

# Passively Engaging in Corporate Consumption: *a Diary of Guilt*

By Ola Hungerford

I have to admit, there's something about Starbucks that placates me. I doubt that it's anything in particular about the place, since I am neither a regular coffee drinker nor a World Music(TM) fan. It's not the people, because I don't usually find the SUV-driving/ polar fleece n' spandex crowd (who, incidentally, are often regular coffee drinkers and easy listeners) very stimulating. And yet here I am, in Woodinville, in a Barnes and Noble, in a Starbucks, browsing books and drinking a Carmel Macchiato. Egad. This is a person who mourns the death of every independent bookstore, and drones on about environmental issues to family members who would much rather sleep. True, I don't often indulge in passive acts of corporate consumption. But after a few sips of my Macchiato I feel a stab of intense guilt. Isn't this wrong, somehow? Shouldn't I be somewhere else?

My first excuse would be that there is simply nowhere else to go. If you're on the Ave or Roosevelt, finding a cozy coffee shop or bookstore is incredibly easy. I used to live about three blocks away from the U-Dub campus and ever since then I've coveted places like the Burke Museum Cafe, where I can just camp out, read and talk with friends, and even get coffee if I have the occasional urge. When you're in Bothell (and a non-driver) there's not that many choices. There are times when I get a craving for a place like the Museum cafe and get on the 307 bus with a friend, but not to journey all the way to the U-District.

I end up instead in the shameless Yuppiland that Woodinville has

become, in a mass-produced substitute for the cafe, in a bookstore that seems to have an unhealthy obsession with Sara Brightman and the color beige. Am I actively choosing to contribute to the powers of OmniCorp.com? My first answer: no. How about I phrase it in a different way: am I choosing to be momentarily ignorant? Well, yes.

Whether this moment matters is where the argument lies. I could plead ironic detachment - and wear "a cultural suit of armor," as described by journalist Naomi Klein in *No Logo*, "[that] many of us are loath to criticize because it lets us feel smug while watching limitless amounts of bad TV." In other words, it shouldn't really matter that you're supporting any particular establishment as long as you remember to wear a cynical sneer as you're doing it. I see this tactic in action when my friends call Starbucks coffee "yuppie juice" or even "crappucino" as they dig 5 bucks out of their "punk" wallet to buy it.

As for the bad TV, there's a lot of it available, and an equal amount of young consumers hungry for easily-digestible media to regurgitate later. It's some form of endless bulimia that leaves the television-viewer exhausted and empty of any real content. This sardonic attitude is not only accepted, but deliberately incorporated into outlets of so-called alternative culture. A noticeable development in this direction is the Stranger's recent "Yes Logo" issue, which pretty much said (sneer intact) that we should all submit to "corporate culture" because there is no avoiding it. If you want to be alternative, buy a Che Guavara belt buckle at Hot Topic. So go ahead, all you irony-hungry kids - eat up that greasy McCulture and smile. There is nothing you can do about the fact that

we are just extras on the global stage, filling out the cast of a macabre play scripted by people we may never see. Now while I do have some remaining respect for the Stranger, I have found through personal experience that living in an ambivalent bubble does not work. Whether I blindly accept what's handed to me or distance myself from it, I still feel traitorous in the end.

By the time I get to the bottom of my coffee it's rather cold and the caffeine is making me quiver. As I depart I notice that Starbux now invests in none other than Bob Dylan as part of their valuable image, selling his new album on their painstakingly cultivated music rack. If a snarling icon of blues and protest has been packaged and sold along with the rest, why should I complain about my modest acts of hypocrisy? It's not like some faceless CEO now owns me because of the \$3.50 I just spent on a harmless beverage. And hey, it's not like a few puffs of carbon monoxide is going to cause whole masses of animals to choke and die. But it's our collective actions that add up like moments into hours, that cause drastic things to happen, and it's a huge lack of awareness that funnels people into contented lifestyles and easy non-choices. I don't think I need to worry as much about a single mocha as I should about knowing what I stand for and why. I don't reject these popularized products so I can somehow feel superior to those who live a less thoughtful way of life, thereby reducing politics to the level of fashion-consciousness. It's just that truth has a way of infesting itself in my mental outlook - and it's moments like this that bring a major social affliction into a graspable perspective, making me realize that yes, I would much rather be somewhere else.

Next time I'll just think of it before I buy my crappucino.

*"If you want to be alternative,  
buy a Che Guavara belt buckle.."*