commodity power. One could say the legendary two-tailed siren lives in another “meadow,” languishing and presiding over what may be considered the modern “land of milk and honey,” an American haven; she breathes a contemporary corporate sigh-of-relief, residing in a postmodern and dimly-lit “third place.” Enveloping the siren in the romance of espresso, Howard Schultz in his career as Starbucks CEO continuously used the dream imagery of his siren to romanticize the space of Starbucks café culture and lend a spectacular and mythological air to his “high-quality” coffee experiences and environment.

⁵⁰⁰ Phillips and Rippin, “Howard and the Mermaid,” 485.

⁵⁰¹ Bull, 76.

⁵⁰² Arthur Asa Berger, *Perspectives on Everyday Life: A Cross-Disciplinary Cultural Analysis* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 90.

Phillips and Rippin observe how within the bounds of the corporate arena the defeminization of the Siren also strongly correlated to Schultz's agenda to drastically re-organize the company. "In this process," they claim, the Siren as corporate spectacle and mythological symbol "has relinquished the physical markers of sexual difference but retains the diadem of phallographic authority...her transgressive qualities have leaked across into the organization's leader. What is abject cannot be fully jettisoned, as there is always something excessive and left over that will make its presence felt."⁵⁰³ Although the siren undergoes graphic manipulation, her defeminization does not suggest complete *demythologization*. There are still strong connections between the seductive properties of coffee and the siren's song. The Starbucks siren and corporate third place are positioned as a mysterious escape or journey but also as a familiar comfortable face—instead of seducing, it solves human problems. Borrowing from Phillips and Rippin and their quotation from S. G. Nichols one could argue that the Starbucks Siren, like the original Melusine figure inhabits a phantasmagoric world wherein those phantasms "of any sort can provide a key to resolving personal, social or political problems."⁵⁰⁴ Phillips and Rippin suggest that "Starbucks uses phantasmagoric elements to sell its coffee and coffee shops, here allying the brand with a grand vision for improving the human condition which sits comfortably alongside its claims to be an escape from the world."⁵⁰⁵

A hybridized escapist spectacle and symbol, the Starbucks siren ultimately dwells in a corporate logo that "grounds" it, anonymously and androgynously "humanizes" it and turns it

⁵⁰³ Ibid., 497. The relationship between Schultz and the Starbucks Siren I would argue is reciprocal. As the Siren loses what is abject in her maternal signifiers, Schultz temporarily displaces his masculine identity to sing the song of the romance of his company as a third place, blending male competition with feminine desire: "the combination of competitive drive and a profound desire to make sure everyone in the organization could win together. I wanted to blend coffee with romance, to dare to achieve what others said was impossible, to defy the odds with innovative ideas, and to do all this with elegance and style. In truth, Starbucks needed the influence of both parents to become what it is today." See *Pour Your Heart Into It*, 11.

⁵⁰⁴ Phillips and Rippin, "Howard and the Mermaid," 490.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid.

into a universal signifier for the company's presence in the global market. This logo echoes throughout café capitalism as it orchestrates and seduces, reverberating higher class sophistication as it spreads into surrounding neighbourhoods. If ever-expanding Starbucks is proliferating and percolating a philanthropic vision (as Murray writes, "It's definitely about the coffee but it's about a lot more than coffee. It's about...being good to people, being good to the world.... That's definitely something that we do in the way that we source our coffee and that we help farmers, the way we treat our customers and the way we treat out partners. I think it's about being good citizens of the planet and taking care of each other in that way and standing up for what we believe in") it is also, as Slovenian theorist Žižek suggests, selling us "cultural capitalism," a buy-a-smile feeling, the ideology of "ethical consumption."⁵⁰⁶

3. After-Life of the Starbucks Siren - Spectacular Submersions, Subversions, and Rearticulations in Social Media, Visual Culture, and Popular Culture

In the final section of this chapter, I will discuss how the Starbucks Siren has been continuously brought to life as a new creation/creature, continuously reinvented and re-read by both the corporation and an artistic and pop-cultural imaginary. As already noted in the previous section, speculating on the mysterious origins of the Starbucks logo has been a popular North American pastime. This preoccupation often leads to parody. The wildly satirical stop-motion TV series *Robot Chicken* (Green, Senreich, Fasolo, 2001 —) over a decade ago in 2012 even contributed their own version of the myth. Adult Swim released a sneak peak clip for season 6, wherein they teased that the origin of the Starbucks logo goes back to a premature photo shoot that would decide whether the founders of a new company wanted to launch a coffee business or

⁵⁰⁶ See Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, then as Farce* (Verso: 2008), 52-53 and Flandreau, "Who is the Starbucks Siren?"

a studio specializing in mermaid porn.⁵⁰⁷ Pointing to their topless, crowned, blonde, white model, whose legs are each fitted with a green mermaid tail, one of the founder's in the speak peak clip points to the model and brazenly states, "Let's shoot the sexy [position] first!" Sitting on a stool in front of a white backdrop, the model lifts both of her legs over her head and the camera snaps. Moments after, a loose studio light falls from the set and hits the model square on the head, killing her. Faced with the immoral repercussions of launching a pornographic studio with a photo of the deceased model, the guilty founder proposes to instead to launch a coffee company "in her memory." Fearing that showing her torso would reveal their ulterior motives, the guilty founder aggressively commands, "We'll crop it!"⁵⁰⁸ The Starbucks logo parody aired in Episode 1 of Season 6 on September 16th, 2012.

In *Robot Chicken*, the Starbucks logo simultaneously censors and represents/entraps sex and death—what has been spun out of Homer's sirens—in a powerful corporate symbol. The absence of the model's voice in the clip, in addition to the show calling the creature a mermaid instead of a siren, doubly complicates the mythological significance and amplifies the role of the Siren as mute spectacle. The episode also seems to liberate the two vertiginous psychosexual drives once repressed by the cup's globular, concentric circles. Two years after *Robot Chicken*, Canadian comedian Nathan Fielder's "Dumb Starbucks" fake café/performance art space (documented in his Comedy Central docu-reality comedy series *Nathan for You*) also used artistic parody to poke fun at Starbucks. The comedian Fielder argued that adding the word dumb was a way to legally "use the coveted Starbucks name and logo because we fulfilled the minimal

⁵⁰⁷ "The REAL reason Starbucks got its logo/Robot Chicken/Adult Swim," *YouTube*, uploaded by Adult Swim UK, 22 Jan 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4DiZHWIZJM>

⁵⁰⁸ See Justin Page, "Robot Chicken Reveals How Starbucks Came Up With Their Iconic Twin-Tailed Mermaid Logo," *Laughing Squid*, 21 April 2017: <https://laughingsquid.com/robot-chicken-reveals-how-starbucks-came-up-with-their-iconic-twin-tailed-mermaid-logo/>

requirements to be considered a parody under U.S. law.”⁵⁰⁹ As announced on Twitter, Fielder opened a “Dumb Starbucks” performance art/coffee shop (or as Fielder claimed a “parodic art gallery”) on February 7 2014 at 1802 Hillhurst Ave in Los Angeles. After only 72 hours it was finally revealed to be a prank and was closed down by the Los Angeles County of Public Health. That “Dumb Starbucks” immediately rose to popularity calls into question the value of the cultural capital Starbucks generates to its consumers. Adding “dumb” to Starbucks not only silences the spectacular power of the commodity; “dumb” also implies a silencing that renders its corporate siren song innocuous. Calling Starbucks “dumb” and muting its corporate power might have also allowed the voices of the workers—and other parodies—to percolate.

Such Starbucks parodies can also be considered a form of cultural jamming, a contemporary cultural practice of criticizing and subverting advertising and consumerism, in essence using mass media and consumer symbols to comment on and critique consumerism itself. Cultural jamming nicknames like “Frankenbucks” further dilute and pollute the brand. If we consider Zhe Zhang and Vanessa Patrick’s fascinating research on consumer brand authenticity, brand nicknames place “brand attachment in a social context so as to shed light on a novel function of brand attachment within consumers’ interpersonal communication.”⁵¹⁰ Although nicknaming may positively contribute to the overall experience of the brand, Zhang and Patrick also point to a tarnishing “out of fear that these unofficial names might dilute the brand equity and confuse consumers.”⁵¹¹ Thompson and Arsel discuss how Starbucks’ nickname “Frankenbucks” arose as a culture-jamming play on fears that the coffee conglomerate was using

⁵⁰⁹ See Ben Popken, “Dumb Starbucks prank shuttered by L.A. Health Department,” *NBC News*, 10 February 2014, <https://www.cnbc.com/2014/02/10/dumb-starbucks-prank-shuttered-by-la-health-department.html>

⁵¹⁰ Zhe Zhang and Vanessa M. Patrick, “Mickey D’s Has More Street Cred Than McDonald’s: Consumer Brand Nickname Use Signals Information Authenticity,” *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 85, no. 5 (2021): 69.

⁵¹¹ *Ibid.*, 70.

a genetically modified hormone, milk containing rBGH [recombinant Bovine Growth Hormone]. As the authors write, "injecting cows with rBGH generates substantial increases in their milk production. Although approved by the FDA in 1994, environmental groups and organic food activists contend that rBGH poses significant health risks to both humans and dairy cattle], thereby linking the brand to consumer anxieties over genetic engineering." (634). In the case of the "Frankenbucks" global protest in September 2001, concerned prosumers revised the Starbucks name to critique the company's operations and signal larger questions about environmental impact, health and sustainability.

Starbucks of course has repeatedly sought to censor or squelch such artistic parodies and protests. A few years earlier, they successfully sued the comic book artist and political cartoonist Kieron Dwyer for his artistic anti-consumerist *détournement* of their logo. In 1999 Kieron Dwyer made a number of self-published zines, t-shirts, and stickers with his own subversion of the Starbucks logo. He substituted "Consumer Whore" for the brand name and gave the Siren her own steaming coffee, gaping mouth, nipples, navel piercing, and cellphone beeping expletives. He also slapped a dollar sign on the Siren's royal head. Although Dwyer could plead parody as fair use, and thus his lawyer initially thought he would be protected from intellectual property litigation, Starbucks decided to sue the artist for copyright and trademark infringement and successfully obtained an injunction that prevented Dwyer from using the parody until the case was scheduled to go to court. The Comic Book Legal Defense Fund and an intellectual property lawyer who assisted the artist *pro bono* ultimately came to Dwyer's aid; he was found innocent of copyright infringement. The ruling dictated that he could continue displaying his logo, but only "in extremely limited circumstances." In short, Dwyer was "permitted to use the logo as

long as Starbucks can be confident that no one will see it.”⁵¹² The artist noted that when he came up with the parody (although some have claimed he did initially want to target the company for its “predatory marketing tactics” and “alleged unethical treatment of coffee growers”) he “had no intention of becoming a poster boy for any cause,” further arguing that ultimately by suing him and backing him into “a corner they actually made the case a high profile one and drew much more attention” to the image ... in an “ironic, odd and kind of laughable” move.⁵¹³

Perhaps seeking to divert attention away from such parodic pop-culture re-readings, Starbucks in 2015 self-reflexively and theatrically staged their own elaborate “photo shoot” with their symbol and muse. The coffee giant asked graphic designer Josh Crews to shoot the logo commercial. Crews’ complex project was intended as a “[first] in a series of commercials for a Starbucks pitch. This campaign brings the mermaid from the Starbucks logo to life. In this initial spot, The Siren is introduced for the first time as an approachable, realistic icon; separated from her whimsical, archaic world from which her story derives from.”⁵¹⁴ The spot begins by situating the original brown “cigar-band” logo against a gray backdrop.⁵¹⁵ The camera then starts to zoom out to reveal that the brown logo is in the pupil of a siren’s eye, whose iris and eyeshadow are iridescent green (Figure 15). White pearls on the side of her face indicate beads of water and opulence, while a transparent jewel hangs delicately over her right eyebrow (Figure 16).

⁵¹² “Starbucks Design: Starbung Wars and Consumer Whores,” *PrintMag* (November 1, 2013):

<https://www.printmag.com/branding-identity-design/starbucks-design-starbung-wars-and-consumer-whores/>

⁵¹³ Ibid and Roger Sabin and Teal Triggs, eds. *Below Critical Radar: Fanzines and Alternative Comics from 1976 to Now* (Hove: Slab-O-Concrete: 2000). Also see Paul Brandus, “Hot Water: Starbucks cues a Citizen,” *Salon* (June 1, 2000): <https://www.salon.com/2000/06/01/starbuckssuit/>

⁵¹⁴ “Starbucks Mermaid Series – Starbucks Logo Commercial: The Siren Debut,” *Joshua Crews: Direction + Design + Animation*, <https://joshcrews.net/starbucks-logo-commercial-the-siren-debut>

⁵¹⁵ “Starbucks Logo Commercial: The Siren Debut,” *Vimeo*, uploaded by *Josh Crews*, (April 15, 2015), https://vimeo.com/125099804?embedded=true&source=vimeo_logo&owner=7605656



Figure 15 - Embedded Iris - Starbucks Original Siren Logo (Siren's Debut, Dir. Josh Crews, 2015)
 [Source: <https://joshcrews.net/starbucks-logo-commercial-the-siren-debut>]

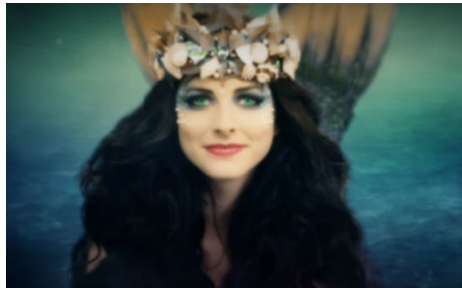


Figure 16 – “She came from a story:” Medium Close-Up of Starbucks Symbol, Muse and Spectacle (Siren's Debut, Dir. Josh Crews, 2015)
 [Source: <https://joshcrews.net/starbucks-logo-commercial-the-siren-debut>]

As the camera zooms out at a slower speed, we see the woman's head wearing a crown made of different seashells and starfish, her black hair gently flowing in a breeze. A female voice softly narrates over swelling violins and gentle harp arpeggios: “*She came from a story and became so much more.*” The siren's lips are painted red, she is smiling; her gaze fixed on the camera. Her arms are folded, supporting her upright on a rock, and a green tail with fins behind her sways gracefully back and forth and indicates the cresting waters behind her. “*Our symbol,*” the narrator says as the siren tilts her head. In a nested framing, the camera pulls back faster again and now we are looking through the green eye and pupil of a more “refined” version of this same siren, this time presented in what we might call “pageant attire” but without makeup or gems. There is a short pull-back again as the seductive voice identifies this siren, “*a muse.*” The camera caresses her arms over her head with long black hair holding the same crown of hardened sea stars and shells. She coronates herself, lowers her arms, and the camera begins to show her body while the voice says, “*A legend that we refine until it defines us*” (Figure 17). The “us” here

is another perfect “blend” – the corporation, consumer, and creative camera lens that captures and curates the spectacle.



Figure 17: “A Muse... a Legend”: Medium Shot of Starbucks’ Pageant Siren (Siren’s Debut, Josh Crews, 2015)
[Source: <https://joshcrews.net/starbucks-logo-commercial-the-siren-debut>]

A silver-green sash wrapped around her bust is connected to a shimmering green dress that shines with a pattern resembling scales. Plastic stars and a moon suspended by wires frame the standing woman and the camera zooms out again to reveal a dramaturgy in the style of Georges Méliès. A male camera operator and studio light are visible; the “refined” Starbucks symbol and muse is framed as a luminescent spectacle, in a self-reflexive wink to the spectacular hand-coloured mise-en-scène of Méliès short fantasy film *La Sirène* (1904) (Figures 18 and 19).



Figure 18: “Who can resist?” Medium-Long Shot of Pageant Siren with (Male) Photographer (Siren’s Debut, Josh Crews, 2015)
[Source: <https://joshcrews.net/starbucks-logo-commercial-the-siren-debut>]



Figure 19 – Méliès' Siren Spectacle with (Male) Showman (*La Sirène*, Méliès, 1904)
 [Source: <https://moviessilently.com/2020/11/04/the-mermaid-1904-a-silent-film-review/>]

We hear the camera shutter snap three times and see three flashes of light. The siren symbol, spectacle and muse, looks straight into the camera, in a stunning moment of direct address (a technique playfully used in the Méliès short (what early cinema scholar Tom Gunning has called the “cinema of attractions”). One final dramatic pull-back occurs and the voice insists, “*After all, who can resist her?*” (Figure 18). The camera pulls back once last time to reveal the company’s newest graphic logo, which has turned green, as the Starbucks theatrics rescinds further into the logo’s eye creating a vanishing point. The vertiginous sensation perceived upon viewing this dream-like commercial fetishizes the Starbucks’ experience through the theatrics of looking: the pathway of the camera travels through the same path as the creature’s relentless gaze, moving through three layered vignettes/views of the mythological figure, illustrating the need to continuously “refine” the logo and “redefine” Starbucks experience. Receding further and further into the eye of the final logo, viewers experience a towering depth of Starbucks history seen through the mythology of a sea creature.

Even though the camera moves backwards throughout the duration of the commercial, this trajectory suggests a narrative and stylistic “progression” traced by this ocular threading. In

the third vignette, the creature's tail "evolves"; she stands on human legs but faintly retains her deep mythological connection through stylistic elements, the scales, stars and the moon. Her costume and staged lunar environment colonize her wilderness habitat as she gazes into the camera, held frozen by the male photographer. Finally, in the newest icon showcased in the spot, we see her tails dissolve into a green oceanic background, and her crown, long associated with what Siegfried de Rachewiltz terms "the negative symbolism of the crown of superbia,"⁵¹⁶ is now a lone white star on top of her head. Her loose, black, and unkempt hair, a symbol of "her aquatic and 'wavy' nature (Undine), alluring and treacherous like water itself,"⁵¹⁷ has been neatly combed or domesticized.⁵¹⁸

The thirty-second short's stylistic elements, exaggerated by the colour green and the motif of the eye, recall the nauseating and swirling psychological scopophilia feminist theorists like Laura Mulvey equate with the filmic male gaze itself.⁵¹⁹ The camera rushes through each scene, seamlessly stitching together a mythological continuity that claims lineage to ancient Greek epic. As the green logo appears, the dialectic is captured, and the siren/female body is further commoditized (in sharp contrast to what corporate messaging promises, that the "new

⁵¹⁶ Siegfried De Rachewiltz, *De Sirenibus: An Inquiry into Sirens from Homer to Shakespeare* (Garland, 1987), 109.

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁵¹⁸ In *De Sirenibus*, de Rachewiltz writes that sirens and mermaids are often depicted in medieval art with combs and mirrors. "Combing one's hair in public is the height of immodesty: on fourteenth-century tapestries, the Whore of Babylon was represented as a woman sitting on a rock, 'combing her long hair and gazing into a mirror.' Mirror and comb are of course well-known symbols of vanity, and indeed one finds mermaids gazing into mirrors quite often. But their meaning is not exhaustively explained in terms of symbols of *vanitas*. Combs are found in women's graves as funerary gifts from prehistory up to the Middle Ages; in folktale, they are magical objects *par excellence*. Already in antiquity, the comb was used as a symbol of sexuality: the Greek word for the scallop-shell, *kteis*, meaning comb and consequently used for various objects with projecting teeth, including the weaving comb, was also used for *pubes* and *pudenda muliebra*. The combing the mermaid is engaged in is an essentially 'gratuitous' act: it will not make the mermaid's hair less entangled, but it will lure and bind her victims. Fair-tressed Circe and Kalypso of the beautiful hair are, one might say, both using an oversized 'comb' as they sit at the loom, weaving and singing. The mermaid's combing is, in fact, the equivalent of Circe's or Kalypso's weaving, which is, in its turn, the tangible correlative of their singing. The mermaid's hair is, therefore, not only a parallel to the cloths and webs the two 'witches' weave, but also the physical correlative of her ensnaring song." (110-111.)

⁵¹⁹ One is reminded of Laura Mulvey's feminist critique of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. On the "male gaze" in classical Hollywood film culture, see Laura Mulvey's article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* (London), vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, 6-18.

evolution liberates the siren from the outer ring.”)⁵²⁰ This story of branding is presented initially as part of a woman’s gaze or look, but the woman is not the ultimate narrator. Through the perpetual zoom-out she is “framed” and reframed, again and again. Starbucks in this logo commercial has recreated itself on the level of myth, as something eternal, beyond history. Abstraction doesn’t always mean liberation; interestingly, if the advertisement zooms out, the siren logo as it evolves in the 1990s and 2000s gradually zooms in, cutting off part of her legs and lower torso. Could we say the Starbucks Siren is thus gradually disembodied or dare we say castrated (although the commercial while championing the Siren as a commodified spectacle, a commodified “collection of images” as Debord writes, restores the legs)? If so, is this disembodiment ultimately fatal? In other words, what could the siren signify without a body?

In “Disembodied Sirens,” scholar Han Tran suggests that the absence of siren’s physical bodies in American artist Rachel Harrison’s multi-media sculptural installation called *Siren Serenade* emphasizes “an unfulfilled promise, but also as signifier of misplaced hope, [and] puts emphasis back on the idea that Sirens are not fatal because they represent a fatal external snare but because they embody a hope impossible to fulfill, a bait to hear more than what one is ready for.”⁵²¹ Tran’s reflections on the piece, which is but a rock with a record player on it (the sculpture consists merely of a black rock, satellite dish and vinyl record without turntable) compel him to conclude that “the power of *Siren Serenade* as sculpture lies in its being not merely landscape, or *in* the landscape, not merely architecture, or part of the architecture, but indeed a redefinition of our space, a space where the audience is brought in the presence of what the Sirens mean, of what their seductive boast signifies. Paradoxically, the very object-ness of

⁵²⁰ Lisa Baertlein “UPDATE 3-Starbucks cuts name, ‘coffee’ from logo; stirs ire,” *Reuters* (January 5, 2011): <https://www.reuters.com/article/starbucks-idINN0528031620110105>

⁵²¹ Han Tran, “Homer’s Disembodied Siren, the Missing Player, or, What’s in Faux Rock?” *Classical Receptions Journal* 12. 2 (2020): 168.

Harrison's rock illuminates the nothing-there-ness of the Homeric Sirens, like a totem signifying a more vaporous conceit."⁵²² The disembodiment of the Starbucks Siren in the 2011 abstract logo likewise is part and parcel of what we examined in the last chapter—an alienating, ambiguous element that goes against the 'cozy' corporate architecture, i.e., the fantasy of the Starbucks Experience as comforting, communal third place. The alienation that lurks behind "Starbuckization" in the spectacularized space ever-expanding Starbucks occupies was of course intensified when during the pandemic the company turned to a to-go model.⁵²³ Yet, the disembodiment of the Starbucks Siren also suggests its plasticity. If only fragments/scales of the siren remain in a highly visual culture, is there an opportunity to re-imagine what a complete siren looks like? Is there a drive to reclaim or reinterpret her significance? Who claims and curates this significance? Furthermore, as we will ask in the next chapter, in the face of this disembodiment can workers reclaim or re-embody the siren to "voice" their own concerns through mythological ventriloquism?

We should note here that for Judith Peraino, the trope that sirens are arbiters of deception is clichéd. She argues that this idea is couched in a culture entrenched in misogynistic analyses. Her reading of Homer challenges these knee-jerk interpretations head-on with a feminist critique that focuses on a politics of identity. She is particularly interested in how "the sirens' song exposes the porous nature of mind, body, and humanly determined boundaries, calling into question the desire to remain bound by these. Odysseus knows beforehand the dangers of listening: these include the rupture of social order, as when a crew must tie the captain to the

⁵²² Ibid., 168.

⁵²³ See Ritzer, *Enchanting a Disenchanted World*, 144: "Starbucks has taken this strategy of seeming to be everywhere (there were more than 15,000 Starbucks worldwide in late 2007), although the number is declining with the current recession. Its innovation is to pack a number of Starbucks into limited geographic areas, often in sight of one another."

mast and not heed his orders; also the contamination of identity.”⁵²⁴ Peraino’s analysis of the Siren story subverts the view that the mythological sirens signify a teleology towards physical and mental corruption with a shipwreck and death as the inevitable conclusion. In her view, the narrative of the siren story can help interpret sociopolitical trends and establish a new politics of gender and sexuality identity. She concludes her powerful essay by observing “how Odysseus, while assuming he can control his transgression, gives into a sexualized self-curiosity and, importantly, a desire to become otherwise, to a question and to be questionable, to risk self-obliteration in music. This is a desire to become queer to oneself.”⁵²⁵ Like Tran, Peraino suggests that the disembodiment of the siren opens the possibility to dream up new bodies and identities as agents or “tempters/temptresses” of radical change that can counter the strongest ideology. If Starbucks has disembodied the siren in its corporate spectacularizing, it has also uncannily opened the symbol up for others to unravel and tease.

As Martine Mussies and Emiel Maliepaard also write, “It is no coincidence that one of the attributes of the mermaid is the mirror (which has also led to the Christian connection with vanity), as the image of the mermaid has metamorphosized to mirror the context in which it occurs.”⁵²⁶ In 2022 visual artist Jade Purple Brown was commissioned by Starbucks to install an immersive 3D interpretation of the Siren at the Starbucks Reserve inside the Empire State Building. On her social media accounts proclaims that this 3D work of art echoes “her own vision of vibrancy and freedom” and “welcomes visitors at the entrance,” “showcasing the Siren’s bravery, strength, and optimism.” The same vibrant colours shine on her “merch”

⁵²⁴ Judith Ann Peraino, *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 18.

⁵²⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵²⁶ Martine Mussies and Emiel Maliepaard, “The Cyborg Mermaid (or: How Technè Can Help the Misfits Fit In),” in *Love and Sex with Robots*, vol. 10237, Springer International Publishing AG, 2017, 86.

available in the concourse level gift shop next to the 3D sculpture.⁵²⁷ Jade Purple Brown's psychedelic colour palette breathes new life into the Starbucks Siren, also giving the figure back some of its sensual power. Her navel is exposed and her pelvic area and legs, bathed in a fiery orange glow, are half hidden/half revealed (Figure 20).



Figure 20 – Siren Installation by Jade Purple Brown (Starbucks Reserve Roastery, Empire State Building)
[Source: https://jadedpurplebrown.com/cdn/shop/products/DSC_6165_edit.jpg?v=1673630901]

Jade Purple Brown's sculpture unfolds as a series of waves, bathing the new Starbucks Reserve café in what Polgar and Claudio Magris's poetically called an aquatic, underwater aesthetics (in their meditations on Vienna's Café Central). The illusion of water is enhanced by mirrors cut in the shape of waves used to reflect the space in which the installation stands. Above the siren's outstretched hand, palm upwards, is a blue mug that appears to hold a hot beverage

⁵²⁷ See Chris Olsen, "Jade Purple Brown reimagines Starbucks Iconic Siren for its Empire State Building Location" *Publish Her Story* <https://publishherpress.com/jade-purple-brown-reimagines-starbucks-iconic-siren-for-its-empire-state-building-location/> and <https://jadedpurplebrown.com/products/starbucks>.

(coffee), its vapour coloured bright orange. Her two tails are in the distance; the siren's crown is also a mirror. The installation turns its back on the traditional green or brown Starbucks hues; instead, it is infused with a vibrant palette of pinks, oranges, yellows, and blues. In the opening lines on her video describing her work, Jade Purple Proud proclaims: "We're beautiful and we have so much to offer so why not share the full scope?"⁵²⁸ The Black American artist describes her work as a way to provide a platform for minority representation, especially for black women in larger communities. In her video, she states that many Black women "want to be able to see themselves in the illustration," and sees her version of the Starbucks Siren as a medium through which black women can see themselves and communities can feel empowered or emancipated. Customers are also encouraged to move around the installation and invited to take selfies beside the revamped Siren, perhaps capturing their faces in one of her many mirrors. Yet ultimately in this refined Reserve cathedral of consumption, her psychedelic Siren is re-spectacularized and commodified; while gazing into one of her many mirrors, spectators are also invited to purchase exclusive many-hued "merch" inspired by the artist's designs.

2021 saw other vibrant re-imaginings of the Starbucks Siren. Black multimedia artist Amika Cooper @blackpowerbarbie who draws on pop culture images and tropes and re-invents them to "encompass a fuller narrative" of experiences collaborated with Starbucks on the "Black Partner Network Playlist" and like Jade Purple Brown repurposed the Siren's waves to "subvert the Starbucks branding", again directing it towards a Black audience.⁵²⁹ Cooper's artwork for the "Behind the Green Apron" partner features for Black History Month in 2021 drew on the Siren's

⁵²⁸ "Jade Purple Brown: The Power of Representation in Design," *YouTube*, uploaded by WeTransfer, 4 Nov 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kDLHRjVazu4&t=1s>

⁵²⁹ Amika Cooper, "Meet @blackpowerbarbie – the artist behind the artwork of the Black Panther Network Playlist" *Starbucks Stories Canada* (February 22, 2021): <https://stories.starbucks.ca/en-ca/stories/2021/amika-cooper-bpn-playlist-artist/> and "How Amika Cooper (a.k.a. blackpowerbarbie) finds joy in the unexpected," *She Does The City* (March 1, 2019): <https://www.shedoesthecity.com/how-amika-cooper-aka-blackpowerbarbie-finds-joy-in-the-unexpected/>

waves to paint out a dramatic background to creatively reframe a modern Black femme. In 2021 at the Starbucks Creative Studio Seattle-based illustrator and pioneer of psychedelic feminist art Jordan Kay also vibrantly re-envisioned the Starbucks Siren as part of a Pride month campaign. Kay designed the popular “Pride Siren” that served as the company’s official Twitter avatar in June. Displayed on Starbucks’ social media accounts and Starbucks’ Instagram stories, the redesigned siren’s skin is rendered pink, and her side profile looks “up” toward a clenched fist holding colour splashes symbolizing the pride and transgender flags⁵³⁰ (Figure 21). As the artist writes on her website, the “Pride Siren” was part of a larger Starbucks project “to celebrate 50 years since the Stonewall Riots, along with intersectionality, inclusion and personal stories around Pride, in the setting of ‘the third place.’”⁵³¹ The Pride Siren also commemorated the annual tradition of the company raising the Pride Flag, a 19 by 38 feet banner, above its headquarters at the Starbucks Support Center in Seattle, since June 2014.⁵³²

Despite Starbucks’ own endorsement of the Pride Siren and active showcasing of 2SLGBTQIA+ communities, Mike Andrew reporting in *The Stand* notes that the 2023 official *Seattle Pride Guide* did not carry a Pride ad submitted by Starbucks Workers United (SBWU), the union that represents the coffee giant’s employees, although the union submitted their copy

⁵³⁰ <https://www.jordankay.com/starbucks-pride>

⁵³¹ Jordan Kay, “Starbucks Pride Campaign,” *Working Not Working*, <https://workingnotworking.com/projects/282050-starbucks-pride-campaign>

⁵³² Heidi Peiper, “Cloudy with a chance of rainbows: Pride Flag hoisted at Starbucks HQ,” *Starbucks Stories & News* (June 24, 2019), <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2019/cloudy-with-a-chance-of-rainbows-pride-flag-hoisted-at-starbucks-hq/>. As discussed in the previous chapter, Starbucks has a long history of supporting LGBTQIA+ communities and also supports individuals who identify with having a disability, have a refugee status, or identify as a veteran or military spouse; recent campaigns such as “All Together Now” and the collaborative “Starbucks Foundation/Born This Way Foundation. The “Born This Way Foundation and Starbucks” celebrate a “shared commitment to building a kinder, braver world where the voices, wellness, and individuality of all young people are supported.” This foundation asks for donations to help “improve access to mental health resources and support organizations around the country who are making a difference for LGBTQ+ communities and society as a whole.” See: <http://bornthisway.foundation/starbucks> and Heidi Peiper “Timeline: Starbucks history of LGBTQIA2+ inclusion,” *Starbucks Stories & News* (May 16, 2022): <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2022/starbucks-pride-a-long-legacy-of-lgbtq-inclusion/>

by the deadline. According to Andrews' article, the ad agency for the Pride parade feared that the advertisement, which featured artwork that defiantly re-reads and revises the Starbucks signature logo (a brown Siren shaking her fist, with flowing rainbow hair) and clearly asks the company to rethink its stance of being both pro-queer and anti-union, would offend Starbucks, a platinum level sponsor of the event. The siren on the ad has rainbow hair blowing upwards, only partly held down by the crown, and her right fist is raised to echo the same fist in the SBWU logo shaking the beverage shaker. The siren's tails fade into the blue background. The artist behind the ad Arthur Pratt told *The Stand* that he "intentionally drew her not happy. Because she's feeling rage. Rage and grief. And that's the rage and grief I feel about Starbucks treating their workers like this."⁵³³ Starbucks' mythological figure is once again radically redrawn and revised from the point of view of exploited labour itself. The reconceptualized Siren sketched out by Pratt, Cooper, Jade Purple Brown and Kay demonstrates the important work done by women artists, the queer community and baristas to reclaim Starbucks' Siren for difference and alterity.



Figure 21: Jordan Kay's *Psychedelic Pride Siren* (2021)
[Source: <https://www.jordankay.com/starbucks-pride>]

⁵³³ See Mike Andrew, "The ad Starbucks doesn't want you to see," (June 12 2023)
<https://www.thestand.org/2023/06/the-ad-starbucks-doesnt-want-you-to-see/>

If Jade Purple Brown, Cooper and Kay use a vibrant colour palette to reimagine the Starbucks Siren and give her a new voice, they do so within the established norms of the Starbucks framework, relying on the larger corporate technè to fund their vision that gives the Siren new agency.”⁵³⁴ Yet some reimagined rainbow sirens, like Pratt’s defiant Siren sketched out for the SBWU ad, are not endorsed by the company. Other 3D reconceptualizations of the Siren that are not sponsored by the company include South Korean illustrator Soo Min Kim’s creative cup canvases. In 2012 the Korean Instagram artist started to “kidnap the iconic Starbucks mermaid,” placing her in “funny everyday situations”⁵³⁵ in carefully curated, comic cup dioramas. The Seoul-based artist’s “paper cup art” (created with white Starbucks cups, white paint and green markers and a box-cutter knife) is showcased in a special gallery of “eye-popping cutouts” on his Instagram account. A journalist in 2018 playfully writes: “Where you see just another Starbucks cup, Soo Min Kim sees a 3D canvas.”⁵³⁶ The artist playfully adds to the elaborate pop-culture dramaturgy of the Siren and her folklore, using inspirations from horror, anime, action film and art to re-incarnate and animate the Siren. In many pieces, she

⁵³⁴ I am indebted to Mussies and Maliepaard here for the term technè to refer to established social norms, as well as corporate funding and structure. Both indicate that mermaids are, in comparison to their walking human counterparts, disabled. In “The Cyborg Mermaid,” the authors write “as a symbol for the misfit and the disabled, she struggles with her feelings between longing and belonging and has to change in order to become acceptable as a human being.” If Anderson’s European mermaid “cannot reach humans... (it is) literally, because she has no legs. And after that, when this problem is ‘cured’ by a trick or technique—technè in Greek” she also “figuratively cannot reach humans because she is literally voiceless. To overcome this disability, Disney provides her with yet another technè, so that she can finally be recognized (and marry the prince). As Judith Butler describes in “Giving an Account of One’s Self,” recognition can only take place through a set of social norms.” Mussies and Maliepaard, “The Cyborg Mermaid,” 85.

⁵³⁵ Iona Baliūnaitė, “Artist Reveals The Hidden Life Of Starbucks’ Mermaid By Transforming Their Cups,” *Bored Panda* (2018): https://www.boredpanda.com/starbucks-cups-drawings-illustrator-soo-min-kim-south-korea/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=organic. Kim posts time-lapse videos documenting his artistic process on social media. He also signs his cups and displays his backlit cup art creations at museums and art fairs. See Kim’s Instagram portfolio on <https://www.instagram.com/fseo/> and Catherine Wang, “Hong Kong’s Art Fair Garden Celebrates Beauty in the Everyday,” *YP*, (December 12, 2016): <https://www.scmp.com/yp/report/latest-reports/article/3071796/hong-kongs-art-fair-garden-artisans-celebrates-beauty>

⁵³⁶ KC Ifeanyi, “Watch this artist turn the Starbucks Siren into Freddie Mercury and Miyazaki’s Totoro,” *Fast Company* (November 27, 2018): <https://www.fastcompany.com/90272972/watch-this-artist-turn-the-starbucks-siren-into-freddie-mercury-and-miyazakis-totoro>

literally “pops out” of the cup in playful 3D environments, liberated from the concentric circles that imprison her. Kim gives the mashed-up mythological creature figurative legs and a new agency, re-fashioning her as a sort of ironic action figure, anime character, superhero, video game mascot, business mogul, or barista.⁵³⁷ In one diorama, Kim reimages the siren as Edvard Munch’s harrowing figure in *The Scream* (1893); in other cup creations he shows her lifting a shirt over her head to reveal a male muscular body or playful shows the Siren “flashing” innocent onlookers as an exhibitionist; however, as the cup turns we see that instead of private parts what is actually displayed is a “No War” sign. The Starbucks siren is transformed; no longer a passive spectacle; she agitates and even “escapes” her mise-en-scène (Figures 22, 23, 24, 25, 26).



Figure 22 (left): Soo Min Kim’s *Siren Escapes!* <Escape!> (2012)

[Source: <https://www.boredpanda.com/starbucks-cups-drawings-illustrator-soo-min-kim-south-korea/>]

Figure 23 (right): Soo Min Kim’s *Strong Businessman Siren* (<Showing off your strength (힘 자랑 (力自慢)>, 2016.05.10)

[Source: <https://www.boredpanda.com/starbucks-cups-drawings-illustrator-soo-min-kim-south-korea/>]

⁵³⁷ On the cultural history and practice of the mash-up see Vincent Miller’s chapter, “Mash-ups and the Crisis of Authorship in Digital Culture,” in *Understanding Digital Culture* (SAGE Publications, 2011), 90-91.



Figure 24: Soo Min Kim's 'The Scream' Siren (<The Scream (절규)>, undated work)
 [Source: <https://www.boredpanda.com/starbucks-cups-drawings-illustrator-soo-min-kim-south-korea/>]



Figure 25: Soo Min Kim's "Flashing" Siren (<No War! (反戰)> 2015.02.22)
 [Source: <https://www.boredpanda.com/starbucks-cups-drawings-illustrator-soo-min-kim-south-korea/>]



Figure 26: Soo Min Kim's "It's hot!" Siren (<It's hot! (아더워)> 2015.03.30)
 [Source: <https://www.boredpanda.com/starbucks-cups-drawings-illustrator-soo-min-kim-south-korea/>]

Kim's cup designs playfully recontextualize the siren and use her to "poke" fun at and play with popular culture. The reimagined pop-out/pop-art siren actively engages with everyday life; she herself, not Schultz, looks outward from the cup or "onward" (although examples of Kim's satirical cup art directed at spoofing the business world ("Escape!" and "Showing Off Your Strength" - Figures 22 and 23) were used to illustrate a 2018 French editorial on Howard Schultz).⁵³⁸ The artist gives her a "backstory" and a background from which she jumps out to address the current moment, playing with larger social themes. These pop-out sirens simultaneously celebrate and spoof spectatorship and the consumption of images; they also use a new storytelling dramaturgy of Starbucks cups to critique passive media representation itself—as if such a critique could jump out of its diorama and address us any moment. The cup art siren is a call for continuous reinvention. The siren asks to be continuously re-read, re-drawn and reimagined; she is continuously given new limbs, animated by a "metaverse" cross-fertilization and collision of ideas. Kim also cleverly distances himself from "ownership," "intellectual property" and the duplicity of the monolithic logo as spectacle and instead embraces and imagines the Siren as a more playful multiplicity, inviting us to think of how we could also potentially transform and morph.⁵³⁹ Here we are reminded of how Peraino reads Adorno's exegesis of *The Odyssey*: "For Adorno, music provokes individuals to question their subjectivity,

⁵³⁸ "Starbucks, Café Prisoner," *Les Echos Week-End*, as shown in Kim's Instagram portfolio on <https://www.instagram.com/fseo/>

⁵³⁹ There are other Starbucks cup prosumer artists I do not have time to discuss here, for example Starbucks' barista Jason Tocewicz in Toronto (Store 4308) who puts a funny face, caricature, scribble or "doodle" on each cup or the "doodle art" artist Abe Green, who also uses a pen and a cup to reveals the "secret life of the Starbucks Siren" in a series of iconic illustrations, transforming the Starbucks' mythological maiden into a spider, octopus, athlete and more. See Abe Green's website: theabegreen.com

their social identity in relation to ideological superstructures; in this view, music can lead to the question that Althusser did not think could be asked: ‘Is it me?’ And further: ‘What am I?’⁵⁴⁰

Who are we in relation to the siren? In this enthusiastic and comedic interplay of identity, the siren is destabilized as a staid corporate mascot. In similar fashion, contemporary horror artist Jordan Persegati playfully re-invents the Starbucks logo by giving the siren back a sense of dread and realism. Dividing the logo vertically, he paints the Starbucks logo as it is on the left and takes creative license on the right-hand side. The Siren’s skeleton is exposed, her hair is white and wiry, her crown is spiked, scales are gray and bloody, and her gaze is pronounced.⁵⁴¹ Persegati’s sirens reminds us of the terror behind the veneer; the siren is still a ravenous monster, a visual warning to all who approach her (Figure 27).

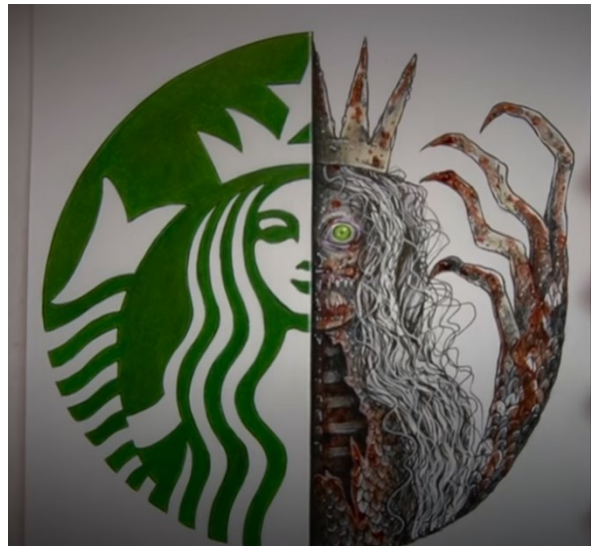


Figure 27: Behind the Veneer: Persegati's Siren
[Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tOj3A8NJIO4>]

⁵⁴⁰ Peraino, *Listening to the Sirens*, 3.

⁵⁴¹ See “HORROR Artist vs FAMOUS LOGOS (Drawing STARBUCKS, KFC + More in SCARY Styles)” *YouTube*, uploaded by Jordan Persegati, 15 Oct 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tOj3A8NJIO4>

Another monstrous morphing of the Siren on the deviant art website entitled “I Work Third Shift” by artist xMJJMoonwalker also transforms the Starbucks logo into a skeletal corpse: her face is a skull, still wearing a crown, but her body is a ribcage set against a black background encircled by the words “NOT ENOUGH COFFEE”. The logo in the centre of text reads, “YES, I work third shift” and “NO, I Haven’t slept yet!” The siren figure is both dead and alive - she is an exploited barista who works “third shift,” perhaps an overnight shift that finishes or begins in the early hours of the morning. The text suggests that such shifts exploit partners who might work more than one job or are attending school. This “third” shift also subverts the dream of a “third place,” further jamming the notion that a utopic third space is possible to maintain.

qxMJJMoonwalker's skeleton siren resurrects the siren figure's “cleaned up” monstrosity, recalling the heap of bones on which Homer's sirens reside. The overworked siren is now a victim of its own call and reduced to “bare bones.” In a similar drawing for an article on Starbucks union-busting activities in a Pittsburgh newspaper in 2022, the artist Lucy Chen also monstrosly morphed the logo, fusing the logo with the horror figure from the Japanese supernatural film *Ringu* directed by Hideo Nakata (1998). Chen's siren, also playfully “trademarked,” literally pops out of the logo as if she were coming out of the cup and breaching the viewer's world to complete her curse. Like the menacing ghost in *The Ring*, Chen's siren is also wet and has large reptilian eyes with a forked tongue hanging out of her mouth.⁵⁴² Perhaps Chen's siren shows viewers what Homer could not: the moment just before the siren catches her mesmerized victim. As a shadowy and otherworldly monstrous figure, Chen's siren dramatically reimagines worker exploitation trapped in the romance of the Starbucks Experience.

⁵⁴² See Lucy Chen, “CP Year in Review: Art Director Lucy Chen chooses her top illustrations of 2022” *Pittsburgh City Paper* (Dec. 28, 2022), <https://www.pghcitypaper.com/blogs/cp-year-in-review-art-director-lucy-chen-chooses-her-top-illustrations-of-2022-23011054>.

As previously discussed, Starbucks corporate literature claims the siren illustration was first spied in an “old marine book” by Starbucks designer Terry Heckler. Although Heckler himself failed to provide much background information on this nautical reference, cultural historian, anthropologist and museum director Siegfried de Rachewiltz importantly points to an often-overlooked fact that “the emblem of the Siren was often associated with the art of typography during the Renaissance, and in many cases became the emblem of the printed book. Nicolaus de Balaguer, a Venetian printer who worked circa 1486-88, was perhaps the first to choose a double-tailed Siren as his distinctive printer’s mark. One of the earliest and most famous of printed books, the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, published by Aldus in Venice in 1499, also contains a woodcut of a Siren.”⁵⁴³ In his nuanced and comprehensive survey, de Rachewiltz observes that images of sirens on books were often known emblems that signalled (to the reader) a skill that was relatively new, indicating that the text at hand was either heretical or contained knowledge in it that would incite pleasure: “The art of printing was diabolic (or, if one will, Sirenic) for a variety of reasons. As the vehicle for the dissemination of profane books (such as Aretino’s erotic poetry), it obviously aided the spread of an increasingly secularized Renaissance humanism, while simultaneously weakening the authority of the Church.”⁵⁴⁴ Extracted from their mythological waters, emblems of sirens on books promised secret knowledge. As emblems of print culture and epistolary epistemologies, the sirens symbolized change and epistolary excitement. The art of mechanical reproduction gave birth to a new creative copying, again reappropriating the siren as motif. As de Rachewiltz argues, drawing on Walter Benjamin, print “technology ... involves the multiplication of copies at the expense of the original... printing most resembles the ‘counterfeit’ or ‘forged’ lure of the Sirens (who...are frequently seen as mere

⁵⁴³ Rachewiltz, *De Sirenibus*, 231.

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 234.

copies, mere ‘doubles,’ mere deceptions, and never authentic originals). It is therefore appropriate that so many early printers should have adopted the Siren as an emblem to grace their title page: she is there to entice the reader, to lure him into the text, and to advertise the craft of the typographer. Her splayed tails, moreover, are perfectly suited to the printer’s display of his own talent and name on the title page.”⁵⁴⁵ As de Rachewiltz powerfully concludes, the Siren’s transition from mythology to technology ushers in a new community or coalition of scholars that could oppose or undo complex ideological structures. The gaze of the siren in this sense becomes the gaze of the subject who understands the power of sirenic interruption. Starbucks’ dream of a third place may “sound” sirenic, promising world music-infused caffeinated interruptions, a new community and inclusivity, but the Starbucks Siren ultimately became ensnared in a complex, multilayered tale of multiplicity and technology (intellectual property, ownership and exclusivity, parody, copycat lawsuits, suppressed workers, and a lucrative market of over 2,000 “siren collection” digital stamps or NFTs). It was ultimately up to the baristas to re-envision and emancipate the Siren figure, rendering her monstrous or mermaid-like and empowering, as unionizing Starbucks baristas sought to give voice to the working backbone of what we might call a new caffeine-infused “liquid modernity.”

⁵⁴⁵ De Rachewiltz, 235. The reappropriated Siren in the hands of unionized workers could be either monstrous or a mermaid-like mascot. In August 2022 labour organizers in Buffalo, New York also gave new life to the Siren by using her as a union mascot to support their strike. A local worker cosplayed the Starbucks siren while she handed out SBWU pamphlets. Staging the Starbucks siren as cosplay mascot makes the corporate symbol tangible. She is no longer silent, mute, or menacing, but stands in solidarity with SBWU. See TikTok video [@]SBWorkersUnited: caption: “Starbucks siren says in Buffalo, we bust broncos, not union! Knock it off #mellodyhobson #starbucks #buffalobills #bronces #bronces [@]starbucksunion” (22 August 2022) <https://www.tiktok.com/@sbworkersunited/video/7134095256202612014>

Chapter Four: Another Odyssey: Oleato, Labour, and Loss or Starbucks in a Post-Pandemic Age

1. Socially Distanced Cafe

In this final chapter, I draw on my personal experiences as a manager and barista at a Starbucks location in London, Ontario, to frame how Starbucks in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped their coffee experience and allegiance to a purported “third place.” I am forever cursed with recalling the day when an elderly customer, who was a regular at the time, asked me if COVID-19 was going to be a “big thing” when his daughter’s international flights from a holiday destination to Toronto were cancelled. After handing the customer their tall-in-a-grande-cup Starbucks Sumatra Blend Clover-brewed coffee, I confidently smiled and answered “nah, I don’t think so.” After showing some reservation, he walked away with his coffee and left the store. I completely regretted my response, and our store closed its doors to in-house guests the following week. I never saw this customer again. He never pulled his car up to the drive-thru window when the in-store café was shuttered. Did my corporate enthusiasm prevent me from having an honest conversation with a customer who needed consolation? In other words, did I fear saying “yes” might have shattered the reputation of the Starbucks brand and tainted the fantasy of a third place, the dream of a coffeeshop where customers could always visit and leave nurtured and inspired? My allegiance to maintaining a seamless and pristine customer service environment—and allegiance to the Starbucks third place platform—had been up to that point impeccable. Within the dark, spacious yet cozy interiors of the Starbucks coffeehouse I worked at, *my* third place, attempting to talk about any problems, let alone risk or dread, was (or is?) an anathema.

That same day, I felt my perception of the “Starbucks Experience” change. I knew the corporation, which flew the Pride Flag atop its Seattle headquarters since 2014, had quietly or not-so-quietly embellished coffee cups with political quotes as part of the “Way I see it” campaign, even asking baristas in Washington D.C. in November 2015 to write “Come Together” on cups to send a clear message about the damage caused by the divisive negotiations at the White House and Congress over the “fiscal cliff.” Yet openly discussing politics and religion with customers or fellow baristas, although never explicitly stated, was not tolerated.⁵⁴⁶ That is, until the lockdowns. As we pivoted to the “to-go” drive-thru model and moved away from the intimate in-store experience during COVID-19 lockdowns, Starbucks workers had to navigate uncomfortable conversations with customers and we ultimately became more vocal. As we donned our homemade masks sewn together by store partners at the beginning of the COVID-19 lockdown, the mask itself started to stand for a political message, promoting medical awareness. There were customers who would scoff at the sight of our masks, dramatically cough in our windows, or say that COVID-19 was a scam after paying for and receiving their order. Corporate updates listed talking points for baristas to help us navigate uncomfortable conversations with venting customers, but inside the café tension also developed. Any shared sense of community baristas and management had collapsed under all the distancing. Corporate messaging encouraged baristas to practice safety measures that would place priority on the physical health of the team. Social distancing was enforced, along with temperature checks for fevers before shifts started; plexiglass separated various stations to prevent contracting the virus. Partner clumsiness, partner “truancy” and lateness were a sign of the times.

⁵⁴⁶ “Starbucks asking baristas to write political message on cups,” *Fox News* (November 21, 2015): <https://www.foxnews.com/us/starbucks-asking-baristas-to-write-political-message-on-cups>

As these problems arose, so too did the frustration with corporate instruction. Starbucks provided extended benefits to partners working or not working during the lockdown, including difficult to navigate mental health “apps.” They also launched a campaign that offered a free 12oz (tall) tea or coffee—hot or iced—to all front-line healthcare workers and first-responders at the drive-thru from March to May 2020: “For many of those working long hours caring for those who are sick or in need, a cup of coffee can represent a bright spot in their day and give them a much-needed boost,” a post on Starbucks Stories states.⁵⁴⁷ At first, baristas were told not to ask for identification as Starbucks would trust those who stated they were part of this group of workers. However, this seamless trust was quickly dispelled, and corporate memos encouraged baristas to check the IDs of customers who would line up around the drive-thru and request free coffee. When this campaign ended with the lifting of some restrictions, customers in turn grew frustrated, claiming that front-line responders now relied on Starbucks to deliver their promise, demanding their free coffee from their “third place” on their way to work.

On March 15, 2020, Starbucks Canada announced that all stores in Canada had to move to the “to-go” model by Wednesday.⁵⁴⁸ All seating, including café and patio seating was removed. Company-operated stores located in malls or other places without exterior/street access (for example colleges and universities) had to close, at least temporarily. The deadline for complete store closures came fast and furious. When the doors to the store I worked at closed, a sense of dread filled our shifts: “Why is Starbucks still open?” was a frequently asked question among the baristas. Lone chairs were placed on top of tables; the last bit of music drifted down

⁵⁴⁷ “Starbucks gives 1 million cups of free coffee to first responders in US and Canada,” *Starbucks Stories & News* (April 23, 2022) <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2020/starbucks-gives-1million-cups-of-free-coffee-to-first-responders-in-us-and-canada/>

⁵⁴⁸ See the urgent letter to Canadian partners (employees) from Lori Digulla, president of Starbucks Canada in “Caring for our Customers and Partners during COVID-19,” *Starbucks Stories Canada* (March 15, 2020) <https://stories.starbucks.ca/en-ca/stories/2020/caring-for-our-partners-and-customers-during-COVID-19/>

from the ceiling speakers like dust and slowly the screech of the espresso machines came to a complete halt. Our store was soon shrouded in silence.

As the Starbucks ship navigated trepid COVID-19 waters, Starbucks tried to transmute the warm and welcoming sense of a “third place” into a dry digital App. As Jennifer Nhieu and Dr. Tony Hernandez document in their article “Starbucks in Canada: Navigating the Pandemic,” “changes to Starbucks’ physical footprint” in Canada often took “place in tandem with an increased emphasis on digital presence with expanded mobile app capabilities.”⁵⁴⁹ Cash was discouraged from transactions (a move already inaugurated in 2001 when the coffee giant launched its debit Starbucks Card), and more customers were encouraged to “load” money onto the Starbucks app as a form of credit.⁵⁵⁰ Customers would be rewarded with points-based system called “stars” which could be earned and be redeemed for espresso-based beverages, lunch, bakery items, or Starbucks merchandise that include bags of coffee. Though the app promised ease of access, it became a digital barrier for human contact. Customers would hold their brightly-lit smart phones up before engaging in conversation, waiting for the laser to scan their barcodes to complete the transaction. More often than not, in this socially-distanced liquid digital economy and café culture, customers would not engage with the barista at all, except for when

⁵⁴⁹ Jennifer Nhieu and Tony Hernandez, “Starbucks in Canada: Navigating the Pandemic,” *CSCA Research Insights*: <https://csc.ryerson.ca/products/starbucks-in-canada-navigating-the-pandemic>

⁵⁵⁰ On credit card culture as part of a “fetishism of debt,” see Michael Denning, “The Fetishism of Debt,” *SocialText Online* (September 2, 2011): https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/the_fetishism_of_debt/. As Gavin Fridell notes, the CAW *Starbucks* UnStrike action in 2002 also “involved a request that customers stop using Starbucks charge cards instead of cash” (255). The company also introduced a JPMorgan Chase Bank Starbucks-branded Visa credit card, Duetto. This was similar to a Starbucks prepaid card but could be used in other stores. Natasha Dow Schüll also describes how the dematerialization of currency in casinos “into an immediately available credit form” not only disguises “actual cash value” and thus encourages “wagering, it also mitigates the revenue-compromising limitations of human motor capacities by removing unwieldy coins from the gambling exchange.” (56). While loading money onto a Starbucks app is not a form of gambling, the dematerialization of money may also encourage “impulse purchases.” Schüll continues: “Although machine gamblers act within the enclosed space of the casino, seated before the consoles of stationary devices and repeating the same routines, they tap into a flow of credit that can bring them into the flowing nonspace of the zone and allow them to be ‘continuously productive’ for the casino as long as that credit lasts” (73). *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012).

they were told that their smartphone screens went dim or turned off completely. As Zygmunt Bauman writes, diagnosing our modern age: “Brief contracts replace lasting engagements.”⁵⁵¹

Coffeehouse “intimacy” was clearly a thing of the past. The pandemic radically interrupted the Starbucks Experience and the “third place” itself crumbled. In the midst of nationwide lockdowns, Starbucks Canada had to redefine its “third place” strategy and allegiance. Up until this point my understanding of how “third places” like Starbucks operated was filtered through an assortment of training videos and interactive modules that all baristas are required to watch when hired and review each subsequent week. “The Third Place Curriculum.”⁵⁵² Video lessons on “showing respect,” “making others feel welcome,” “what it feels like to belong,” “understanding bias,” “confusion about a customer’s gender,” “customer product returns,” and “the tip jar,” positioned the barista in such a way that, as Althusser would say, they are turned into a subject—or re-branded—in “a material ritual practice of ideological recognition in everyday life.”⁵⁵³ When the pandemic interrupted Starbucks as a business, however, the third place was condemned (as it were) and a gap in the interpellation procedure widened. The official philosophy was threatened. Partners and stakeholders wondered how Starbucks would manoeuvre around coronavirus restrictions and reinvent its platform. Would the company close entirely, or would the third place concept evolve to meet the needs (or desires) of the wider community? What could or would a coffeehouse do, really, in times of global change? Baristas, in turn, wondered if they would keep their jobs or stay safe.

⁵⁵¹ As quoted in Chris Kutarna’s article, “Liquid Capitalism: Making Sense of Davos,” *The Globalist* (January 24, 2018): <https://www.theglobalist.com/capitalism-inequality-world-economic-forum-davos/>

⁵⁵² “The Third Place Curriculum,” *Starbucks Stories Canada* (June 4, 2022): <https://stories.starbucks.ca/en-ca/stories/2020/the-third-place-curriculum/>

⁵⁵³ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: NLB, 1971,) 161.

2. The “Third Place” in a Pandemic

On March 15, 2020, Starbucks locations across the U.S. and in Canada were recommended to have “reduced operating hours in communities with high clusters of COVID-19 cases.”⁵⁵⁴ Stores that did not have drive-thru infrastructure ceased operating altogether. As a result, some baristas hung up their green (or black) aprons while those who opted to keep working were relocated to stores across cities that stayed open for business. The workers who stayed on the job faced tremendous pandemic pressures; labor disputes arose and ultimately, as we will discuss later in this chapter, Starbucks partners began to mobilize and unionize, even recalibrating an online version of a “third place” for Starbucks discussion and debate.

In some stores in the U.S. and Canada, Starbucks experienced dire labour shortages due to escalating sick calls as a result of the virus; there was also the fear one could spread it to other employees. One of the three Starbucks stores in London, Ontario, permitted to remain open was forced to close entirely when three outbreaks between the baristas were announced causing further panic to the public.⁵⁵⁵ Vaccination incentives were initially offered in the form of paid time off, but this benefit was later rescinded.⁵⁵⁶ On the other hand, the prioritization of safety garnered negative responses from the public who faced longer times and line ups for their coffee; some decided to forgo their favorite beverage.⁵⁵⁷ Labour reporter Michael Sainato in *The*

Guardian paints out some of Starbucks’ pandemic pressures as “understaffing at stores, intense

⁵⁵⁴ “Timeline: Starbucks COVID-19 Milestones,” *Starbucks Stories & News* (February 28, 2022):

<https://stories.starbucks.com/press/2022/timeline-starbucks-COVID-19-milestones/>

⁵⁵⁵ “COVID-19 outbreak at Starbucks prompts customer warning,” *The London Free Press*, (October 17, 2020),

<https://lfpres.com/news/local-news/customers-told-to-watch-for-COVID-19-symptoms-after-starbucks-outbreak/wcm/df9ad16a-3514-4f51-899e-df4fda5a5f63/amp/>

⁵⁵⁶ Dani Romero, “Starbucks Reversal on Vaccine Mandate sparks Customer, Barista Backlash,” *Yahoo! Finance* (January 25, 2022): <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/starbucks-reversal-on-vaccine-mandate-sparks-customer-barista-backlash-191029771.html?guccounter=1>

⁵⁵⁷ Mike Pomranz, “Starbucks and McDonalds are shortening staff hours amid staffing shortages and Omicron spikes,” *Food and Wine* (January 19, 2022): <https://www.foodandwine.com/news/starbucks-mcdonalds-chains-shorten-hours-omicron-staffing-shortages>

workloads, and customers who have changed their ordering habits and become increasingly aggressive and confrontational during the coronavirus pandemic.”⁵⁵⁸ Sainato also describes the pressure of corporate surveillance and performance in panic-ridden environments, the pressure to meet drive-thru quotas, as drive-thru sales increased as Starbucks pivoted to the “to-go” model and the pressure of subjecting partners regularly “to customer satisfaction surveys where they are at a risk of being written up if they fail the surveys.”⁵⁵⁹ Longer car lineups that crept into city streets and blocked traffic caused the overworked baristas who perceived long lineups as performance failures additional anxiety. Grace Dean, Senior Business Reporter in the UK and others have also claimed that “Starbucks customers got ruder and more abusive during the pandemic, current and former employees say. One barista even said customers seemed to have ‘forgotten humanity.’”⁵⁶⁰ Labour shortages, in turn, according to Dean were linked to many “violent incidents” driven by product shortages (including cups, lids, and ingredients), masking mandates at the drive-thru window, and complicated beverage orders from the “secret menu” (the idea that the Starbucks Corporation has a “secret menu” is a perpetual myth exacerbated by social media platforms like TikTok).⁵⁶¹

⁵⁵⁸ Michael Sainato, “Coffee-making robots’: Starbucks staff face intense work and customer abuse,” *The Guardian* (May 26, 2021): <https://amp.theguardian.com/business/2021/may/26/starbuck-employees-intense-work-customer-abuse-understaffing>

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁰ Grace Dean, “Starbucks workers say customers got ruder and more abusive during pandemic,” *Insider* (February 19, 2022): <https://www.businessinsider.com/starbucks-baristas-rude-customers-masks-tiktok-product-shortages-throwing-drinks-2022-1?amp>

⁵⁶¹ Ibid. As Dean writes, “A barista in British Columbia said she'd been called ‘stupid,’ a ‘fucking bitch,’ and ‘brainwashed’ by customers after she asked them to wear masks, while a barista in Indiana said she was yelled at by customers for wearing a mask herself.”

3. Shaking It Up: Starbucks Workers United

Baristas' efforts to seek unionization to mitigate these and other unfavourable working conditions, like lower wages, and advocate for more support for trans-inclusive healthcare benefits (despite the company's inclusive philosophy, additional support is still needed) have been vehemently (or even viciously) thwarted by the CEO Schultz and the larger corporation, but by 2022, over 6,500 workers at over 250 corporate-owned Starbucks stores in the United States voted to unionize with Workers United, a Service Employees International Union. Starbucks Workers United (SBWU) has grown to become one of the most ambitious and robust examples of solidarity unionism to date. In 2004, an International Workers of the World (Wobblies) unionization drive started a grassroots campaign "Starbucks Workers Union" (SWU) in the US that laid important groundwork for unionization. By 2023, 290 Starbucks employing over 7,000 workers have unionized. The first store to unionize was located in Buffalo, New York.⁵⁶² A year later, 260 additional Starbucks in the States joined SBWU. Now there is also a unionization push at Starbucks stores across Canada and unionization drives in other countries, even in the Global South.⁵⁶³ A Chilean Starbucks announced that it was the first Starbucks in Latin America to unionize in June 2022.⁵⁶⁴ Starbucks union-busting tactics are also now under scrutiny. On

⁵⁶² One store unionized with United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 1001 in the United States in March 1985, but Schultz spurred a movement to decertify the union. See Samantha Christmann, "Why Buffalo was the place to unionize Starbucks," *The Buffalo News* (September 5, 2022): https://buffalonews.com/business/local/why-buffalo-was-the-place-to-unionize-starbucks/article_befc3a66-1ff8-11ed-bfdc-cb9d41ad4dce.html

⁵⁶³ See Cherise Seucharan, "Lessons from the one unionized Starbucks store in Canada," *Canadaland* 10 (June 13, 2022): <https://www.canadaland.com/starbucks-unionizing-canada/> and Rosa Saba's articles, "Unionization push at Starbucks Canada gaining steam, but facing similar barriers to U.S. efforts," *CBC* (November 23, 2022): <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/starbucks-union-canada-1.6661667> and more recently "Edmonton Starbucks store unionizes," *Global News* (April 14, 2023): <https://globalnews.ca/news/9625385/edmonton-starbucks-unionize-retail-trends/>

⁵⁶⁴ Antonio Paez and Deborah Jofre, "Labor Movement: 'We are the first Starbucks union in Latin America: Chilean Starbucks Workers Speak,'" *Left Voice* (June 28, 2022): <https://www.leftvoice.org/we-are-the-first-starbucks-union-in-latin-america-chilean-starbucks-workers-speak/>. Fabian van Onzen argues that it is important to create "bonds of solidarity between workers in peripheral nations" and the Global South with partners and "baristas

November 30, 2022, the U.S. National Labor Relations Board ruled that Starbucks unlawfully refused to recognize and bargain with the union at its Reserve Roastery Store in Seattle following an election in May 2022 (Starbucks of course appealed the NLRB's decision to the Ninth Circuit). As summarized in a news press release published on Bernie Sander's website, the judge in a detailed 220-page ruling "found that Starbucks illegally retaliated against employees for unionizing; promised improved pay and benefits if workers rejected the union; conducted illegal surveillance of pro-union workers; refused to hire prospective employees who supported the union" and "relocated union organizers to new stores and overstaffed stores ahead of union votes –all clear violations of federal labor law."⁵⁶⁵ Interestingly, unions for Schultz represent another "third," not a safe "third place," but a threatening "third party" outside of the employer/employee relation. Speaking of challenges with the "post-pandemic customer" in a leaked video call in April 2022, Schultz warned supervisors against heeding an "outside force that's going to dictate or disrupt who we are and what we do."⁵⁶⁶ In June 2022, when Schultz was asked if he could imagine unions at Starbucks, he replied that the "third party" union was "threatening the company." Numerous judges have determined, however, that Schultz was the one threatening the unions, as summarized in Bernie Sander's March 7th report, "NEWS: Sanders Announces Starbucks' Schultz to Testify Before HELP Committee." To hold him and the company accountable, Schultz has to testify before the Senate HELP Committee on March

in the Global North" (7-8) to better support unionization drives. See Onzen, *Service Workers in the Era of Monopoly Capital: A Marxist Analysis of Service and Retail Labour* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2022).

⁵⁶⁵ "News: Help Majority Staff Report on Starbucks," *Bernie Sanders: US Senator for Vermont* (March 26, 2023): <https://www.sanders.senate.gov/press-releases/news-help-majority-staff-report-on-starbucks/>

⁵⁶⁶ "More Perfect Union" Tweet, "EXCLUSIVE: In a leaked video call, Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz begged managers to increase their union busting" (21 April 2022). <https://www.trendsmap.com/twitter/tweet/1517175142702587906>

29th.⁵⁶⁷ In an interesting move, Schultz stepped down as C.E.O. in March two weeks earlier than first announced, distancing himself from the company before the HELP Committee hearing. The National Labor Relations Board has issued over 80 complaints against Starbucks for violating federal labor law and an Administrative Law Judge in New York recently ruled that Starbucks has engaged in “egregious and widespread misconduct” in a union organizing campaign that started in 2019. Although over 280 Starbucks coffee shops have successfully voted to form a union over the past year, Starbucks has refused to negotiate in good faith to sign a single first contract with their employees. The HELP Committee intends to make clear that America can’t tolerate a two-tiered justice system in which billionaires and large corporations can break the law with impunity, while working class people are held accountable for their actions.⁵⁶⁸

The polemics around unionization have tainted the long-held view that Starbucks is a progressive company. Amy McCarthy, a staff writer at Eater.com reports that “For a time, Starbucks customers could feel assured that they were patronizing a good business, one that called its employees ‘partners’ in a nod to the spirit of community. ‘We call our employees partners because we are all partners in shared success,’ the brand boasts. ‘We make sure everything we do is through the lens of humanity.’ But now that consumers are aware of the union-busting and pure, profit-driven capitalism that lies beneath the surface, Starbucks no

⁵⁶⁷ Meggan Robinson, “Starbucks is being held accountable for threats to unionizing employees,” *Tasting Table* (February 2, 2023): <https://www.tastingtable.com/1187005/starbucks-is-being-held-accountable-for-threats-to-unionizing-employees/>

⁵⁶⁸ “NEWS: Sanders announces Starbucks Schultz to testify before HELP committee,” *US Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions website*, (March 7, 2023): <https://www.help.senate.gov/chair/newsroom/press/news-sanders-announces-starbucks-schultz-to-testify-before-help-committee>

longer feels even remotely like the progressive, edgy choice.”⁵⁶⁹ Apparently more than half of Starbucks customers apparently supported unionization. However, a major tension Dean identifies through interviews with Starbucks Store managers and (former) baristas relates to the fact that the company was unable to police customer negligence. Nat El-Hai, a Starbucks barista in an exclusive location in Beverly Hills, California according to Dean “went as far as to say Starbucks had ‘uniquely horrible’ customers that ‘truly have free rein and can walk all over employees.’”⁵⁷⁰ Dean, a former Starbucks barista in Atlanta also said, ‘This is something I feel like is unique to Starbucks customers.’ According to this former employee, Starbucks customers could be considered “the ‘most entitled group ... in human history, because the company has catered them and made them to be that way.’”⁵⁷¹ Paradoxically, rallying to support worker’s rights in a third place takes us back to the roots of what made coffee shops popular. The history of coffee houses as we recall from the second chapter involves a sordid tale of colonialism, but also social levelling and sowing the seeds of change. As we see in Figure 28, the Starbucks Workers United logo subverts the siren symbol. Instead of shrouding Starbucks in “mystical” magic, the logo foregrounds the materialist means of incessant production, defiantly “shaking” – not “stirring”—iced drinks and agitating instead of seducing through spectacle. Starbucks baristas around the world participate in this tactile and highly audible process making iced drinks that “shake” community up into a more politically-tuned coalition.⁵⁷² Initially, the leftist iconography used for the SBWU logo showcased a Siren shaking her fist, but Zachary Field the barista and organizer who created the Starbucks logo while working in Buffalo and other

⁵⁶⁹ Amy McCarthy, “What’s the point of Starbucks now?” *EATER* (September 1, 2022): <https://www.eater.com/23365208/starbucks-new-cafes-third-place-pivot-union-fight>

⁵⁷⁰ Grace Dean, “Starbucks workers say customers got ruder and more abusive during pandemic”

⁵⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷² Adele Licona productively uses thirdspace theory to support her thesis that zine culture creates cultures of coalition through opposition of the status quo. See Licona, *Zines in Third Space: Radical Cooperation and Borderlands Rhetoric* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012).

organizers were worried that the “Starbucks Siren with a solidarity fist” could “expose” the union to “legal liability.”⁵⁷³ The “solidarity” Siren logo was still used on posters during strike action, but a new logo was also worked up that jettisoned the siren, but retained the shaker first and cup, the literal tools of the barista’s trade (Figure 29).



Figure 28: Starbucks Workers United Original Logo
 [Source: https://ky.aflcio.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/starbucksunited_workers_0.jpg]



Figure 29: Starbucks Workers United Revamped Logo
 [Source: <https://sbworkersunited.org/>]

⁵⁷³ See Cole Louison’s article, “The Fist meets the Frappuccino: How Starbucks Union created their Pro-Labor Logo,” *GQ* (July 13, 2022): <https://www.gq.com/story/starbucks-union-logo>

The sound of the shaker symbolizes solidarity and speaking up, learning to amplify discreet discussions that once took place quietly amongst baristas behind the counter. Another community of workers now gathering anonymously around the world on the publicly accessible online Reddit forum, has also reinvented the Starbucks logo, a Starbucks subcommunity *r/Starbucks*. This unofficial Starbucks community describes itself as “the cyber third place for Starbucks friends, fans, and families alike! Please sit back, get yourself a beverage, and enjoy your stay. On behalf of all partners on */r/Starbucks*, the views expressed here are ours alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of our employer. An unofficial Starbucks community.”⁵⁷⁴ On this interactive platform and alternate “cyber third place”, Starbucks partners and customers discuss their interests and concerns about the company and also share their experiences, forging a new dialogue across different regions and cultures. Posts discuss how to unionize, list the “breaking points” in barista’s tolerance with customers, and lament how Starbucks has turned into a McDonalds: “The smell of food began to overwhelm the smell of espresso, the drive-through began to overwhelm the café, the mobile orders came, and the look and feel of the fun beatnik hangout spot turned into a corporate industry frantically running against time. The look of happiness on the barista’s faces was replaced by a grim and overwhelmed blankness.”⁵⁷⁵ The very concept and integrity of the third place as dictated by Starbucks has been challenged by many members of this cyber third place. Partners online often stress how impossible it is to perform tasks on time due to labour shortages. One pointed post titled “The Biting Irony of the ‘Third Place’ Doctrine” calls for Starbucks to recognize the death of the third place rather than to continue in its current trajectory: “All across the landscape indie coffee got knocked out,

⁵⁷⁴ “*r/Starbucks*,” Reddit, April 20, 2009: <https://www.reddit.com/r/starbucks/>

⁵⁷⁵ shiekherybouti42, “‘Third Place’ no longer. In competing with McCafe Starbucks has turned into McDonalds,” *Reddit*: https://www.reddit.com/r/starbucks/comments/v15w7y/third_place_no_longer_in_competing_with_mccafe/

Starbucks would literally pick spots across the street from indie spots (see Maude's in Gainesville) and with Starbucks success came the death of the 'third space' that the CEO experienced in Milan. Now, years on, Starbucks wants to reclaim that, and I think its a little tone deaf on it. Those indie coffee experiences did accept everyone, it wasn't even really a thought, however if you were homeless, and smelled, or if you didn't order something (at least a cup of coffee) then the owner would at some point ask you to move along. These inspirational places in Europe are no different, you can sit there all day, but you do have to at least buy a cup of coffee. That seems like a reasonable social contract. I admire Starbucks looking for its soul, but to find it, its going to have to admit that it was responsible for the death of the coffee culture its seeking to rediscover within itself."⁵⁷⁶ The cyber third place is an attempt to reclaim a space where third place qualities are present, which, as many users of this forum state, cannot currently be found in the "Starbucks Experience." In this digital landscape, Starbucks workers are allowed and even encouraged to openly voice frustrations about the working environments, vent about ventis and playful exchange anecdotes about work frustration and bizarre drink orders, recycling behind the counter banter for good fun and critique.

The community's logo perhaps best summarizes the dissent expressed by this forum. It is another redaction of the official Starbucks Siren. Her head has been replaced with the Reddit mascot and an antenna has replaced the largest star in the Siren's crown. The siren's face has been defamiliarized by the reddit smile, rendered uncanny, chimeric, and partly automata; while the siren's face is white, this reddit version is fully green with only a white smile and large white circular eyes. While the logo incites humour, satire, and perhaps madness, the colour inversion also calls attention to questions of race and alterity. In addition, this siren's body now appears

⁵⁷⁶ [deleted], "The Biting Irony of the Third Place Doctrine," *Reddit*, https://www.reddit.com/r/starbucks/comments/8nj37x/the_biting_irony_of_the_third_place_doctrine/

clothed. This siren is an interlocutor of worker dissent, literally outfitted with a technological tool, an antenna (Figure 30). Her crown signals to a larger community; she is a technological siren who warns of imminent danger. Here, the siren symbolizes both caution and a call to action in the face of oppression.



Figure 30: The Cyber Third Place Reddit Logo
 [Source: <https://www.reddit.com/r/starbucks/>]



Figure 31: Michael DeForge's Illustration "Why is Starbucks at War with its Unions?" (Walrus, 2023)
 [Source: <https://thewalrus.ca/why-is-starbucks-at-war-with-its-unions/>]

Of course, quashing or suppressing unions at Starbucks has a long history, as the recent *Walrus* article reminds us, asking “Why is Starbucks at War with its Unions?” Before Schultz became C.E.O., some of the company’s Seattle employees joined the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), successfully “securing benefits like health care coverage and paid vacation for part-time workers.” When Schultz took the helm, however, he viewed collective action suspiciously “as a sign of poor morale and mistrust among employees.” Moreover, Schultz wrote, “If [workers] had faith in me and my motives, they wouldn’t need a union.”⁵⁷⁷ There were short-lived attempts to unionize in Vancouver (in the late 90s, 12 Starbucks locations in British Columbia successfully unionized joined the Canadian Auto Workers private sector union), but by and large after Schultz became C.E.O. from the late 80s to 2020 unionization at Starbucks was quelled.⁵⁷⁸ Michael DeForge’s illustration (Figure 31) for an article published in *The Walrus* ““Why is Starbucks at War with its Unions?”” in March 2023, humorously depicts green-aproned baristas (some shy and some scathingly mad) climbing out of a coffee cup, the coffee itself bleeding out of all of the cup’s pores. Agitation and mobilization seem possible. Importantly distancing the employees from the Starbucks spectacle, the logo is masked, like the workers themselves during the pandemic. “Masking” the spectacle gives the labourer new bodily freedom. One barista has a looped earring, and another has hair touching their shoulders, in violation of the earliest versions of the Starbucks strict dress-code that prohibited workers from wearing certain colours, jewellery, piercings, and shoes. Hair over a certain length was to be tied back and tattoos were largely forbidden. This is perhaps a homage

⁵⁷⁷ Rob Csernyik, “Why is Starbucks at War with its Unions?” *Walrus* (March 1 2023): <https://twitter.com/thewalrus/status/1644429928685793294>

⁵⁷⁸ For a full discussion of Starbucks’ hard anti-union stance in the early 2000s and its refusal to negotiate a new contract with the Vancouver workers at CAW 3000, see Gavin Fridell, “Fair Trade Coffee in Canada,” *Fair Trade Coffee: The Prospects and Pitfalls of Social Market Justice*, 254-256.

to the AW Canada Local 3000 Starbucks Private Sector Union Unstrike in 2002 when Starbucks employees continued to go to work, but came to stores with tattoos visible, dyed hair and piercings, disregarding the corporate dress code.⁵⁷⁹

COVID-19 was a catalyst for change. Increased demands from customers and some of the pandemic pressures already outlined brought significant changes to Starbucks store operations, for start easier access to benefits and time-off. In March 2020, Starbucks started to support their partners with “catastrophe pay,” a system designed to couch “any partner who has been diagnosed with or exposed to COVID-19 or comes in close prolonged contact with someone in their store of household who has, is eligible for up to 14 days”⁵⁸⁰ of pre-determined compensation. These gestures and benefits supporting Starbucks partners seemed initially to point to the evolution of the third place, building on Oldenburg’s enthusiastic observations that the third place is for the “greater good.” Starbucks initially pointed to three “guiding principles” for navigating the pandemic as summarized on the Starbucks Stories & News website: 1) Prioritizing the health and well-being of partners and customers; 2) Playing a constructive role in supporting health and government officials as they sought to mitigate the spread 3) Showing up in a positive and responsible way to serve the larger community.⁵⁸¹ On May 4, 2020 Starbucks CEO Kevin Johnson in an open letter published on *Starbucks Stories & News* argued that in a time of crisis, “third places” like Starbucks were needed more than ever before. Johnson positioned the *third place* as a humanitarian “mindset—a feeling of comfort that uplifts customers

⁵⁷⁹ See “Starbucks ‘Unstrike’ in British Columbia,” *Labor Notes* 274 (2002), 9 and Gavin Fridell, “Fair Trade Coffee in Canada,” *Fair Trade Coffee: The Prospects and Pitfalls of Social Market Justice*, 254-256.

⁵⁸⁰ “Letter to Partners: Caring for Starbucks Partners during COVID-19” *Starbucks Stories & News* (March 11, 2022): <https://stories.starbucks.com/press/2020/letter-to-partners-caring-for-starbucks-partners-during-COVID-19/>

⁵⁸¹ “Timeline: Starbucks COVID-19 Milestones,” *Starbucks Stories & News* (February 28, 2022): <https://stories.starbucks.com/press/2022/timeline-starbucks-COVID-19-milestones/>

everywhere, and in every way, they experience.”⁵⁸² At the same time, however, Starbucks pandemic store operations were being ergonomically optimized and processes were reviewed for maximum efficiency. Johnson’s open letter quickly turns away from humanitarian aid to tout the ease and comfort of a new digital extension of the Starbucks’ “third place experience”:

We have expanded service beyond drive-thru to include mobile ordering for contactless pick-up, delivery and, in some locations, curbside pickup and grab-and-go through the café. We are putting immense emphasis on the safest and most convenient way for customers to order their favorites from Starbucks. Nearly 20 million customers are using the Starbucks App as part of their daily routines and as those routines evolve, we’ll be finding ways to tailor the app to customers’ individual needs.

The *third place* experience created by Starbucks partners in our stores is extended and enhanced by the digital relationships we have with our customers. Our Starbucks App will enable new features, including optimizing for curbside pick-up, entryway handoff, improved drive-thru experiences, voice ordering through Siri and the ability for everyone to earn stars that can be redeemed for rewards. We will also shift toward more cashless experiences, knowing that the handling of cash creates consumer concerns about the spread of viruses. We predict the mobile app will become the dominant form of payment.⁵⁸³

Ordering through the Starbucks App or through food delivery services like UberEats and DoorDash was encouraged for customer accessibility and convenience and might have been cashless, but this often came at a cost. Starbucks employees complained that too many customers were being encouraged to place their orders digitally, causing strange drink and food modifications, the confusion between mobile and in-house orders, and orders that were placed even before stores opened first thing in the morning. On the level of corporate rhetoric, the digital itself became a new asset: “Digital touchpoints like mobile orders and the Starbucks Rewards loyalty program both saw an uptick in customer engagement and demand in the last quarter and are at the heart of its differentiation efforts. We are seeing first-hand the power of

⁵⁸² Kevin Johnson, “Starbucks CEO: The Third Place, needed now more than ever before.” *Starbucks Stories & News* (May 4, 2020): <https://stories.starbucks.com/press/2020/starbucks-ceo-the-third-place-needed-now-more-than-ever-before/>

⁵⁸³ “Starbucks CEO: The third place, needed now more than ever before,” *Starbucks Stories & News* (May 4, 2020): <https://stories.starbucks.com/press/2020/starbucks-ceo-the-third-place-needed-now-more-than-ever-before>

integrating physical and digital customer touchpoints to meet customers' growing need for convenience,' [Kevin] Johnson said. 'Our digital assets have proven to be a competitive advantage.'"⁵⁸⁴ As Julie Littman documents, the demand for drive-thru locations and mobile orders skyrocketed during the pandemic: "Mobile order and pay, which generates over \$400 billion in sales, is up 400% in five years and over 20% from last year, Schultz said. Starbucks Card holders also spent roughly \$11 billion last year in prepaid purchases, he said, adding that over \$1 billion is on Starbucks Cards waiting to be spent. Rewards memberships were up 17% during the quarter to 27 million members."⁵⁸⁵ From one barista's perspective, however (the Beverly Hills barista Nat El-Hai): "The whole mobile order system is really bad."⁵⁸⁶ A lot was lost when profits and practicality, above and beyond the physical location, were touted as the revamped characteristics of a new "third place."

In *ModernRetail*, multi-platform journalist Julia Waldow notes that "Starbucks, like its counterparts in the restaurant industry, knows that wait time can impact revenue and wants to speed up its operations to cater to as many customers as possible. A recent study by SeeLevel HX found that an extra 30-second wait in a drive-thru could cause one restaurant location to lose up to \$32,091.33 over the course of 12 months."⁵⁸⁷ Of course, more customers could access the third place simultaneously and increase the company's profit margins if the third place were imagined to be perennially accessible online, a ruse Starbucks used to solve the problem of

⁵⁸⁴ "How Starbucks is using COVID-19 crisis to differentiate brand," *WARC* (March 8, 2020): <https://www.warc.com/newsandopinion/news/how-starbucks-is-using-COVID-19-crisis-to-differentiate-the-brand/43929>

⁵⁸⁵ Julie Litman, "99% of new Starbucks Stores will have drive-thrus," *Square* (May 4, 2022): <https://www.restaurantdive.com/news/new-starbucks-stores-drive-thrus/623162/>

⁵⁸⁶ Grace Dean, "Former Starbucks worker says the chain's mobile ordering system is out of control," *Insider* (June 26, 2021), <https://www.businessinsider.com/starbucks-mobile-ordering-app-barista-pandemic-coffee-customers-online-digital-2021-6>

⁵⁸⁷ Julie Waldow, "As Starbucks changes its growth strategy, the 'third space' café model fades from view," *ModernRetail* (Sept. 20 2022), <https://www.modernretail.co/operations/as-starbucks-changes-its-growth-strategy-the-third-space-cafe-model-fades-from-view/>

losing \$3 billion in revenue due to COVID-19.⁵⁸⁸ As argued in the introduction, Starbucks for decades has sought to provides customers with an exclusive, elevated experience one could link to Ritzer’s theory of implosion: “the spectacular manipulation of time,” that greedy spiral that leads to “more customers and more expenditures. And the more time available for consumption, the greater the number of goods and services that will be sold. Furthermore, consumers who are disoriented in terms of time are likely to be disoriented in other ways, including their thinking about money.”⁵⁸⁹ The pandemic and post-pandemic Starbucks is accelerating, steam-lining and optimizing, but all the while it claims it is carving out or “*creating a new, global digital community – a community defined by collaboration, experiences, and shared ownership – all centered around coffee to start, and then perhaps expanded into the many of the areas Starbucks has played in over the years as a coffeehouse; art, music, books and beyond.*”⁵⁹⁰ Schultz’ dream of an “authentic digital third place” with branded NFT collections was pitched in Spring 2022 not only as an extension of the literary coffeehouse tradition by Brady Brewer, chief marketing advisor and advisor, Adam Brotman; it was also mapped out as an extension of Starbucks’ earlier mastery of wi-fi, mobile payment and mobile ordering, which taught the company “how to engage customers at scale to unlock opportunities,” leading to the dream of a “Starbucks Digital Community Web3 platform” that “has the potential to pioneer the combination of an approachable, widely accessible front-end, backed by the right blockchain technologies that are fast and inexpensive.”⁵⁹¹

⁵⁸⁸ “Starbucks Workers in Buffalo, NY vote to unionize,” *CBC News* (December 9, 2021): <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/starbucks-buffalo-unionization-1.6279347>

⁵⁸⁹ Ritzer, 142.

⁵⁹⁰ Brady Brewer and Adam Brotman, “Starbucks: We’re creating the digital Third Place,” *Starbucks Stories & News* (May 3, 2022): <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2022/starbucks-creating-the-digital-third-place/> (my emphasis in italics)

⁵⁹¹ *Ibid.*

Johnson's May 2022 letter, published on the same platform, further solidified the third place, and by extension Starbucks, into a larger ideological apparatus, again building on the rich social history of the coffeehouse: "On the other side of this challenge, we will treasure human connections—from warm embraces with our loved ones to small everyday interactions with those in our communities—like we never have before. Human connections will not only be restored, but reinforced and re-invigorated. The *third place* will not just survive, but with adaptations and new routines, it will thrive."⁵⁹² In the cold and calculated world of the pandemic Starbucks, however, new intimate interactions and connections, daily routines and adaptations are still socially-distanced: mobile ordering, contactless pick-up, physically-distanced delivery, curbside pickup and café grab-and-go can never replace the physical contact of the past. Now, it is as if the Starbucks third place could potentially be "“everywhere they're holding our cup, [COO] Ros Brewer continued. 'No matter their journey, after leaving our stores, that feeling of comfort stays with them. And in an increasingly busy and on-demand world, it's that feeling that keeps the third place growing,'"”⁵⁹³ a strategic shift in creating a global perspective that would ultimately change the trajectory of coffeehouse history, pushing it towards a "to-go" model.

In an attempt to juggle customer relations, partner morale, and business margins, as Starbucks became "more entrenched in digital space," as Julia Waldow observes, by September 2022, it was clear it had to change to meet the demands of an evolving consumer culture that prioritizes efficiency and speed over the slower ambience of a coffeehouse:

⁵⁹² "Starbucks CEO: The Third Place now needed more than ever before" (Letter to Starbucks partners and customers from Kevin Johnson, Starbucks CEO and president), *Starbucks Stories & News* (May 4, 2022): <https://stories.starbucks.com/press/2020/starbucks-ceo-the-third-place-needed-now-more-than-ever-before/>

⁵⁹³ Kate Taylor, "Starbucks is reimagining the core belief that turned the chain into an \$88 billion juggernaut," *Insider* (March 20, 2019): <https://www.businessinsider.com/starbucks-reimagine-third-place-2019-3?amp>. Also see "Starbucks sets vision at annual meeting," *Global Coffee Report Magazine* (March 21, 2019): <https://www.germag.com/starbucks-sets-vision-at-annual-meeting/>

More coffee concepts are using what can be called an ‘ambient coffee’ model, Thomas pointed out. Blank Street Coffee, which began in New York and recently expanded to London, says its spaces are half the size of the average New York coffee shop. About Time, also in New York, says it offers everything from ‘intuitive ordering, to customization options, to expedited pickup,’ with a ‘mobile-first generation in mind.’ Coca-Cola’s Costa Coffee is building completely autonomous coffee vending machines. ‘If you look around in the coffee world, everyone’s moving down this path for coffee to go,’ Thomas explained. Similarly, in Starbucks’ case, ‘efficiency is the experience — instead of the ambiance,’ Kondrat said. ‘I think there is actually a world where Starbucks kind of taps into a whole new customer. And that’s the one that doesn’t care about the environment. They care about, can I get my coffee? Can I get it fast? Is it already ready when I get there?’⁵⁹⁴

Kondrat’s observations are at ends with what we described earlier as Ritzer’s cathedrals of consumption, where consumers are encouraged to spend more time and get lost within the calculated interiors of big-box stores moving around and looking at various paraphernalia that only encourages more shopping and more brand allegiance. As a result, there is a loss of the third place as a phenomenological experience of play as Oldenburg and Brissett wrote.⁵⁹⁵ This “whole new customer” in relation to the third place is concerned less with the time it takes to engage in play as it is with convenience, security, and anonymity. Theorist Herbert Marcuse writes in *One-Dimensional Man* that this is not, on the contrary, an entirely new customer. Modern industrial society has fashioned a “technological rationality”⁵⁹⁶ that has been exacerbated by global crisis and yet consoled by automatized comfort. One way this has been exemplified is through the automotive industry. Audi’s plans for the urbansphere concept car as a “third living space” was unveiled on April 19, 2022: “In these urban areas, where personal space is in particularly short supply, the concept car offers the largest interior space of any Audi to date. It intelligently

⁵⁹⁴ Julie Waldow, “As Starbucks changes its growth strategy, the ‘third space’ café model fades from view,” *ModernRetail* (September 20, 2022), <https://www.modernretail.co/operations/as-starbucks-changes-its-growth-strategy-the-third-space-cafe-model-fades-from-view/>

⁵⁹⁵ Johan Huizinga writes play “is never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty. It is never a task. It is done at leisure during ‘free time’”. See Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Mansfield Centre: Martino Publishing, 2015), 8.

⁵⁹⁶ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 227.

coordinates this with technologies and digital services that appeal to all the senses and offer a whole new level of experience.... The spacious automobile acts as a lounge on wheels and a mobile office, serving as a third living space during the time spent in traffic.”⁵⁹⁷ If the assumption is that Audi considers the thirdness of their vehicle to precede work and home as personal spaces, their third (living) space concept then emphasizes mobility and isolation from the public, emphasizing its dislocation from community in an idiosyncratic mobile abstract space.

Forbes Magazine senior contributor Chris Walton writes that the pandemic was, perhaps, a change that initiated significant *positive* change for the corporation. Closing certain locations in favour of building more that have drive-thru integration did not really alter the Starbucks Experience. Rather simply, he says, Starbucks

just manifests itself differently under the same brand promises. Prior to digital, retail was all about the pre-purchase service experience. Come into a store, get help from a sales associate or a barista, pay, and walk out. Now it’s different. Now the personal connections consumers make with brands are as much, if not more so, about the experience they have with brands after purchase, especially when humans are involved. Whether it’s the call of a name to pick up a cup of coffee, a great experience making a return, or getting helpful service on a customer service phone or text line, these are the touch points that matter far more for the long-term than the silly habit of requiring one human to take dictation from another human behind a cash register.⁵⁹⁸

The brandscape is strengthened, although the personal connection is weakened. Precision and tact in the post-pandemic age become more important to the coffeehouse guest than time spent in or near the cafe. Starbucks “Pick-Up” locations appear wedged in-between kiosks in train stations, or on busy street corners near Liberty Village in Toronto, where “all orders are placed

⁵⁹⁷ “Space travel in the heart of the mega city,” AudiMediaCenter (April 19, 2022), <https://www.audi-mediacenter.com/en/press-releases/space-travel-in-the-heart-of-the-megacity-14595>

⁵⁹⁸ Chris Walton, “3 Ways Starbucks will emerge from COVID-19 stronger than before,” *Forbes* (April 3, 2020): <https://www.forbes.com/sites/christopherwalton/2020/04/03/3-ways-starbucks-will-emerge-from-COVID-19-stronger-than-before/?sh=4bbb809a1844>

by customers on their mobile phones. All production operations have moved behind the scenes. The front of house area is merchandised specifically to handle order pickup activity, rather than as the bolt-on that it is in so many other Starbucks stores today.”⁵⁹⁹ The shift to a completely mobile experience, where the Starbucks app eternally remains on smart phone technology for many loyal customers, is a profitable way for the corporation to also capitalize on the substantial amount of capital loaded onto prepaid Starbucks Member cards, as business analyst Walton writes: “In 2019, Starbucks held nearly \$1.6 billion in prepaid deposits for its mobile app and loyalty cards. Calculate this figure, assuming Starbucks could get everyone to go mobile, and it soon balloons to \$5.3 billion in everyday deposits that essentially also act as an interest-free loan. That’s a deposit figure that is higher than many banks and a loan that could pay for a lot of innovation or capital improvements down the line as well.”⁶⁰⁰ Augment innovative architecture and spiralling stairways with towering and vertiginous digital landscapes. That is precisely what Starbucks has done.

4. Starbucks Odyssey

The Starbucks “to-go” coffee-house model has seen the development of new policies, procedures, perks and extended community outreach. The most playful and immersive extension of this “to-go” digital model was the launch of Starbucks Odyssey, a nonfungible token (NFT) rewards program. As we will discuss below, Odyssey and the “to-go model” have changed how people interact with each other and why, this time *through* the ideology of the coffeehouse—not *within*.

As argued in Brewer and Brotman’s open letter, “While the ‘Third Place’ has often been described in physical terms — a place between home and work — the essence of the Third Place

⁵⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid.

has always been the feeling of connection and belonging it provides. But in the hyper digital era that we live in, the community connection that Starbucks has always created is equally powerful as we extend the Third Place Connection wherever customers experience Starbucks.” Brady Brewer, the coffee giant’s chief marketing officer and partner Adam Brotman meditate on the possibilities of extending the third place to digital vistas through “Web3,” a reiteration of the world-wide-web coined by Ethereum co-founder Gavin Wood that “uses blockchains, cryptocurrencies, and NFTs to give power back to the users in the form of ownership.... Web1 was read-only, Web2 is read-write, Web3 will be read-write-own.”⁶⁰¹ Using the capabilities of NFT exchange, Starbucks Odyssey “allows members to participate in a series of entertaining, interactive activities called ‘Journeys’. Once a Journey is complete, members will earn collectible ‘Journey Stamps’ (NFTs) and Odyssey Points that will open access to new benefits and immersive coffee experiences that they cannot get anywhere else.”⁶⁰² Targeting the risk-taking liquid citizen (Bauman) who continuously seeks out new experiences, the Odyssey Experience again steeps the Starbucks consumer in myth and the literary tradition, borrowing its name from Greek mythology, magnifying Odysseus’ own journey when he sailed the Aegean Sea in Homer’s epic, *The Iliad*. Users navigate digital landscapes that “range from taking a virtual tour of Starbucks coffee farm Hacienda Alsacia in Costa Rica...to playing interactive games like the customer-favourite, Starbucks for Life.... Once a Journey is complete, members will be awarded with a collectible ‘Journey Stamp’ (a Polygon-based NFT) and bonus Points towards their overall Point total.”⁶⁰³ Quite noticeably in the new hyperreality of cultural

⁶⁰¹ “Introduction to Web3,” *ethereum* (May 19, 2023), <https://ethereum.org/en/web3/>

⁶⁰² “The Starbucks Odyssey Begins,” *Starbucks Stories & News* (December 8, 2022): <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2022/the-starbucks-odyssey-begins/>

⁶⁰³ Ibid. Also see the “Starbucks Odyssey” video where lead designer on the Starbucks digital stamp project Krispijn Larrison discusses the artistry behind the scenes that “brings to life a new dimension of Starbucks”, reminding the

capitalism, the element of risk present in Homer’s epic has been downplayed in favour of returning a sense of play to the third place. But this play now involves exclusive ownership. The 2,000-item “*Siren* Collection,” released in March 2023, inspired by five memorable *Siren* expressions, drawing on the company’s deep coffee stamp archives and an older 2006 trademarked logo that showcases a side view of the sinuous creature, features fanciful, colourful renderings of the company’s iconic *Siren*, with the stamps initially priced from \$100. Five higher priced animated versions of the Starbucks Siren showcase the Siren’s iconic tail, beautifully crafted with a gradient of blues and greens, her long flowing hair meticulously detailed with greens and golds. The siren is sometimes holding a key or a starfish, in the NFT pictured below (a newer version of a rarely used older, protected side view logo – Figures 32, 33, and 34) she appears almost Cyclops-like, silhouetted with her eye traced out (Figures 35, 36, and 37). One can purchase all these stamps on NiftyGateway.com. They were initially offered for \$100 a piece, but now range in price from 475.00 to 7,777,777.00 USD.⁶⁰⁴ To insiders and partners, “The Siren’s Eye” is a term used for a visual guide that baristas follow when setting up seasonal store displays, new signage, or when launching a new product, baked good, or beverage. Partners are required to meticulously follow corporate documents to ensure consistency of product displays across stores, while still allowing for slight variation. In keeping with the goal of a uniform but also eye-catching and colourful brandscape, the digital NFTs are themselves variations on logo themes, once again reinventing the Siren.

viewer that Starbucks mission has always been to “foster connection over coffee, community and belonging”: “Starbucks Odyssey: Behind-the-scenes of our Limited-Edition Stamp Collection,” *YouTube*, uploaded by Starbucks Coffee, 22 Mar 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VhD0laeXn84>

⁶⁰⁴ Andrew R. Chow, “Why NFTs are being sold for thousands of dollars,” *Time* (March 9, 2023): <https://time.com/6260048/starbucks-nfts/>



Figures 32, 33, 34 and 35: Alternative siren logo applications in the Starbucks brandscape (a Siren sign holder [far left] and a green plastic coffee stirrer [centre left] (source: personal collection), followed by the black 2006 trademarked logo [3841834, centre right – Source: <https://www.gerbenlaw.com/trademarks/restaurants/starbucks/>] and 2023 Starbucks Siren Collection NFT #1483[source: www.niftygateway.com/marketplace] [far right])



Figure 36 (left): 2023 Starbucks Siren Collection NFT #1328

[Source: <https://www.niftygateway.com/marketplace/item/0x1ff052df592ffc42fe6a4173975d351dcc99d45/1328>]

Figure 37 (right): 2023 Starbucks Siren Collection NFT #5

[Source: <https://opensea.io/fr/assets/matic/0x1ff052df592ffc42fe6a4173975d351dcc99d45/5>]

That Starbucks has reintroduced the one-eyed “Siren’s Eye” as a digitally traded NFT suggests perhaps Starbucks is extending its dream of “consistency” and extending the siren’s reach as an all-seeing panopticon, in the spirit of Homer’s omniscient sirens. The eye through which the history or herstory of the Siren was told in Josh Crews’ commercial is now either seductively half-closed or more monstrously warns us of the corporation’s Cyclopean powers. Now produced as a bought and sold NFT that anyone in the US can purchase, the Siren’s Eye spectacle eerily represents what Debord states is “the moment when the commodity has attained

the *total occupation* of social life. Not only is the relation to the commodity visible but it is all one sees: the world one sees is its world.... It is *all the sold labor* of a society which globally becomes the *total commodity* for which the cycle must be continued.”⁶⁰⁵ Homer’s siren, who once sang to Odysseus of “everything...directed toward a singing which is always ‘still to come,’”⁶⁰⁶ is now itself the commodity. NFTs have given new life to the siren but also sealed her in commodity fetishism, in liquid capitalist ebbs and flows. She now swims through digital debris, singing in binary code, and articulating a new Odyssey or green-backed “beyond”: a safe haven of capitalist collecting, curiosity and desire. The almost-abstract background for the Starbucks Odyssey collage used to advertise the Odyssey’s “immersive adventures” plays on this dream of caffeinated desire and sustainability, weaving together different production sites and natural symbols—green mountains, fields, blue skies and clouds (Figure 37). But the Odyssey visual tapestry also obscures or overlays these natural symbols with a grid of topographical lines and markers and what looks like glitchy light. The Odyssey collage plays with surface and depth. One almost wants to don 3-D glasses while viewing it; it plays stereoscopically with the viewer (Figure 38).

⁶⁰⁵ Debord, paragraph 42.

⁶⁰⁶ Rebecca Comay, “Adorno’s Siren Song,” *New German Critique*, vol. 81, no. 81 (2000): 21-48: 36.

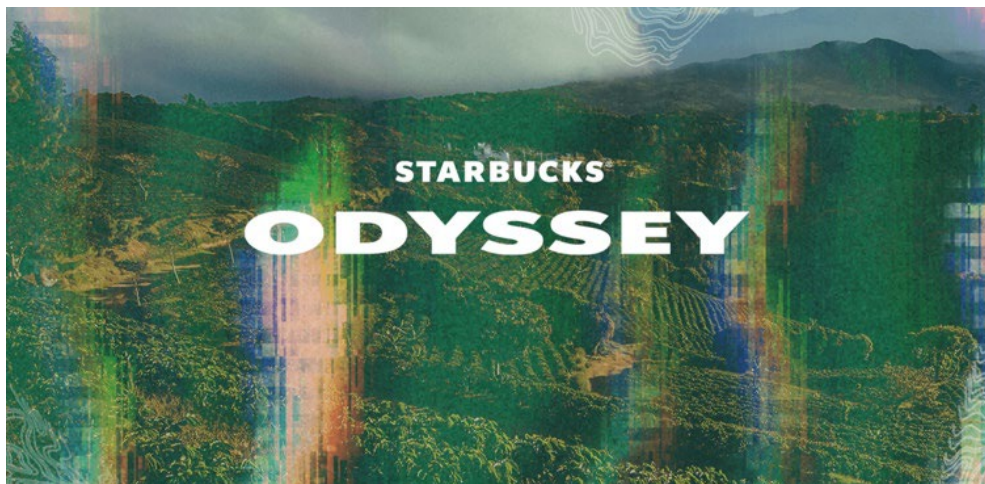


Figure 38: Starbucks Odyssey Graphic
 [Source: <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2022/the-starbucks-odyssey-begins/>]

Lead designer and artist Krispijn Larrison in a video recently shared on Starbucks Coffee poetically depicts the Odyssey stamps as if they were part of Penelope’s tapestry, “weaving together visual elements of Starbucks past, present and future, into beautiful, layered pieces of artwork.”⁶⁰⁷ Starbucks Odyssey trading game asks us to step into a new dimension. As Larrison argues, the NFTs are said to “brings to life a new dimension of Starbucks.” In Brewer and Brotman’s pitch, the Odyssey game also creates a different kind of collage, a digital ecosystem. Recycling the sustainability language the corporation has sought to master since the 90s, the Starbucks employees argue that users of the Starbucks immersive Odyssey game “will form the core digital community and backbone against which” the corporation hopes it can “build future collections and collaborations—all building on the same new *ecosystem*.”⁶⁰⁸ This Starbucks ecosystem itself is not based on rich diversity and collaboration, however, but on digital immersive play and ownership of rare and unique multi-layered siren artwork, “one of a kind”

⁶⁰⁷ “The Starbucks Odyssey Begins,” *Starbucks Stories & News* (December 8, 2022): <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2022/the-starbucks-odyssey-begins/>

⁶⁰⁸ Brewer and Brotman, “Starbucks: We’re creating the digital third place,” (my emphasis in italics).

limited-addition “assets.”⁶⁰⁹ Although the corporate rhetoric has turned away from the ‘third place,’ it seems the coffee giant toys with the possibility of re-reading the third place now as a reward-based Odyssey roadmap adventure to be navigated on a mobile device. Todd Bishop from *GeekWire* participated in the beta launch for Starbucks Odyssey, but thought that “an elaborate marketing game might seem frivolous as workers at hundreds of Starbucks locations vote to unionize in their own quest for better working conditions.”⁶¹⁰ Building impersonal relationships online and crafting a new “third place” strategy based on online play and efficiency ultimately is an attempt to code over the harsher corporate reality and larger sociopolitical issues Starbucks is ensnared in.

5. Starbucks’ Alchemy

One month before resigning again from Starbucks as the company’s interim CEO, Howard Schultz announced a new line of beverages on February 21, 2023 that would beguile the modern-day coffee consumer. Inspired by the “sun-kissed olive groves of Sicily,” Schultz and Starbucks introduced “Oleato, Starbucks coffee infused with Partanna extra virgin olive oil.”⁶¹¹

The “unexpected”⁶¹² pairing of espresso and oil came about through his experience of the “Mediterranean custom of taking a spoonful of olive oil each day”⁶¹³ with his routine of drinking a fresh demitasse of espresso every morning. He describes this blending as a “unique alchemy of

⁶⁰⁹ “Starbucks Odyssey: Behind-the-Scenes of our Limited-Edition Odyssey Stamp Collection,” *YouTube*, uploaded by Starbucks Coffee, 22 Mar 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VhD0laeXn84&t=2s>

⁶¹⁰ Todd Bishop, “I just earned and sold a Starbucks NFT: How it works, what I made and what I learned,” *Geek Wire* (December 21, 2022): <https://www.geekwire.com/2022/i-just-earned-and-sold-my-first-starbucks-nft-how-it-works-how-much-i-made-and-what-i-learned/>

⁶¹¹ “And for the name, the team settled on Oleato, inspired by the Latin word for “olive” and an Italian word that nods to the process of infusing the olive oil with coffee. See Heidi Peiper’s article “Coffee meets olive oil: The story behind Starbucks new coffee ritual—Starbucks Oleato coffee beverages” on *Starbucks Stories & News* (February 21, 2023): <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2023/the-story-behind-starbucks-new-coffee-ritual-oleato-olive-oil/>

⁶¹² “Message from Howard Schultz: Introducing Starbucks Oleato,” *Starbucks Stories & News* (February 21, 2023): <https://stories.starbucks.com/press/2023/message-from-howard-schultz-introducing-starbucks-oleato/>

⁶¹³ *Ibid.*

two of nature’s most transcendent ingredients” that together “create a truly extraordinary experience.”⁶¹⁴ Though this medieval science cannot produce gold, nor the philosopher’s stone, Schultz nevertheless believes that this allegorical experience or *elixir of life*—will be the next Starbucks ritual, shaken and stirred daily. Pinning a lot of hopes on Oleato, Schultz fantasizes that the drink will bring that magical sense of intrigue and romanticism back into coffee. Indeed, in an interview with CNN’s Poppy Harlow, Schultz admitted that “I came back this past year because the company really did lose its way, and it lost its way culturally. The unions showed up because Starbucks was not leading in a way that was consistent with its history in terms of being a values-based company, and I came back to basically restore those values.”⁶¹⁵ Could his idyllic return to Italy help get Starbucks “onward”?

“This summer,” Schultz recounts, “I was once again captivated by a transformational idea while traveling through Italy. I came across a time-honored tradition that transformed my coffee experience and improved my life. It was wholly unexpected, yet the possibilities filled me with excitement.”⁶¹⁶ While adding oil to coffee is not new, noting the recipe of adding butter and coconut oil to coffee to help facilitate ketosis, steaming extra virgin olive oil with oat milk and adding it to Starbucks *blonde* espresso is, on the surface, an attempt to further emulsify Italian tradition into Western culture. But in Schultz’s words, the pairing is also a nostalgic drive or “dream” to capture the essence of coffeehouse culture: “we return to the spirit of entrepreneurship that has differentiated Starbucks for more than 50 years. I truly believe that our enduring drive to constantly exceed the expectations of our partners and customers is the key to

⁶¹⁴ Ibid.

⁶¹⁵ Chloe Taylor, “Howard Schultz says union push at Starbucks is a sign of ‘much bigger’ social problems – but CEO admits the ‘coffee giant’ lost its way,” *Fortune* (February 22, 2023), <https://fortune.com/2023/02/22/starbucks-ceo-howard-schultz-unionization-existential-threat/amp/>

⁶¹⁶ “Message from Howard Schultz: Introducing Starbucks Oleato,” *Starbucks Stories & News* (February 21, 2023): <https://stories.starbucks.com/press/2023/message-from-howard-schultz-introducing-starbucks-oleato/>

our future.”⁶¹⁷ Adding olive oil to coffee, Schultz takes customers back to a time when the company was at its infancy, before Starbucks’ vertiginous expansion, and before the screech of espresso machines muffled the chatter of informal gatherings. “This dream transformed my image of what Starbucks could mean to people and transformed our brand into a global movement to inspire and nurture the human spirit—one person, one cup and one neighbourhood at a time.”⁶¹⁸ By invoking the traditions of olive oil production and refinement, noting that the future of Starbucks relies on innovation and creativity, Schultz’s vision for the company is again part of a classical pedagogy, infused with vignettes of ancient Greek or Egyptian culture, of agoras and Olympics, of golden statues and sacred offerings and celebration. Promotional material for Oleato, drenched in vibrant yellows and gold, convey both the mixture of the viscous substance and a new mythology or theology. Schultz also theatrically debuted his new elite coffee at a special dinner he co-hosted at the Milan Starbucks Roastery with the chairman of “The National Chamber of Italian Fashion” during Milan fashion week. To commemorate this occasion, Starbucks also made “a fashion film, which played for guests” and was incorporated into “Milano Fashion Week programming throughout the week.”⁶¹⁹ Elaborately choreographed bodies, faces, hands and hair (some painted or sprayed with gold), are shown leaping over Starbucks Reserve espresso bars, with golden hands and fingernails tapping on glass, and glittered torsos twisting around nearby exposed steel support columns. Although the dancers first seem to represent a living pantheon of frantic demigods, Starbucks, it seems, wants to continue its climb to vertiginous heights. The ecstatic dancers whose hands shake are perhaps dramatizing

⁶¹⁷ Ibid.

⁶¹⁸ Ibid.

⁶¹⁹ “A Night in Pictures: Starbucks, together with Camera Nazionale della Moda Italiana host dinner to introduce Starbucks Oleato,” *Starbucks Stories & News* (February 21, 2023): <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2023/a-night-in-pictures-starbucks-and-national-chamber-of-italian-fashion-host-dinner-to-introduce-starbucks-oleato/>

the dramatic ritual of the Starbucks baristas shaking drinks over the bar. Instead of struggling, unionizing baristas, we now see a vibrating dancer on top of the bar. The barista body itself is spectacularized in an attempt to once again distract us from actual labour conditions. The shaking hands doubly represent the demands of the customers in front of—not behind—the bar. This dancer performs alone. Does this suggest the sensation of loss as workers left stores during the pandemic, symbolize the loss of the corporate battle against collective unionizing, or symbolize the loss of the third place community? Or is our lone dancer, backlit by soft yellow light that illuminates oddly shaped bottles on the shelves resembling syrup stands although otherwise the Reserve environment seems almost devoid of product, a nostalgic representation of the original Starbucks theatrics celebrated in the Reserve environment, Starbucks most pure Cathedral of Consumption? Hands reach upward to grasp at the glory of old Starbucks theatrics, shaking together with a movement that echoes the rhythm of the Starbucks shaker.



Figure 39: National Chamber of Italian Fashion and Starbucks introduce Starbucks Oleato

[Source: <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2023/a-night-in-pictures-starbucks-and-national-chamber-of-italian-fashion-host-dinner-to-introduce-starbucks-oleato/>]

At the end of the Starbucks Milano promotional video, we zoom out from a tall glass of an iced-espresso beverage containing the olive-oil alchemy and see a re-establishing shot of two young women sitting across from each other (Figure 39). The women depicted here are sitting at a wooden circular table. They exchange knowing smiles, not words. The woman on the left is framed by a barred window in the background that is out of focus; her head is tilted downwards glancing to the right at her friend, while her hair is loose and falls over her pink shirt adorned with jewels. The woman on the right folds her arms after taking a sip of the beverage, her body closed off and hair straighter than the woman across from her. The muted colouring of her clothes contrasts with the vibrant pink. Guests who are coupled together at tables appear in the back and are backlit. It is not clear if the guests in the background are consuming Oleato. We are conditioned to view these two women, who are not painted in gold like the dancers in the dream sequence, as somehow inherently distinct from the world around them. Yet they are also quietly ecstatic, lost in a fantasy world. The advertisement tells us that anyone who is not consuming a

Starbucks beverage, regardless of whether it is Oleato or a Frappuccino, is not privy to this fantasy. Looking to Debord again, the seduction of the spectacle operates on partitioning: “The most earthly life thus becomes opaque and unbreathable. It no longer projects into the sky but shelters within itself its absolute denial, its fallacious paradise. The spectacle is the technical realization of the exile of human powers into a beyond; it is separation perfected within the interior of [humankind].”⁶²⁰ By consuming Starbucks Oleato, consumers are imagined to soar into a “beyond” that is birthed in a soaring space or more humble interior: an alienated utopia conjured up by the mythic third place and the multisensory rituals in the Starbucks Reserves as cathedral of consumption. Oleato, the next “Starbucks Experience” and spectacle refilters and repackages Debord’s “beyond” in the face of the dramatic “loss” of a third place. Again, it is instructive to recall Debord’s musings on the spectacle, bringing his theory of the spectacle into a new dialogue with Oleato: “The spectacle is the material reconstruction of the religious illusion. Spectacular technology [via alchemy] has not dispelled the religious clouds where [people] had placed their own powers detached from themselves; it has only tied them to an earthly base.”⁶²¹ The earthy essence of extra virgin olive oil conveys the pastoral fields of Italy and Greece, the pure or “extra virgin” essences of community and kitchen, but also discreet pleasures—aesthetics and idolatry. Schultz’ olive oil dream involves the pleasures of looking, shaking, touching and growing, capturing a world unaffected by time.

Like coffee, the cultural history of olive oil is linked to commerce, religion, power, and prestige. Today, olive oil is also a part of the wellness landscape and can be found in soaps for

⁶²⁰ Debord, paragraph 20.

⁶²¹ Debord, paragraph 20.

bathing, lotions, and in supplements to foster healthy diets.⁶²² Consuming healthy fats has become the new rage. Oleato is an elite wellness product. Lin Foxhall's *Olive Oil Cultivation in Ancient Greece* suggests that those who could access and consume olive oil did so for prestige. They were from wealthy households, and consuming olive oil “was the endpoint of desire ... and could both reflect and construct the identity and status of the individual consumer.”⁶²³ The practices of imbibing olive oil has long been linked to the social status of the consumer. Foxhall notes that “the literal embodiment of specialness through the consumption of olive oil, internally and externally, often took place in social situations where that specialness was highlighted ... the symposium (oil for food, lighting and perfume) and the gymnasium (oil for cleansing and conditioning the athletic male body). In this sense the consumption of olive oil in all its forms does not merely enhance the social status of the consumer, it serves more basically as a key constituent of personal identity, through the body, of the consumer.”⁶²⁴ Schultz's intentions of infusing olive oil into Starbucks drinks may not simply be a bucolic dream, a fantasy of experiencing new tastes and textures. For the post-pandemic Starbucks, a coffee giant that has long defined itself by crafting a “special” place, olive oil consumption promises something healthy and safe—rebirth and restoration- both for the coffee citizen and the larger corporation.

Foxhall notes that oil was at times considered “a gift of the goddess in Athenian thought.... Yet, with this oil, the consumer also embodies a physical reification of ‘being Athenian’ in its most basic sense, and one which connects ‘being Athenian’ directly with the

⁶²² “Olive Oil: A Brief History,” *Olive Oil Emporium*: <https://www.oliveoilemporium.com/pages/origins-of-the-olive/a-brief-history>

⁶²³ Lin Foxhall, *Olive Cultivation in Ancient Greece: Seeking the Ancient Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 26.

⁶²⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

realm of the divine via a material food commodity.”⁶²⁵ Georg Lukács returned to Marx’s concept of reification in 1923 to explain how social relations are mediated by the objects (ideas and symbols) that are produced, consumed, or fetishized.⁶²⁶ Reification, as Lukács suggests, is also closely related to the dialectics of alienation. By (in)fusing olive oil with espresso and using this new elite product to again conjure up his dream or memory of the third place in Milan, Schultz seeks to “restore” the lost post-pandemic Starbucks body, form/fuse community once again.

Loss is a sensation that is not entirely uncommon to the coffeehouse.⁶²⁷ The murky, vertiginous, and aquatic sensation conveyed by Polgar’s literary coffee house could be translated into deeper recesses of melancholia and grief. In the Starbucks mythology, the reification of loss is expressed through a symbol, a siren, whose pelagic abode and song—or technological blare—embellishes and haunts coffeehouse culture. I end this chapter with the words of Métis writer

⁶²⁵ Foxhall, 94-95.

⁶²⁶ See Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1971). Foxhall suggests that the process of ‘being Athenian’ through the consumption of oil begins with “conferring value upon an object... creating a materiality it did not necessarily possess intrinsically. That is, an object in this sense could be a thing, but it could also be a service, idea, technique, relationship, image, or anything else, which through the cultural and social processes by which they come to be valued, are transformed in effect into concrete objects with a material existence which can be measured against something else. The specifics of the cultural and social processes of desire, though which such values are conferred, are almost infinitely variable.” In this sense, Foxhall suggests that the “reification of the desired object” creates “social acts which define the relationships of people and the things in their world.” Foxhall, 258.

⁶²⁷ The reification of loss through various icons and symbols and tools can be quite powerful, especially when filtered through coffeehouse culture and tradition. Writing in *New York Times*, Jason Zengerle notes how Black Rifle Coffee Company, an internet coffeehouse supplier based in Salt Lake City, Utah, has “explicitly presented itself as a troll-y, Trump-y alternative to the Seattle giant (32).” This coffeeshop which sells their coffee and merchandise online names their roasts after contentious political moments, Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign is a special blend “Make America Great Again.” There is also a “Freedom Roast,” “Thin Blue Line,” “Beyond Black,” and their darkest roast, “Murdered Out.” While I am finishing this dissertation, I see that their social media account on Instagram boasts 1.8 million followers. The company was founded in 2014 by Evan Hafer “and two fellow veteran who served in Afghanistan and Iraq and who were enthusiastic enlistees in America’s culture wars.” Zengerle points out that Black Rifle’s political stance appeals to the far right and spoofs the liberalism of popular corporations and trendy businesses, which appeal to specific political alignments, “not necessarily for ideological reasons but for business ones (31).” On a talk show entitled, “Fox & Friends,” Hafer stated “‘I want people who voted for Trump to know that there is another option for you... Howard Schultz doesn’t want your business. I do.’” When holding a Black Rifle coffee mug, consumers hold the gun or weapon itself, which is the materialization of one of Hafer’s video statement’s that “Black Rifle believes ‘in the Constitution, the Second Amendment, [and] the right to bear arms’ (30).” See Jason Zengerle, “Selling the Culture Wars: Can the Black Rifle Coffee Company Become the Starbucks of the Right?” *New York Times* (July 18, 2021), 32.

Délani Valin, who captures this haunting melancholia of the Starbucks mythology in her poem “STARBUCKS,” in her personifying and giving voice to the coffee giant’s capitalist mascot, the Starbucks Siren, to tell a cautionary tale of overconsumption, mourning, and loss. Reversing the gaze, we see what the Siren sees—a sea of waste. In this Siren song one fatefully does not belong, drifting and squirming in a post-pandemic age:

STARBUCKS

I used to sink southern ships
 with the flick of a fin
 Watched old whaling captains
 lock themselves in their chambers.
 I followed the wrecks, swam
 down to comfort sailors,
 stroked their black-algae hair
 as they succumbed to stillness

The water warmed-
 it scalded skin and tale.
 Corals caved to acid. I found
 the whales humming, high pitched,
 like kettles. We swam,
 past rusting tankers spewing
 waste, and garbage barges,
 trapping seagulls in plastic rings.

Tangled and squirming,
 they hoisted me into harbour.
 Held down, examined, probed,
 I was brought to Pike’s Place
 to become a fish-tossed mascot.

I sometimes stare at the sea
 to look at the floating paper cups.⁶²⁸

⁶²⁸ Délani Valin, “STARBUCKS,” *Shapeshifters* (Gibsons: Nightwood Editions, 2022), 11.

Conclusion – A New Siren: Behind the Scenes

As I sit down to write the conclusion to this dissertation, Starbucks is in a transitional moment and is “reinventing” itself once again. My aim in this conclusion is to reflect on larger themes addressed in the dissertation, mediating on the Starbucks spectacle, bucolic storytelling, and the move away from a “third place” mission, also taking stock of where Starbucks is headed as the unionization drive continues and Howard Schultz steps down as three-times CEO of the company (two weeks earlier than planned).

The last time Schultz “retired” from Starbucks there was speculation he would put in a bid for president.⁶²⁹ There are no such speculations now. Schultz would no doubt prefer to stay out of the limelight after a tense exchange with Bernie Sanders on Capitol Hill when he was called to testify before the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee and address allegations that the corporate giant has been breaking labor laws in its vehement fight against unionization. Not surprisingly, Schultz initially turned down Sanders’ request to testify. The Chairman of the Senate Help Committee subsequently subpoenaed the CEO and demanded he respond publicly to unfair practice labor complaints the *National Labor Relations Board* filed against Starbucks. The Vermont Senator in a press release also called on Schultz and Starbucks to publicly apologize to the workers for breaking federal law. Schultz of course denied all accusations. On May 3, 2022, NPR already reported that Starbucks characteristically “denies engaging in illegal anti-union activities, including at other stores where worker organizers have

⁶²⁹ Andrew Ross Sorkin, “Howard Schultz to step down as Starbucks Executive Chairman,” *New York Times* (June 4, 2018): <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/04/business/dealbook/starbucks-howard-schultz.html>

been fired. Starbucks says the workers in question were fired for violating company policies.”⁶³⁰ Testifying before the Senate committee, almost a year later Schultz played up his “humble” background, repeatedly claiming not to be a union-buster and instead repeating ad nauseum that all Starbucks workers are considered “partners.” Starbucks promises hourly wages above minimum rates, company stock, and post-secondary tuition rebates, provided one meets the stringent criteria, but the company has claimed that some benefits and salary incentives no longer apply to stores that are unionizing.⁶³¹ Only hours after Schultz’ testimony, Starbucks investors voted for an independent third-party assessment of the coffee giant’s labor practices.⁶³² The NLRB records also speak louder than Schultz. Starbucks in many cases was not only been sued; the company was also asked to reinstate fired workers: “The NLRB [National Labor Relations Board] has issued formal complaints against Starbucks in a couple such cases, calling the actions retaliatory. In Arizona, the NLRB has sued Starbucks to have three workers reinstated.”⁶³³ Some rulings have even ordered Starbucks to issue back-pay to these workers.⁶³⁴ The City of New

⁶³⁰ Andrea Hsu, “Starbucks says employees getting new benefits, but not at stores that are unionizing,” (May 3, 2022): <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/03/1095909869/starbucks-union-ceo-howard-schultz-workers-united-labor-benefits>

⁶³¹ Ibid. Also see Jasmine Leli’s article, “I’m a Starbucks Barista who doesn’t qualify for the wonderful benefits you keep hearing about. We want the ‘different kind of company’ that Howard Schultz promised but failed to deliver,” *Fortune* (March 30, 2023): <https://fortune.com/2023/03/30/starbucks-barista-doesnt-qualify-for-wonderful-benefits-you-howard-schultz-unions/>

⁶³² See Danielle Wiener-Bonner, “Starbucks Shareholders want more information about the company’s anti-union efforts,” *CNN* (March 30, 2023): <https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/30/business/starbucks-shareholder-proposal-unions/index.html> and Hilary Russ, “Starbucks Shareholders approve review of labor union practices,” *Reuters* (March 30, 2023): <https://www.reuters.com/business/retail-consumer/starbucks-shareholders-approve-review-labor-union-practices-2023-03-29/>

⁶³³ Alina Selyukh and Andrea Hsu, “In clash with Bernie Sanders, Starbucks’ Howard Schultz insists he’s no union buster,” (March 29, 2023): <https://www.npr.org/2023/03/29/1166277326/starbucks-bernie-sanders-howard-schultz-union-hearing>.

⁶³⁴ Ibid. Selyukh and Hsu further report that “Federal labor officials have issued scores of complaints against the coffee giant. Administrative law judges have found Starbucks violated labor laws in at least eight of those cases so far, which the company is appealing. Some rulings have ordered Starbucks to reinstate fired workers and issue them back-pay. One said Starbucks engaged in egregious and widespread misconduct demonstrating a general disregard for the employees.” Although judges found Starbucks violated labor laws in numerous cases, the company is appealing.

York also sued Starbucks for wrongfully firing a Queens barista and union organizer.⁶³⁵ A myth-busting press release Sanders' office circulated claims the three-time CEO "faces nearly 100 accusations of violations of federal labor law for statements he made during 'collaboration' and 'co-creation' sessions" he hosted with Starbucks workers nationwide.⁶³⁶

Schultz's dream-like vision of a third place at this point was quickly crumbling, turning into a nightmare involving unfair working conditions and "partners" threatened with termination should they speak out. While corporate headquarters celebrated "Founder's Day" at headquarters on March 22nd, 2023 (two days after the new CEO assumed office), workers at over 100 Starbucks nationwide including Seattle went on strike.⁶³⁷ Picket signs read "No contract. No coffee." Amy McCarthy in an article provocatively entitled "What's the point of Starbucks Now?" suggests that the third place idea is quickly fading from view as the company is "leaning hard into operating just like any other fast-food restaurant," emphasizing speed and quick turnover rates⁶³⁸ If the point of a Starbucks was once to provide a warm place beyond the obligations of work and home, this scaled-down Starbucks signifies a dead end for many cold-shouldered by the company. Although the Starbucks ship may be sailing in a new direction of mobile orders and drive-thrus, many partners and even shareholders believe the coffee giant should still incubate a "third place." On April 11, 2023, civil rights, environmental, gender

⁶³⁵ Jack Stebbins, "NYC sues Starbucks for coffee chain's firing of union organizer," *CNBC* (September 2, 2022): <https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/02/nyc-sues-starbucks-for-coffee-chains-firing-of-union-organizer.html>

⁶³⁶ "News: Help Majority Staff Report on Starbucks," *Bernie Sanders: U.S. Senator for Vermont* (March 26, 2023) <https://www.sanders.senate.gov/press-releases/news-help-majority-staff-report-on-starbucks/>

⁶³⁷ "Starbucks workers across U.S. to tell CEO Howard Schultz: 'Union busting is disgusting!'" *SEIU/1021* (March 13, 2023): <https://www.seiu1021.org/article/starbucks-workers-across-us-tell-ceo-howard-schultz-union-busting-disgusting> and Josh Eidelson, "Starbucks union to greet new CEO Narasimhan with 100 Café Strike," *Bloomberg* (March 22, 2023): <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-03-22/starbucks-sbux-baristas-welcoming-new-ceo-laxman-narasimhan-with-a-strike>. The workers' strike was timed to coincide with Founder's Day celebrations honouring Schultz at Starbucks corporation headquarters.

⁶³⁸ Amy McCarthy, "What's the point of Starbucks Now?" (September 21, 2022): <https://www.eater.com/23365208/starbucks-new-cafes-third-place-pivot-union-fight>

justice and labour groups ceremoniously called on the new Starbucks CEO to reinstate the third place: “It’s our hope that you uphold Starbucks’ reputation as an inclusive and welcoming third place for the community by taking this opportunity to redefine the company’s relationship with Starbucks partners working in cafes, reserve stores, and roasteries across the country.” The open letter penned on official Starbucks Workers United letterhead calls for the new CEO to bargain in good faith with over 7,500 workers who have formed the union, also asking for the corporation to sign the Fair Elections Principles, affirming workers’ legal right to organize.⁶³⁹ In conversations with the Associated Press, however, Narasimhan held firm on Schultz’ position that the coffee conglomerate “functions best without a union,” although he did acknowledge that “Starbucks respects worker’ right to organize.”⁶⁴⁰ At the shareholder meeting with the new CEO management clearly stated it would “not be entering into a labor neutrality agreement” with the union, since this would “prohibit” the coffee giant’s ability “to talk openly and freely with... partners.” Instead of committing to specific agreements regarding workers’ rights to unionize, the new CEO at the shareholders meeting spoke in a more relaxed way about fostering “intimate and deep human connection.”⁶⁴¹ Going back to a deep well spring of Starbucks rhetoric about restoring “human connection” during COVID-19 (echoing former CEO Johnson), Lax (as he is known to partners) jettisons the dream of “third place” intimacy, but resurrects in its place a fantasy of human connectivity.

⁶³⁹ Starbucks Workers Union Ally Sign-on Letter (April 11, 2023), addressed to Mr. Narasimhan: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/61195afce6d74d317a220f9f/t/64349b729222e775276a8afb/1681169267195/SBWU+Ally+Sign-on+Letter.pdf>

⁶⁴⁰ Dee-Ann Durbin, “New CEO plans to work in stores monthly,” *The Globe and Mail* (March 23, 2023): <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/starbucks-ceo-laxman-narasimhan-barista-work-in-stores-once-a-month-letter-investors/>

⁶⁴¹ “Transcript for Starbucks 2023 Shareholder Meeting,” (31st annual shareholders’ meeting) https://s22.q4cdn.com/869488222/files/doc_events/2023/Mar/23/starbucks-annual-meeting-of-shareholders-transcript.pdf

If connectivity here sounds tech-driven, it is. Even the most cursory scan of some of the headliner articles on the new CEO tells us that Narasimhan has already turned “to technology to brew up a more personal connection with its customers,” has asked staff to do “connectivity sessions” (croissant and coffee-fuelled meet-ups between team members and store managers opened by Lax himself on video) and has donned not only a green apron, but also a VR set on the café floor in an immersive virtual reality barista training program.⁶⁴² If Schultz in the late 90s and early aughts had a new technologically-driven corporate vision of the hang-out cafe modeled on World Wide Web “networking” and “high tech loitering,” the new CEO has already authored his own holistic coffee-tech-philosophy.⁶⁴³ In a mission statement and remarks made at the Spring 2023 Shareholder’s meeting, Narasimhan diagnoses the modern world as one pulverized by “disconnection” and “crisis,” arguing that in “a world in a crisis of disconnection, where loneliness, division and polarization have become far too common, the everyday ritual of coffee is a powerful way to make connection happily with others, and with yourself.”⁶⁴⁴ The CEO proposes a caffeine-infused panacea to the post-pandemic crisis, arguing that in “a different type

⁶⁴² The new CEO has also promised to regularly visit stores and work a half-day shift on the café floor once a month. These connection sessions and CEO barista shifts have been eyed suspiciously by some partners. According to *Fortune Magazine*, a union representative told *Insider* that the “so-called connectivity sessions are nothing more than a thinly veiled attempt by the company to continue its unprecedented union-busting campaign.” The Barista coffee and chocolate croissants offered during these sessions aren’t enough to tempt unionized employees. Instead, the union representative stated they want to see the management come to the bargaining table: “If Starbucks really wanted to connect with its partners, it could meaningfully participate in bargaining with workers at the more than 300 stores who have joined together and voted to form a union.” See Eleanor Pringle, “Starbucks is inviting staff on 2-hour coffee dates as it works to fix rift with unionizing employees,” *Fortune* (April 26, 2023):

<https://fortune.com/2023/04/26/starbucks-ceo-laxman-narasimhan-connection-staff-sessions-amid-union-attempts/> and Aidan Pollard, “I’d really prefer it if he stayed out of our way’: Starbucks union organizers lash out at CEO’s promise to work behind the counter,” *Business Insider India* (March 25, 2023):

<https://www.businessinsider.in/international/news/id-really-prefer-it-if-he-stayed-out-of-our-way-starbucks-union-organizers-lash-out-at-ceos-promise-to-work-behind-the-counter/articleshow/98999486.cms>

⁶⁴³ Narasimhan’s knowledge of technology was seen as a major asset when he was hired. “Starbucks names Laxman Narasimhan Its New CEO,” *New York Times* (September 2, 2022):

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/02/business/dealbook/meet-starbucks-new-chief-executive-laxman-narasimhan.html>

⁶⁴⁴ Danny Klein, “Starbucks New CEO: We Will Deliver Connection,” *QSR*, May 3, 2023:

<https://www.qsrmagazine.com/beverage/starbucks-new-ceo-we-will-deliver-connection>

of world” where “millions of people ... feel isolated and alone... socially excluded ... and crave meaningful connections over a cup of coffee” it is Starbucks that “delivers connection no matter how you visit us, in stores, drive-thrus, or digitally—we are there to provide this connection, any place, any time.” In a post-pandemic alienated world Starbucks promises “to deliver connection,”⁶⁴⁵ but despite the claims of the new mission statement, community paradoxically is secondary; this ‘connection’ the new CEO states could be “with others” or could be just “with yourself.” Community collapses into self-care rhetoric.

Distancing itself from the urban dream and spatial rhetoric of Oldenburg’s “neighborhood third place” (perhaps now too intimately tied to an older “hangout” café model and the underpaid labor of the barista), Starbucks now speaks of an “expanded sphere” ... moving beyond “neighborhoods to communities,’ inviting people in both stores and digital spaces to be part of the conversation.”⁶⁴⁶ Cups, conversations and community live on, although one can also have a “conversation” with “oneself.” In other memos, the new CEO calls for cheaper cups, greater speed, more efficiency. The mission statement powerful ends in this vein with thoughts on expansion and profitability, not community: “Our shareholder promise: Generate long-term returns.”⁶⁴⁷ Connectivity, optimization, automatization ... this is not new,

⁶⁴⁵ Danny Klein, “Starbucks New CEO: We Will Deliver Connection,” *QSR* (May 3 2023): <https://www.qsrmagazine.com/beverage/starbucks-new-ceo-we-will-deliver-connection>. On Schultz’ cyberspace “networking” vision see Richard Gibson, “For Starbucks, Internet Froth takes on Whole New Meaning,” *Wall Street Journal* (May 26 1999), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB927676228276030287> and John Markoff’s articles: “Microsoft and Starbucks to offer wireless internet over coffee,” *New York Times* (January 3, 2001): <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/01/03/technology/microsoft-and-starbucks-to-offer-wireless-internet-over-coffee.html> and “Starbucks and Microsoft plan coffeehouse web access,” *New York Times* (January 4, 2001): <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/01/04/business/technology-starbucks-and-microsoft-plan-coffeehouse-web-access.html>

⁶⁴⁶ Heidi Peiper, “A new mission for Starbucks,” *Starbucks Stories & News* (April 24, 2023): <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2023/a-new-mission-for-starbucks/>.

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid. This Starbucks story tunes us in to Narasimhan’s “new mission and brand promises: “Our Mission/with every *cup*/with every *conversation*/with every *community*—we nurture the limitless possibilities of human connection “(my emphasis). The larger promise, however, contains six points. “Our partner promise: Bridge to a better future. Our customer promise: Uplift the everyday. Our farmer promise: Ensure the future of coffee for all.

but strategically recycled rhetoric in a larger Reinvention- era epistemology. As Dee-Ann Durbin of the Associate Press writes: Narasimhan’s goal is threefold: to see “Starbucks evolve into a more global company, be less wasteful” and finally and most emphatically “move with greater speed.”⁶⁴⁸ From inventory lists to coffee and drink production and mobile ordering, Starbucks is implementing new digital technologies, workflow tools and “automatization” tricks (also AI-driven) to increase profits and ostensibly according to Frank Britt, Starbucks’ chief strategy and transformation officer “free up time and energy for the production of coffee itself, and most importantly, the connection to customers.”⁶⁴⁹

Not surprisingly, Narasimhan’s inauguration on March 20, 2023 was spun by *Starbucks Stories & News* into a simple tale of connectivity, technology and humanity. The inauguration was celebrated with great fanfare with a photo-op and sharable story about humble beginnings entitled “Photos. Laxman Narasimhan’s Immersive Training from Starbucks barista to CEO.” The title promises a sort of rags to riches story, climbing the ladder from barista to CEO. As the photo shoot reminds us, the executive in training did a four-week barista certification program prior to create a public image of a “hands-on” and relatable coffeehouse CEO. Bright and optimistic pics show Narasimhan wearing a VR headset in the company of laughing baristas (promoting the Clover Vertica VR barista training program), embracing fellow partners, and even meeting coffee farmers in Hacienda Alsacia. Starbucks Storyteller Heidi Peiper writes:

Our community promise: Contribute positively. Our environmental promise: Give more than we take. *Our shareholder promise: Generate long-term returns.*” (my emphasis).

⁶⁴⁸ Dee-Ann Durbin, “New Starbucks CEO plans to work in stores monthly,” *The Globe and Mail* (March 23, 2023): <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/starbucks-ceo-laxman-narasimhan-barista-work-in-stores-once-a-month-letter-investors/>

⁶⁴⁹ Aneurin Canham-Clyne, “The 4 biggest takeaways from Starbucks’ Investor Day,” *Restaurant Dive* (September 14, 2022): <https://www.restaurantdive.com/news/4-key-takeaways-starbucks-investor-day/631783/>. Also see note 442 for partners’ responses to this new technology and “Starbucks shareholders take virtual reality tour of Costa Rican farm,” *Tico Times* (March 23, 2017): <https://ticotimes.net/2017/03/23/starbucks-shareholders-take-virtual-reality-tour-costa-rican-farm>

“Whether it’s hand-delivering a new cold foam blender to baristas in Seattle or testing out the virtual reality training for the new Clover Vertica™ in Minneapolis, Narasimhan has taken a hands-on approach to new technologies to help create a better store experience for partners and customers.”⁶⁵⁰ Laxman himself is wrapped up in new virtual tricks of “liquid capitalism,” immersed and enveloped in new siren technologies as he “earns” his barista certification and green apron from the ground up. At Starbucks VR “mixed reality glasses” behind the scenes are being used to enable partners “to identify customers using face detection,” enable customers to pay “without physically swapping money,” enable shareholders to virtually visit coffee production sites and show partners how to craft specific drinks.⁶⁵¹ Starbucks’ third CEO also debuted the coffee conglomerate’s “Siren System” at the “Invest Today” fair in Spring 2023. This new equipment was designed to streamline and enhance barista productivity and “reduce friction in the employee experience – eliminating steps and increasing speed of service.”⁶⁵² Other

⁶⁵⁰ Heidi Peiper, “Photo: Laxman Narasimhan’s immersive training—from Starbucks barista to CEO,” *Starbucks Stories & News* (March 22, 2023): <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2023/photos-laxman-narasimhans-immersive-training-from-starbucks-barista-to-ceo/>

⁶⁵¹ See creative director Franklin Bachrach’s virtual VR Barista Training Experience mockup and article “Starbucks VR Barista Training Experience,” <http://www.franklinbachrach.com/starbucks>

⁶⁵² Joey Thompson, “Starbucks nears rollout of time-saving ‘Siren System’ in stores,” *Puget Sound Business Journal* (May 2, 2023): <https://www.bizjournals.com/seattle/news/2023/05/02/laxman-first-earnings-call-siren-system.html>. With the advent of the Siren System, one might say Starbucks has returned to or resurrected the original Il Giornale logo, the “Mercury” of speed. In a sense, as it launches and lurches “onward” in its quest for streamlined technological efficiency, the Siren herself now signals a more mercurial and less gregarious tale. Each Starbucks is tied to the mast of its corporate ship and its workers’ ears are plugged with a metaphorical wax, filled with the shrill sound of the automatic system. Speech with consumers is now pointless - both consumers and workers are isolated and alienated in this shrill, streamlined cafe experience. In this hypermodern cafe environment as more stores are turning towards tableless layouts and digital landscapes/brandsapes, Starbucks partners are wrapped up in a new Odyssey -- many baristas have vocally expressed their discontent as they contemplate the song of this new automated siren, a shrill reminder of a company that never stops to reach beyond and up, ever expanding and absorbing more profits. See some of the scathing comments on this automatization posted on Starbucks official TikTok account in response to a video the company posted introducing the Siren System”- “Sneak Peak into the Future of Starbucks Innovation - Siren System Cold Bar,” <https://www.tiktok.com/@starbuckspartners/video/7154044261296573738?lang=en> (Starbucks has notably decided to disable comments on their Fashion Week Oleato videos posted to YouTube), corporategossippod’s @nitetoast TikTok post “Starbucks Automation: Who likes it?” <https://www.tiktok.com/@corporategossippod/video/715446045327453274520878> Ross Yodder’s “Starbucks’ Reinvention Plan is Facing Employee Criticism,” *BuzzFeed* (October 18, 2022): <https://www.buzzfeed.com/rossyoder/starbucks-reinvention-plan-cold-bar-employee-criticism> and Allyson Waller,

automization tools the corporation is using to “reinvent” the “Starbucks Experience” are “Deep Brew” (AI) and the “Starbucks Connect” mobile order and pay and rewards program.⁶⁵³ By celebrating the new CEO as both common barista partner and new “human” face of technological innovation, the Starbucks Storytelling team creates another bucolic narrative, strategically distracting us from Starbucks’ union-busting activities and the controversial Senate hearing with Schultz. Behind-the-scenes—one has to wonder—is Schultz still pulling the strings? He is after all still a Starbucks executive and still serves on the company’s board.

Before he stepped down as CEO, Schultz also crafted a new myth-infused spectacle and elite Reserve “experience” to help boost stock prices and reboot the company: the olive-oil infused coffee drink Oleato (the name is playful blend of the Italian terms olive [olive] and oliato [oiled or smooth]). To promote this new “unique alchemy” of Partanna extra virgin olive oil and coffee as a “luxurious” ritual (to establish its European pedigree, it was first trialed and released in Italy), Starbucks partnered up with Vogue and the fashion industry on both sides of the Atlantic. In February 2023, during Milan Fashion Week, Schultz first served the velvety drink that combines two Italian classics at a private gala dinner the CEO co-hosted at the Italian Starbucks Roastery with Carlo Capasa, Chairman of the Camera Nazionale della Moda Italiana.

“It’s going to be like trying to get ice cream at McDonald’s: Starbucks’ New Machine Siren System Cold Bar Sparks Debate,” *The Daily Dot* (October 18, 2022): <https://www.dailydot.com/debug/starbucks-siren-system-cold-bar/>

⁶⁵³ Rick Huckstep, “Brand Strategy: How Starbucks Leverages Machine Learning to Revolutionize the Customer Experience,” *Rick Huckstep*, (March 8, 2023): <https://rickhuckstep.com/starbucks-machine-learning/>. Deep Brew and “predictive ordering” were first introduced by former CEO Kevin Johnson and were thought of as ways to enhance the “third place” experience. Also see: “How Starbucks uses AI and Innovation to create their ‘Third Place’ Competitive Advantage,” (November 12, 2021): <https://subspace.com/resources/starbucks-ai-and-innovation> ; “Starbucks Outlines AI-Powered Expansion of Walk-Thru Stores,” *BrainStation* (December 10, 2020): <https://brainstation.io/magazine/starbucks-outlines-ai-powered-expansion-of-walk-thru-stores> ; Panda (Alumni), “Brewing with a Dash of Data and Analytics – Starbucks,” *Digital Initiative* (April 19, 2020): <https://d3.harvard.edu/platform-digit/submission/brewing-with-a-dash-of-data-and-analytics-starbucks/> and Tonya Garcia, “Starbucks gets personal with Deep Brew artificial intelligence program.” *MarketWatch* (November 1, 2019): <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/starbucks-gets-personal-with-deep-brew-artificial-intelligence-program-2019-10-31>

Starbucks baristas served Oleato Golden Foam Cold Brew, Oleato Iced Shaken Espresso and Oleato Golden Foam Espresso Martinis.⁶⁵⁴ The National Chamber of Italian Fashion, as briefly discussed in the last chapter, also shot a short commercial at the Roastery to playfully introduce their new “alchemy,” celebrating the new commodity with a musical medley of classical and contemporary dance styles and dress dramatically performed on the bar and floor of the Roastery. The Milan video starts off with a blues-like female vocalist silkily singing “Your touch makes me weak...” and the video ends with two women seated at a café caressing their Oleato glasses. A second Oleato fashion video shot in New York City by Vogue and Starbucks in a sense picks up where the first music video ends. The video used to promote both Starbucks and the 2023 Met Gala aired May 1st “during Vogue’s Met Gala live stream and re-plays of the Met Gala red carpet experience” and was shared on Twitter, YouTube and “on select Conde Nast channels.”⁶⁵⁵ Again we see an inky interior, tactility, and sensuality; the video also dramatizes the female “hands” that caress the Oleato drink.

Insert a new Starbucks Siren, a bird of paradise in her dark interiors. This siren is caught up in a spectacle of gender performance and camp, caught up in the magic of “fashion’s biggest night out” which, according to *Vogue*, draws “stars, young creatives, and industry paragons.”⁶⁵⁶ We assume this suave siren is preparing to attend the event, sipping on “Oleato Golden Foam

⁶⁵⁴ “A Night in Pictures: Starbucks, together with Camera Nazionale della Moda Italiana host Dinner to Introduce Oleato,” *Starbucks Stories & News* (February 21, 2023): <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2023/a-night-in-pictures-starbucks-and-national-chamber-of-italian-fashion-host-dinner-to-introduce-starbucks-oleato/> and Annabel Sampson, “How a Starbucks Gala Dinner became the most coveted Invitation of Milan Fashion Week,” *Tatler* (February 22, 2023): <https://www.tatler.com/article/inside-starbucks-gala-dinner-milan-fashion-week-harold-schultz-dame-anna-wintour>

⁶⁵⁵ “Starbucks is the exclusive coffee of the 2023 Met Gala,” *Starbucks Stories & News* (May 1, 2023): <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2023/starbucks-is-the-exclusive-coffee-of-the-2023-met-gala/> In its first design collaboration, Starbucks also recently partnered with Brandon Blackwood to produce a “limited edition slip & sling” handbag to celebrate the release of another non-caffeinated drink, their “Pink and Paradise” summer beverage. Vogue has also actively promoted the bags. See: Shauna Ben-Haynes, “Brandon Blackwood & Starbucks Debut Limited Edition Sip & Sling Bottle Bag Collection,” *TeenVogue* (April 28, 2023): <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/starbucks-brandon-blackwood-bottle-bag-collection>

⁶⁵⁶ “Met Gala 2023: Celebrities, Red Carpet, Theme & More,” <https://www.vogue.com/tag/event/met-gala>

Espresso Martini,” the drink advertised at the end of the video. For the first time our siren is made human; her feathers, however, conjure up the armor of those chimeric creatures, half bird-women imagined by Greek mythology and early Homeric traditions. This new coffee siren is a sophisticated, sensual, and opulent woman who possesses a wealth of social capital and commands a depth of cultural tradition.

Tactility and touching are foregrounded in this video; the sculpted hands narrate the drama unfolding before the viewer. Black artist, dancer, and hand model Lya Pouleyy plays the siren who wears the luxurious feathered Chanel jacket.⁶⁵⁷ Her hands were prominently displayed in a “World Emoji Day” post by Apple that introduced the pink acrylic nail emoji and also showcased in sensuous ads for Cetaphil cleaning supplies, Intelligentsia candles, Celebration coffee, Johnnie Walker alcohol and spirits, smartphones and Victoria Beckham beauty products.⁶⁵⁸ The cocktail crafted by Pouleyy’s caressing hand is not only a haptic spectacle; the coffee foam is also a kitschy ornamental “touch,” a way to embellish or enhance an already decadent cultural experience, like cosmetics. Oleato is introduced as a new multi-sensory ritual, stirred not shaken, by the siren herself, diverting our attention away from contentious labor disputes and the shaking hands of the unionized baristas. Although we cannot see the siren’s face, as if her glare would paralyze viewers, mirrors play a larger part in the vertiginous framing of the commercial and recall the hanging mirrors of buzzing Parisian cafés and the canted angles in the Milan video. This siren is alone. Our muse, ironically representing the modern dandy or *quaintrelle*, is silent and perched in front of two mirrors, silvered surfaces that reflect the

⁶⁵⁷ See Pouleyy’s social media post on TikTok, “Chanel Jacket for the Shoot,” <https://www.tiktok.com/tag/lyapouleyymodel>

⁶⁵⁸ “Vogue x Starbucks for Met Gala 2023. Model: @Lya Pouleyy,” *YouTube*, uploaded by Lya Pouleyy, 2 May 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQLu2QM0QHU> and “@Vogueux@Starbuckscommercial for#metgala2023” <https://www.tiktok.com/@lya.pouleyy/video/7228608532923370795> Also see: “Welcome to my Modeling Cosmos,” <https://lyapouleyymodel.myportfolio.com/>

“epitome of commodity fetishism” (as Anne McClintock writes in “Soft-Soaping Empire) and multiply objects and desire. Here the mirror not only powerfully frames feminized “monsters and the monstrosity of objects,”⁶⁵⁹ it also turns the monster into a *monsteur* – a show(wo)man as spectacle.

According to both de Rachewiltz and Teodorski, sirens and mermaids were often depicted holding mirrors or were themselves etched or gilded into ivory or golden mirror frames and wooden armoires.⁶⁶⁰ Our siren, our *dandrizzate*, sits in front of a mirror for what may be hours. The “cathedral of consumption” (Ritzer) has turned inward. Invoking the work of Giorgio Agamben, Teodorski suggests that “in order to transgress the state of commodity, and return to innocence to things, the dandy has to push the commodity to its extreme—[they have] to become artifice itself. The dandy has to become the undead, a living corpse, constantly tending toward the Other, a creature essentially nonhuman and antihuman. [They have] to become a commodity so that the Other can be cancelled, the commodity destroyed as the opposite of humanity.”⁶⁶¹ Once a harbinger of death, with a nonhuman body, our Met Gala siren is humanly possible because she has been caught in a continuous cycle of self-annihilating operations, at once “grounding” her monstrosity and transcending it. She sacrifices her power to become *part of our world*, “finally gain[ing] an entrance into the commodified space of advertisement and marketing.”⁶⁶² She sips Starbucks Oleato, the nectar of Greek culture, to secure her apotheosis into goddess, leaving traces of her decadent sensuality—the orifice that shapes her voice—softly on the glass. “In the very moment when we proclaim the death of a monster,” Teodorski

⁶⁵⁹ Teodorski, “Reflecting the Monster’s Future: The Commodification of Sirens,” 3.

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid., 12 & 20. See also de Rachewiltz’s chapter, “The Siren’s Mirror,” in *De Sirenibus: An Inquiry into Sirens from Homer to Shakespeare*: 188-221.

⁶⁶¹ Teodorski, 8.

⁶⁶² Ibid., 16.

concludes, “we give birth to it again, more powerful and more influential than before because we are making it invisible. That is how sirens became culturally possible—as merchandise.”⁶⁶³

Crafting an “exclusive” coffee-infused cocktail and magical new commodity is a sensuous odyssey—in a caressing close-up we watch Pouleyy hand-craft Starbucks’ new Oleato espresso martini. The jazz music that reverberates throughout the video is turned down for a moment to enhance the haptic sensation of the foam. The glossy Oleato foam delicately seen pouring over the top of the iced espresso guided by the twisted spoon seems to convey a new creation story. The two-tiered fountain that gently spreads out the Oleato in three cascades rests on top of the coffee like land over water within the boundaries of a circular rim. The camera then swoops over the foam as if it were a bird flying over empty desert sands, scanning the lush, uninhabited crests and valleys—an unoccupied territory symbolizing newness, opportunity, colonization, and consumption. Is the siren searching for a place to land or is she looking for a rustle in the sand to prey on her next victim? The layering of foam over espresso, the cream of the crop, may be symbolic of Starbucks’ attempt to mask its dark labour history with a new elite commodity. Oleato is introduced as an elegant multi-sensory ritual, stirred not shaken, by the siren herself, muffling the shaking hands of the baristas and burying their political unrest.

The siren saunters over to a dressing room vanity framed by a dark teal wall; thin white feathers sensually ruffle and bounce as she flips her coat to sit down in front of a rectangular mirror (Figure 40). Her hair, the colour of red sand, is braided into a weave; we do not see her face. To the left of the mirror, six tall cylindrical brass lamps with exposed round lightbulbs

⁶⁶³ Ibid., 19.

provide soft, yellow light for her perch.⁶⁶⁴ With long, deep aquamarine, shellacked nails on her mahogany fingers, the siren wraps a golden bracelet around her right wrist.



Figure 40: Oleato Siren in front of her mirror⁶⁶⁵ (Hand Model: Lya Pouleyy)

[Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sMNW-nKcLPI&t=1s>]

She gracefully turns her delicately opened hand upwards. Bottles of perfume or ointments are organized on a brass tray, and an opened small glass jar of red lip gloss sits bare on the quartz tabletop. Reflected in the titled circular mirror to her right, the siren adjusts her obsidian lapel pin with a gold star beneath her neck and strokes her chest feathers downwards, her pointed nails gently clawing between them (Figure 41). She taps her fingertips impatiently on the glossy aquamarine quartz veined with white lines that spread like tiny hot bolts of lightning. A golden ring fitted with a globular pearl awaits its fate. (Figure 42). The siren dwells in the realm of what

⁶⁶⁴ A similar framing is used for the underwater femme fatale Ursula in Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989). Ursula also sits down at a dressing table, applies lipstick and gives the spectator a seductive tale about the power of the image. Ursula's lair is also lit up with "lost souls" encased in globes (the round light bulbs in the Vogue/Starbucks mise-en-scène seem to echo this). Ursula was voiced by Pat Carroll and inspired by the drag legend Divine.

⁶⁶⁵ "Starbucks Oleato Met Gala 2023," *YouTube*, uploaded by Starbucks Coffee, 1 May 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sMNW-nKcLPI&t=1s>

Susan Sontag calls the decorative art of camp, “emphasizing texture, sensuous surface and style at the expense of content.”⁶⁶⁶



Figure 41: Oleato Siren with lapel-pin reflected in her mirror (Hand Model: Lya Pouleyy)
 [Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sMNW-nKcLPI&t=1s>]



Figure 42: Campy hands that craft the elegant Oleato cocktail (Hand Model: Lya Pouleyy)
 [Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sMNW-nKcLPI&t=1s>]

⁶⁶⁶ Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp” in *A Susan Sontag Reader* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 107.

The siren stirs a glass filled with ice and a translucent brown liquid with a silver bar spoon and strains the liquid into a martini glass. She then carefully tops it with a silky tan foam, guided by the convex curve of the inverted spoon. Her feathers rustle again. She picks up the pearl ring with her right hand in between her thumb and index finger and smoothly slides it onto her left middle finger. Pink powder blush and a golden comb with long black bristles are visible. With her left hand she caresses her right shoulder; the pearl ring refracts ochre light; the circular mirror reflects her movements cautiously. She pulls the martini glass with the layered sienna drink towards her, the abyssal brown substance below a thin shade of ecru. Although the act of consumption itself is censored, in the next shot we see the same glass embossed with red lipstick sealed on the edge like wax; the cracked lines indicate a sensual kiss, also echoing the fulminating pattern on the quartz (Figure 43). In a playful video posted online, entitled “Model and actress (in my head)” we see the actual kiss.⁶⁶⁷



Figure 43: Oleato Siren's Kiss

[Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sMNW-nKcLPI&t=1s>]

⁶⁶⁷ “Model and actress (in my head),” *YouTube*, uploaded by Lya Pouleyy, 9 May 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zfnHiWLZfr0>

The crystal clear close up of the glorified commodity, sealed with a kiss, and choreographed “classy” tactility obscure both the unionized shaking in the larger Starbucks factory and the more spontaneous hip hop dancing that occurs behind the scenes. Although we do not see the siren’s face in this private “getting ready” space, Pouleyy’s behind-the-scenes videos posted on social media show us the Starbucks star/hand-model conversing with the camera, twirling around in her Chanel coat during the commercial shoot, and spontaneously moving to hip hop beats.⁶⁶⁸ In the final commercial itself and post-pandemic Starbucks mythology, however, the new siren shakes and crafts solo, concocting and “connecting” only with “herself.” She stirs her cocktail in a dark private space. Our Siren Star is both spectacle and show(o)man, masked performer and commodified passion, glamorized monster and *monstrateur*.⁶⁶⁹ In early cinema, *monstrateur* means exhibitionist “showing” (*montrer*, to show) and presenting, not “telling.”⁶⁷⁰ Yet in the final Oleato commercial, unlike the “Siren’s debut” ads and Méliès’ trick films, there is no look into the camera; the hand model is an invisible behind-the-screen double for human desire and what the haptic hand as spectacle “shows” is how to “connect” with a fantasy, the fantasy of the commodity. The kissed commodity itself takes centre stage.

⁶⁶⁸ See “Classy and Hip Hop,” *YouTube*, uploaded by Lya Pouleyy, 8 May 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dEYHm26Uu_U.

⁶⁶⁹ The Starbucks/Vogue Oleato commercial like the episodes of the *Vogue* “getting ready” TV series self-reflexively plays on the Hollywood “behind-the-scenes” backstage publicity or dressing room subgenre. See Brett L. Adams, “The Backstage Life,” *Hollywood Bohemians: Transgressive Sexuality and the Selling of the Movieland Dream* (McFarland & Co, Jefferson, 2008), 160, and “Celebrities invite Vogue into their ‘getting ready’ space to see their process of preparing for an event,” <https://www.vogue.com/video/series/getting-ready-with-vogue>.

⁶⁷⁰ See Andre Gaudreault’s “Narration et monstration au cinéma,” in *Hors Cadre 2: “Cinénarrable” 2* (April 1984): 87-98 and “Film, récit, narration; le cinéma des frères Lumière,” *Iris* 2.1 (1984): 61-70 and *From Plato to Lumière: Narration and Monstration in Literature and Cinema*, trans. Timothy Bernard (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988).

Stephen Duncombe perceptively argues that although Starbucks “audaciously...promises what they call ‘a connection’ (2011a)”... what they deliver is not a “connection with the socio-natural world of the coffee produced and served,” but a fabricated pedigree, imagined link to an “Italianate” community, the world of the “leisured artist or intellectual,” European loft-living or larger “fantasy life-world of arts and culture and history”:

a connection with a fantasy life-world of arts and culture and history wherein the harried consumer is magically transformed into a leisured artist or intellectual enmeshed within a community of Italianate, loft living, retro-historical yet culturally relevant, and thoroughly inspirational bohemians. Needless to say, a cup of coffee cannot deliver free time, creativity, culture, travel, nor an alternative occupation, and as such the promise made can never be met. It remains a fantasy and, as any marketer can tell you, the best sort of fantasy is the one never fulfilled: it keeps you coming back for more.⁶⁷¹

In the bucolic Starbucks story or epic, consumers and partners are given imaginary passports for a fantasy odyssey and encouraged to track their coffee journey as they sample coffee produced from beans dislocated from small regions around the world, shot into the heart of the roastery, shipped to stores, ground up, and brewed into a cup. Starbucks shareholders don VR sets and virtually visit newly acquired farms in Costa Rica. Coffee tourism and the “Starbucks Experience” are both packaged as a “luxurious” odyssey, but what one obtains is only a copy, a cup, a digital trace: in the new digitally integrated Starbucks one even “buys into” the brandscape digitally, acquiring digital stamps of the siren and corporate logos as private property/NFTs. As Starbucks continues its vertiginous expansion and produces a new corporate theology, we again heed Debord’s writings:

Every given commodity fights for itself, cannot acknowledge the others, and attempts to impose itself everywhere as if it were the only one. The spectacle, then, is the epic poem of this struggle, an epic which cannot be concluded by the fall of any Troy. The spectacle does not sing the praises of men and their weapons, but of commodities and their passions. In this blind struggle every commodity, pursuing its passion, unconsciously

⁶⁷¹ Stephen Duncombe, “It stands on its head: Commodity fetishism, consumer activism, and the strategic use of fantasy,” *Culture and Organization*, Vol. 18 (5), December 2012: 360-361.

realizes something higher: the becoming-world of the commodity, which is also the becoming-commodity of the world. Thus, by means of a *ruse of commodity logic*, what's *specific* in the commodity wears itself out in the fight while the commodity-form moves toward its absolute realization.⁶⁷²

As already observed, our Siren Star's face is masked in this private "getting ready" space; her identity is obscured in a larger struggle as the commodity "fights for itself," also solo, without community, "cannot acknowledge the others," imposing itself "everywhere as if it were the only one." Yet the hand model behind-the-scenes ultimately reasserts her own hand-crafted identity by posting actor pics or "peaks".

If the hand model reminds us that Starbucks fashions commodity form as performance, the new CEO also interestingly uses both Schultz' term "theater" and a new term "factory" when discussing the challenges Starbucks faces in the pandemic pock-marked 21st century. He refers to the "theaters at the front" and the "factories at the back," signaling that in both cases, but especially the later there is a need for increased efficiency.⁶⁷³ But will the CEO also tread the factory floor and pick the beans, not only visit the farms virtually? The goal of this dissertation has also been to take us behind the scenes at the Starbucks factory and theater, to get a better glimpse of the baristas who demand a seat at the shareholder table and clearer view of the logo that is continuously reinvented, reappropriated and parodied, and the rituals, space and spectacles that shape the "Starbucks Experience," imprinting them on everyday life. The coffee company's fantasy of fulfilling the coffeehouse legacy and becoming an "inclusive and welcoming third place," a private/public third place where one can loiter, dream and scheme was ultimately

⁶⁷² Debord, paragraph 66.

⁶⁷³ Keith Nunes, "The Future of Starbucks: Theater in the Front, Factory in the Back," *Food Business News* (April 4, 2023): <https://www.foodbusinessnews.net/articles/23755-the-future-of-starbucks-theaters-in-the-front-factories-in-the-back>. "To strengthen our health, we need to think of our business as having theaters to the front with a factory in the back," Mr. Narasimhan said. "Our theaters are where our store partners are focusing on their craft and delivering an elevated experience to our customers..."

consumed by the ruse of the commodity logic that only sees power, profit, and uniformity, not individuality or specificity. But at the same time, as the shaking baristas remind us, there are still “grounds” for revisiting and perhaps even reinventing the collective coffeehouse as an innervating and stimulating “third place.”

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 - iv. broadcaster, in the case of a communication signal

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