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Consuming Apple: Conformity through Rebellion & Design

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Abstract

Apple Inc. is one of the world’s most celebrated brands and has built a loyal customer base through its award winning advertisements and product design. This paper examines key advertising campaigns and the propaganda techniques that have established Apple’s image and the image of its consumers as a rebellious and creative lot who are changing the world for the better. In stark contrast to its well-cultivated image, Apple employs the use of Planned Obsolescence and walled city building in its product design to help ensure continuing financial growth at the cost of the environment and those charged with manufacturing their goods. When thoroughly examined, Apple is more akin to the destructive, totalitarians that they claim to be rescuing the world from.
Acknowledgements

Tony Kawanari, for supporting my academic and professional goals from the beginning and being one of the best teachers I’ve had the privilege of studying under.

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To my parents, Becky & Cliff Born and Ray & Judi Botkins for supporting me through this 14 year adventure known as my ‘college years,’ a feat that should have exhausted the patience of any normal parent. You have all supported me every step of the way, no matter what I have wanted to do, and never once failed to pick me up when I have stumbled. Words will never be enough.
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Disclaimer

I have done my best to provide proper citations and give credit to those responsible for the ideas upon which I build my thesis. However, much of this paper presents information that I have absorbed and stored through my years of education and have no direct sources to credit. In most cases, I have consulted sources to confirm the accuracy of a given statement, but my technique and memory are not beyond reproach. Where I have not given specific citations, it is my belief that the information falls under the category of “general knowledge” for most historians of the given field. This may or may not be standard practice, but in either case I feel I have done my duty for the given time and scope of this project. Should something be outright false or in need of credit, I invite you to correct me or provide a source so that credit may be given to those whose work I have unwittingly presented as my own.

The following issues do not apply exclusively to Apple Inc. I have chosen them for examination because they do not excel in small, specific areas of promotion and planned obsolescence - they excel at many. Apple Inc. is supposedly the number one brand in the world and has been recognized for their work in design and brand development. For this reason, there is a high level of accessibility, which has aided my study. In the technology industry the application of these techniques apply to Microsoft, Google, Facebook, Nintendo, Sony, HTC, Samsung, Dell, and many others.
The technique used to develop the terms and models applied within have been achieved through the study of advertisements as seen in print, film, and television. These cover approximately 160 years of print advertisements, 90 years of film, and 60 years of television. Specifically, I have studied propaganda and product design in the industries of alcohol, tobacco, home furnishings, office furnishings, electricity, electric appliances, radio, the military and war, television, computers, and medicine. I have studied the social history of Great Britain, the United States, and Germany to provide a larger picture of what was happening in those regions over time to provide a context for the images and moving pictures. Through a torrent of images and recordings I recognized certain patterns over long periods of time and reoccur with some regularity. None of the terms presented are entirely new, but I believe some of their applications are unique in the realm of design.

When looking at a picture, ask - What are you looking at? Who made it? What are they trying to express? Is it real or imagined? Is it what is or the idea of what is? How is it intended to be viewed? Who is the audience? What is being sold? What is being bought? How is the image distributed? What is absent from the image? List the things you notice. Why are those things there? Is it a part of an established genre?

Nothing is produced (writings, drawings, etc.) without the intent of it being consumed.
Commodity is that which is bought and or sold and is not restricted to physical goods only.

Propaganda is the means to promote new, or reinforce old, ideas concerning a religious, political, or economic ideology by means of mass communication. It introduces and legitimizes a specific worldview and can grab your attention through spectacle or subtlety. Propaganda goes by many names and has many advocates - advertisers, public relations, communications, salesmen, admen, publicists, psychotechnicians, and missionaries. The advocate’s purpose is to get you to buy whatever is being sold (figuratively and literally), and submit to the will of their client. They do not want you buy things; they want you to want to buy things. By this definition, this paper is propaganda. It provides a worldview and it justifies itself through various forms of authority and expertise in hopes of propagating the ideas presented within. Propaganda creates culture, a shared world view. For the purposes of this paper I examine five cults of propaganda - Youth, The People, Hero, Leader, and Utopia.

Cult of Youth is the worship of youth. Youth symbolizes vitality, action, and freedom. It is a time of transition between childhood (being defined in the terms of the elder) and adulthood (being defined by the self.) It is often

Terms

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regarded as a time of exploration, unfettered by the burdens of adulthood. It is marked by rebellion against established authority and, most importantly, it can never be regained. A successful Cult of Youth provides a means of expression for the rebelling youth and a means for elders seeking to regain their passing vitality.

**Cult of the People** is the worship of the anointed or the chosen people. In marketing terms, this is the returning customer. This form of propaganda often uses the image of “Other” to help define what the people are not. It can both alleviate internal fears by externalizing them in a corporeal form, and it can stir inner fear of straying too far from the herd, which inspires conformity. In utopia we are free from the dreaded Other.

**Cult of the Hero** is the elevation of a person, living or dead, to the status of an idol. These men and women are idealized and held above all others for their achievements and, should they be dead, their life’s work and sacrifice. These “heroes” provide an unattainable goal for the common person to strive for and the pursuit itself is not intrinsically satisfying. It is the relationship to the person with whom they identify that provides the satisfaction. Propaganda uses the commodity as a means to connect and establish an imagined relationship with the idol. For instance, a 1991 Gatorade commercial features basketball star Michael Jordan drinking their product while a song plays: “Sometimes I dream, that he is me... Like Mike, if I could be like Mike. I want to be like Mike.” The product is offered to the consumer as a connection to the hero.

**Cult of the Leader** is similar to the cult of the hero, but those attributes are placed upon the single figurehead of the organization. It is not always used to promote brand and saleable goods, but in some cases it can be an effective tool. This type of propaganda is more often seen in the political
realm in the visage of the determined and enlightened leader who, alone, sees the way forward, guiding his or her people to utopia.

**Cult of Utopia** is the projection of an ideal world for the chosen and their leader to dwell in. It is heaven manifested through the work and will of the chosen people. Rather than giving a hero to relate to, it is a place where the residents have internalized the values of the culture and have dominion over their world. There is the promise of an existence in a better world that can only be achieved through the purchase of products. Most of the time these utopias exist only in our minds, but in some rare instances they exist as places we can visit. In this case, they are only surface representations of a utopian, like Disney World.

**Planned or Designed Obsolescence** is the practice of designing or engineering products with the intent of shortening both its exchange and use value. I examine four types of planned obsolescence for this paper - Physical, Postponed, Style, and Technological.

**Physical Obsolescence** is the intentional designing of a product to break so that it needs to be replaced sooner. This is caused by a desire for increased revenue through more frequent purchases, limited materials, and cost. To remain competitive, companies must reduce production costs. In this respect, we design products to minimum specifications, because on paper it seems to be the most pragmatic. For instance, the life expectancy of refrigerators has declined significantly over the last forty years. What was once expected to last twenty years now lasts eight to twelve. This is often viewed as a positive for product manufacturers; production costs are significantly reduced and consumers now have to buy the product twice as often, thus increasing profit margins.
Postponed Obsolescence is the withholding of a product’s improvement to shorten its lifespan; this is a counterbalance to Technological Obsolescence. This practice is most clearly seen in industries that have tiered product categories ranging from low-end to high-end. Car safety features such as anti-lock brakes, power steering, power windows, 4-wheel independent suspension, GPS, keyless entry, and airbags tend to be standard on mid-to-high-end vehicles, but not lower-end models. Companies may argue that including such features would raise the price-point outside of the desired consumer’s budget. However, the practice shortens the life of the product, lowers its resale value, and creates the incentive for a replacement purchase sooner rather than later.

Style Obsolescence is the frequent change in a product’s aesthetic to differentiate between brands, between new and old models, and between high-end and entry level products. This practice originated in seasonal fashion changes and was adopted by the automotive industry with their annual body style changes. There may be no change in the product’s construction and functionality, but its appearance changes enough to outdate previous models. Historically, styling has found its inspiration in cutting edge sciences - military technology, aerodynamics, human-centered ergonomic forms, science fiction, etc. With a society immersed in youth culture and consumerism, there is a tremendous social pressure to be constantly up-to-date.

Technological Obsolescence is the practice of pushing out new technology that renders older technology useless. Televisions and other media-based technology are great examples of this practice. Recently the United States has moved from CRT TVs (480i) to LCD and plasma TVs (720p and 1080p), and there is now a push to adopt 3D TVs. Televisions have gone from lasting twenty years to, on average, seven. “Old” sets are
perfectly functional, but new and improved models outstrip them. We went from one major improvement in fifty years to three in a matter of ten. Rear projection 720p TVs were the trend ten years ago, but then we were encouraged to upgrade to 1080p, 120 MHz LCD HDTVs in the mid 2000’s and now to 3D-TVs in 2012. This decreasing mean time has touched nearly every media industry; television, cinema, and music have all gone through upgrade after upgrade. Every time we have had to repurchase the rights to media we have bought over and over.

The Walled City is used as a metaphor a number of times throughout the paper to provide a context for what is happening in a given profession or market. Imagine a world without civilization – exposure to the elements, predators, open sewage, no safety, and chaos. Now imagine in this wild world a city surrounded by walls – safety, security, running water, markets, and order. In any given frontier there is chaos and then order is imposed. Within the walls there is hierarchical order – there are the priests in the temple (upper-class), there are those who do the work of managing the city and attend the gates (middle-class), and there are those outside of the walls trying to find a way in (working-class). The establishment of any new market or industry is the creation of another walled city in a chaotic world. Barriers and gates are put in place to control access to a resource, and those gates are used to exact a toll for the privilege of accessing that resource. Our world is composed of millions of walled cities, great and small, real and virtual; we have created walled cities within walled cities.
Creating Value through Propaganda

Apple Inc. is considered to be one of America’s great success stories. Founded by Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak in a garage in 1976 it is, according to Milward Brown, the world’s most valuable brand as of 2011. The company initially began selling home computers and has since branched out into entertainment, media, and communications. They have won numerous awards for their television commercials and product designs thanks to founder and former CEO Steve Jobs who was fanatical about design. They have a strong and loyal customer base that, at times, borders on religious zealotry. This zealotry was easily seen in the hundreds of thousands of people who lined up outside bookshops around the globe to buy a copy of Steve Jobs’ official biography on the day it was released. Of all personal computing manufacturers, they have been the most successful in building a walled city through propaganda, closed system architecture, and planned obsolescence.

Apple was the first to produce a home computer with a graphical user interface (GUI) when it introduced the Lisa in 1983 for just under $10,000. The GUI was heavily based on Xerox PARC’s Alto. In fact, Apple recruited several of Xerox’s employees during the development. More important than this was Apple’s Macintosh that was being developed in parallel. This computer received a far more ambitious advertising campaign which included one of the most famous Super Bowl commercials of all time, an 18-page brochure in *Time & Newsweek* in December of 1983, and 39...
advertising pages in the November of 1984 post-election issue of *Newsweek.*

The original 18-page brochure claimed, “Of the 235 million people in America, only a fraction can use a computer. Introducing Macintosh. For the rest of us.” The ambiguous language implied that computers were difficult for anyone to use. All of Apple’s competitors, including Atari, IBM, Commodore, and Texas Instruments, used command line interfaces, which required knowledge of specific commands and syntax in order to use them. The GUI was touted as intuitive and easy to use by comparison. It also inferred that command line interfaces were so difficult that only a small portion of the population could use the computer. While it’s not realistic to assume this, but technically 99/100 is a fraction. The use of the world “only” is the key operator because it infers that the fraction was small. The ad claimed, “If you can point, you can use a Macintosh.” Although it was hardly that simple, the target market was clear: people who have never used computers before. However, the machine was hardly “for the rest of us,” since it was introduced at a premium for $1995 at launch, and then it was re-priced at $2495 after a poorly executed 24 hour trial campaign failed.

It is important to note that the home computing market was still in its infancy at in the early 1980s. Home computers were generally for hobbyists or the wealthy. IBM jumped into the home computing market a couple of years before the release of the Macintosh and was anxious to catch up to the rest of the competition. Apple, Commodore, Atari, and Texas Instruments all had their start in the previous decade. Thanks to its rushed, ad hoc approach in designing IBM’s Intel based machines with off-the-shelf parts, IBM clones hit the marketplace a year later. Many people had associations with IBM only from their workplaces. Cold rooms full of giant, refrigerator-sized cabinets housed IBM mainframes maintained by quirky men in the basements of the corporate office building. If people worked on computers they logged into dumb terminals. While IBM’s jump into the home computer market gave it legitimacy as something other than a hobby, it associated the machines with work. It would take something big to get the public at large to get behind the home computer, and Apple felt it had what it would take.
1984: Establishing Cults of The People & Utopia

On January 22, 1984 Apple took its chance. The “1984” Super Bowl ad was a huge success and is still talked about and analyzed today. It was themed around George Orwell’s book of the same title and was directed by Alien and Blade Runner director Ridley Scott. The 60-second commercial is highly reminiscent of Fritz Lang’s 1927 film, Metropolis, and uses similar shots and compositions. It begins with an exterior shot of men walking through glass-ceilinged tubes between high-rises. It breaks to an interior shot of the men, marching in lockstep with one another, while a fanatical voice extols, “Today we celebrate the first glorious anniversary of the Information Purification Directives!” Everything and everyone is grey and dusty. It breaks to a half second shot of a very tan, blond, woman dressed in red running shorts and a tank top with the Macintosh logo, running with a sledge hammer. The voice continues over shots of the lockstep men and pursuing police in riot gear, “We have created, for the first time in all history, a garden of pure ideology - where each worker may bloom, secure from the pests of purveying contradictory truths.” The lockstep men march into the room toward a projection of the voice’s face, like children into the mouth of the Moloch. Seated, they stare vacantly as the voice continues, “Our unification of thoughts is more powerful a weapon than any fleet or army on earth. We are one people, with one will, one resolve, one cause.” Slow motion shots of the well-endowed, colorful woman are an interlude between the mindless drones and the faceless riot police. She whirls around with the sledgehammer like an Olympian, releasing as the projection of Big Brother declares, “Our enemies shall talk themselves to death, and we will bury them with their own confusion. We shall prevail!” The hammer shatters the screen and the automatons are bathed in bright white light, dust, and wind. Words scroll up from the bottom as a calm, deep voice reads, “On January 24th, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you’ll see why 1984 won’t be like 1984.”

Several symbols are at work in the 1984 commercial. The source material, Orwell’s “1984,” provides a wealth of back-story and allegory - totalitarian rule, monitored behavior, imprisonment, media-forged reality,
brainwashing, Nazis, communists, paranoia. Everyone in the commercial, with the exception of the hammer thrower, is male. Programming, building, and repairing computers were male dominated activities at the time. The drones in the commercial walk in lockstep, not as high-stepping soldiers, but as regimented prisoners. They view Big Brother with a vacant stare and mouths agape. They are not enthusiastic supporters, or even feigning survivors, they are mindless. The militant pursuers of the woman, whose single purpose is physical domination, are faceless, disorganized, and losing the race. The woman, the personification of Macintosh, is colorful and athletic. She is the one thing not like the others, a freethinking individual; she alone is vitality. She alone goes against the odds and challenges the monolithic and violent authority. She is not oppressed by technology as the men are. Technology is her servant and she uses it to shatter the image of Big Brother, a mere shadow on the wall. This may not have been a utopian image, but it was the destruction of a dystopian image. This advertisement was Apple’s attempt to frame their company and product in terms of rebellion against the status quo, individualism, and liberator.

Initial sales projections for the Macintosh were expected to be 563,000 units, but actual sales were closer to 275,000 units. Despite this, the 1984 commercial was important in distinguishing Apple as separate from IBM’s herd. The Macintosh caught the attention of developers and programmers. Desktop publishing applications typically appeared on the Macintosh before being ported over to IBM machines. PageMaker by Aldus Corporation debuted in 1985 on the Macintosh; it didn’t come out for the PC market until 1987. Adobe Photoshop was released in 1990 for the Macintosh and was not imported to the PC until two years later. I believe these are key reasons why the design industry is one of the few dominated by Apple hardware. Apple benefitted from third parties providing the first set of digital tools for designers on their platform. Design firms, heavily involved in print and publishing, were eager to speed up the process and made the plunge into Apple hardware. Initial investments in hardware and training are steep. It would make no fiscal sense to abandon that initial investment in hardware only to have to reinvest in another platform, such as the PC.
This also may be the reason why Apple was eager to provide machines to educational institutions at a discount. Educate the students on Apple equipment and perhaps they are more likely to purchase Apple products when they have incomes of their own.

It was during this time that the design industry began to change over from traditional media to digital media. Photo typesetting, painting, airbrushing, etc. were being pushed out the door of most design firms and being replaced with computers. This allowed for a whole new set of workers to enter the design field and increase the pool of labor. While these people were not unskilled, they were certainly less skilled. Those who did not adapt died out. Like a hundred industries before, capital displaced labor. Capital is invested in technology, that technology allows for cheaper, unskilled labor to replace previous laborers, more product is able to be produced at a lower cost. Thus the design world was able to grow and Apple with it.

Think different.: Cult of the Hero & of the People

Steve Jobs was forced out of Apple in 1985, but returned in 1996, and was named CEO in 1997. With him came a new campaign, “Think Different.” The campaign featured a series of 22 posters featuring the slogan and a picture. Amelia Earhart, Alfred Hitchcock, Pablo Picasso, Mahatma Gandhi, Thomas Edison, Maria Callas, Martha Graham, Joan Baez, Ted Turner, Jim Henson, Miles Davis, Ansell Adams, Lucille Ball & Desi Arnaz, Frank Sinatra, Richard Feynman, Jackie Robinson, Cesar Chavez, Charlie Chaplin, Francis Ford Coppola, Orson Welles, Frank Capra, and John Huston were all featured in the posters. The commercial was a black-and-white montage of clips of many of the same people Albert Einstein, Bob Dylan, Martin Luther King Jr., Richard Branson, John Lennon, Yoko Ono, Buckminster Fuller, Thomas Edison, Richard Feynman, Mohammed Ali, Ted Turner, Maria Callas, Mahatma Gandhi, Amelia Earhart, Alfred Hitchcock, Martha Graham, Jim Henson, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Pablo Picasso. The commercial ends with a shot of a young girl opening her closed eyes. Actor Richard Dreyfuss provided the voiceover for the commercial:
Here’s to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers. The round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently. They’re not fond of rules. And they have no respect for the status quo. You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them. About the only thing you can’t do is ignore them. Because they change things. They invent. They imagine. They heal. They explore. They create. They inspire. They push the human race forward. Maybe they have to be crazy.

How else can you stare at an empty canvas and see a work of art? Or sit in silence and hear a song that’s never been written? Or gaze at a red planet and see a laboratory on wheels? We make tools for these kinds of people.

While some see them as the crazy ones, we see genius. Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the ones who do.

Apple re-establishes the theme of rebellion against the status quo, individualism, and liberator. The first two components, rebellion against the status quo and individualism, are spelled out or in this case read out for the viewer. The third, liberator, is implied visually through the use of Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi. An array of figures were offered as archetypes for the viewing audience to relate to. Almost everyone featured in the ads came from the entertainment industry or art world - the exceptions being Einstein, Edison, Feynman, King, Gandhi, Chavez, and Earhart - three scientists, three civil rights activists, and a groundbreaking female aviator. Of those featured, three were assassinated (King, Gandhi, and Lennon) and three tragically died before their time (Earhart, Callas, and Henson). Apple co-opted the achievements of these people to form an identity for Macintosh, the majority of who were never alive to use one. The word ‘they’ use used throughout the commercial to distance Apple from those they chose to honor, as if to say, ‘we are but their humble servants.’ Apple doesn’t claim to be amongst their lofty ranks, but they can make the tools to enable these kinds of extraordinary people, and they are smart enough to recognize genius. If the consumer, who is of course an individual and potential genius, wants to realize their potential like those shown, all they must do is buy a Macintosh - the activating catalyst.
The final ad campaign that I will be examining is the “Get a Mac” campaign featuring the “I’m a Mac, I’m a PC” commercials. The campaign ran from 2006 to 2009 and featured Justin Long as the Mac, and John Hodgman as the PC. Long always appears on the right (dexter) and Hodgman always appears on the left (sinister). In each of the 30-second ads the two politely converse about feature differences and attributes of their respective machines. Hodgman plays a polite, stuffy, jealous, work obsessed stereotype, while Long plays a sympathetic, relaxed, confident, and casual individual. Initially the ads pointed out differences in hardware features and capabilities, but later ads focused on differences between the Windows OS and Mac OS. Long always comes away triumphant and Hodgman always ends up frustrated and defeated. Apple never takes on a specific PC brand, such as Dell, or model, but goes after the nebulous body of PCs as if they are all identical. This allows them to pick and choose a negative aspect and assign it to all PCs. The ads imply that all PCs run Windows, don’t have built-in cameras or safety plugs, and that Mac is the only machine without viruses and is capable of running both Mac OS and Windows; however, all of these assertions are false. Although Long and Hodgman are supposed to be anthropomorphic representations of the hardware and software of the respective sides, they are really projections of the user of each system.

Hodgman is portrayed in a negative light through cultural standards of fashion. He is heavyset and his wardrobe exaggerates this. His suit, often mismatched and not color coordinated, is too large for him. The sides of his pants often flare out making him seem even heavier. The inseam of his pants is low and his jacket is long, making him appear short-legged and top heavy. He often slouches with his shoulders forward. These two factors give him a shorter presence than Long, despite the two of them being almost identical in height. Hodgman’s character occasionally deviates from his off-the-rack suit and is put in costumes ranging from a dress-like hospital gown, an ugly Christmas sweater, protective beekeeper gear, to a Pink Panther private eye disguise - all of which accentuate his weight and make him appear ridiculous. Although he appears to be older, he is immature, round, and physically
weak. Long, on the other hand, wears form-fitting clothes that accentuate his athletic features. Every shirt shows off his well-developed physique. His feet are almost always shoulder width apart giving him a stronger presence than Hodgman’s more narrow stance. His shirts range from un-tucked button-downs, to t-shirts accessorized by the occasional hooded sweatshirt. All of his clothes are some shade of blue and never clash with his dark blue jeans. One commercial features both men wearing suits. Hodgman sports a dark brown, unbuttoned sport coat with matching tie, a warm white button-down, greenish khakis, and red brown shoes. Long wears a buttoned, tailored, navy-blue suit with black shoes, and a grey-blue tie. These demonstrations of masculinity are further enhanced by the characters’ interaction with women. Of the 68 commercials for the “Get a Mac” campaign, five featured women. Four of the women had physical contact with Long, and none had contact with Hodgman. Hodgman’s body language is directed toward the women, with his hips and shoulders turned toward them, but the women do not reciprocate at all. Their bodies face forward and only turn their head to acknowledge Hodgman or, in the case of the Japanese woman, Long’s compatible peripheral, totally ignores Hodgman. However, their body language is different when interacting with Long - they fully face him. The women also stand in closer proximity to Long. One segment features supermodel Gisele Buendchen as the personification of a home movie made on an iMac. Hodgman’s personification is a bearded man in the same dress as Buendchen. All of these interactions send subtle, and not so subtle, messages about desirability in a sexual context. The directed body language tells the viewer that being a Mac user enhances one’s attractiveness. The one exception to this is where a woman plays the role of couple’s counselor to Hodgman and Long. She is in the power position of mediator and judge. She asks the two men to say something nice about one another. Long does not hesitate, Hodgman reluctantly reciprocates only to end the compliment in an insult. Long’s character is clearly the mature one in the relationship and is the more desirable between the two.
Steve Jobs: Cult of the Leader

For Steve Jobs propaganda was about portraying “values” in a “complicated” and “noisy” world and it was imperative to use the medium to project a very specific image about Apple. He felt good public relations was something Apple lost during the interregnum period from 1985 to 1997. He thought that during that time Apple misdirected its efforts in focusing on technical specifications and directly competing with Windows. For Jobs, great propaganda was not about the commodity itself, but creating an identity for the manufacturer and what they stood for. He used the example of Nike in a 1997 presentation that kicked off the “Think Different” campaign. He said that Nike, “never talked about their products,” or compared their products’ attributes to the competitor’s products but instead, “honor great athletes and honor great athletics.” Value and desire are created through the aspirations of the consumer. This explains the use of associating the brand, and not the product, with the range of figures associated with greatness in their field, the relaxed fashionable youth held in contrast to the uptight man-boy, and the vibrant woman who destroyed conformity and oppression with a single blow. Apple is perceived to be something entirely different from a PC because of these campaigns. The commercials and print ads have created an alternate reality of ‘us’ and ‘them’ through audiovisual association that has contributed to consumers lining up to buy Apple products.

II. Why We Can’t Have Nice Things

Technical Obsolescence

Propaganda campaigns are not the only tactic that Apple employs to keep the revenue stream flowing. The corporation continually uses design and engineering to maximize all four types of Designed Obsolescence. Technological obsolescence is synonymous with the computer industry as a whole. Part of the computer’s use value is framed by what it can do in comparison to the competition’s product. New hardware is continually introduced across the spectrum to outperform not only the competition,
but also older models within the brand. There isn’t really a need to go into specific models, but I feel it is important to note that the annual model method is driven by the stock market and need for capital investment. Annual profits must be projected to help establish a stock value, quarterly results are reported to update that value, and annual dividends are paid out to investors. This process is the driving force behind annual product tweaks and upgrades so that new revenue streams are open to pull in a profit and is the driving force behind the home computing industry’s continual technical obsolescence.

**Postponed Obsolescence**

Apple’s use of postponed obsolescence is evident in its tiered product structure. Currently Apple offers a variety of nine laptops between two body styles and eleven different desktop models over three different case styles. Software upgrades tend to demand more of the hardware, thus slowing the system down. In Apple’s case the jump to OS X was incompatible with OS 9 software, forcing the consumer to upgrade or be left behind. Further hardware was made obsolete with the introduction of OS X 10.5, Leopard, which no longer supported PowerPC machines and the iBook G4 that were available for sale only 3 years prior. OS X 10.6, released in 2009, eliminated all support for Motorola based Macs. In the case of the iPhone and iPod Touch, dormant hardware is included but not activated until a software upgrade is offered. First generation iPod Touches and iPhone 3G had no Bluetooth capabilities, but the 2nd generation models did. It was unlikely that many consumers knew which model they had because Apple’s packaging only indicated the type of product, but gave no indication of the generation. Both first and second-generation devices had identical retail prices and were produced and sold between 2008 and 2009 at the same time. The only way to tell which generation it belonged to was by looking up the serial number online or upgrading to iOS 3.0 when it was released in June of 2009. If the product was second generation, Bluetooth was enabled. This change devalued the nearly physically identical first generation models, and encouraged the consumer to purchase an upgraded piece of...
hardware that was less than two years old. The same thing is happening to first generation iPad owners who upgrade to system 5.0.1. There are many reports that the interface has slowed down drastically and software crashes more frequently. These practices contribute to the intentional devaluation of previous products. While Apple uses software to ensure postponed obsolescence, they use materials and the design of the physical aspects to engage in physical obsolescence.

**Physical Obsolescence**

Apple is notorious for their practices in physical obsolescence, which have resulted in a number of class action suits. The original iPod debuted in October of 2001, featured a 5GB drive, and retailed for $500. It featured a lithium-ion battery in a sealed case that was designed in such a way to prevent it being opened by the consumer. The product had approximately a 25% failure rate within the first year largely in part to the use of a lithium-ion battery. The average life span of a lithium-ion battery is 300 to 500 charges, a fact that was sure not to escape Apple's attention, and probably the inspiration behind having a sealed case. The product came with a 12-month warranty and Apple was unyielding in its initial policy when it came to replacement. Once a battery died, Apple charged $255 for the replacement and is well-documented for recommending that the owner buy a new one instead of having it replaced. The cost of the battery was less than $20. This policy did not change until a class action suit was filed against Apple. Battery replacement currently runs $80 should your device fall outside of the one-year-warranty period.

Apple found itself involved with another class action suit over the screens used on the iPod Nano. The screens were easily scratched which made them unusable and, again, the response from Apple was to buy a new one. The iPhone's touch screen has also been a sore spot for consumers. Like the iPod Nano, its screen was easily scratched, though it was more scratch resistant. Later models featured Corning's Gorilla Glass, a nearly scratchproof and shatter resistant material. However, if an iPhone is dropped from a height greater than two feet and lands on anything harder than
carpet, odds are that it will shatter. This, of course, is why protective cases are sold, but if Apple is supposedly so good at design, why is there a need for peripheral case? Shouldn’t the device be designed in such a way as to prevent damage should the item be dropped? This, of course, would eliminate those customers needing to buy protective accessories or replacement phones. I argue that this is an intentional design feature to increase breakage. The first three iPhones used a design that protected the glass from being exposed at the edge by protecting it with a metal ridge. With the iPhone 4, Apple removed the protective metal edge and exposed the glass front and back of the device. An impact with a hard surface on the corner of the device is almost certain to break it.

Another design feature that was introduced with the iPhone 4 was an exterior antenna that ran along the outside perimeter of the phone. When a user holds the phone, their hand comes in direct contact with the antenna and introduces electrical resistance, lowering the reception of the phone, and an increase in dropped calls. This caused an outcry from the iPhone 4 customer base and was dubbed “Antennagate.” Apple’s initial response to complaints was to hold the phone in a way that the hand does not come in contact with the antenna. Their next response was to push a software update (iOS 4.0.1), but the only thing that did was change the UI to show no change in reception as indicated by the reception bars icon. This may have changed the user’s initial perception that the problem was fixed, but poor reception and dropped calls were still a problem. A class action suit was filed, and subsequently settled and all iPhone 4 owners were given a two and a half month window to claim a $15 case that prevented direct contact with the antenna. Some might believe this was a simple mistake, but a multimillion-dollar project doesn’t go out the door without testing. Apple has shown plenty of examples of introducing intentionally flawed design into the world of consumer goods with the intention of shortening the lifespan and value of the product to increase incoming consumer capital. Apple has excelled in the above categories of designed obsolescence, but they may be best at style obsolescence.
Style Obsolescence

Few companies have defined the aesthetic of an industry like Apple. In keeping with their image of being rebellious, Apple has taken many chances in their attempts to create a new aesthetic. The original Macintosh featured a single body design, encompassing both the monitor and computer hardware in a single structure. Andy Hertzfeld recalled Steve Jobs stating that the Mac needed to be “different, different from everything else,” but, “have a classic look, that won’t go out of style, like the Volkswagen Beetle, or Porsche.”

Seventeen years later, Jobs would get his wish for a Ferdinand Porsche inspired case with the original iMac.

The iMac was a radical departure from Apple’s design aesthetics, which were very much in line with the PC world during Jobs’ absence. The iMac’s Volkswagen/Porsche styling cues are clear when they are compared. The iMac was round, bright, colorful, and like the original Macintosh—featured an all encompassing case that integrated the monitor, disk drive, and CPU. Like all iMacs, from its inception in 1998 to present day, the iMac was designed with the intention of never being opened by the consumer. Monitor, video processing, sound processing, and CPU were all integrated; this meant there was no upgrading the system and if one component failed it meant catastrophic failure for the entire machine, and an extremely expensive repair bill. Again, this is but another example of purposeful physical obsolescence.

Aesthetically, though, the iMac has had six body styles with three of them being major paradigm shifts. This doesn’t include the changes in palette for the plastics Apple used for the cases, which number three over 4 years for the original iMac (various colors, clear, and white). The iMac G4, introduced in 2002, looks like a half deflated basketball with a rod sticking out of it that supports a monitor. The 2006 redesign is relatively close to what is available today in 2012, but was originally encased in white plastic. An aluminum version was introduced in 2007, and in 2009 it received a minor makeover in the form of some proportion tweaks and reduction of aluminum on the face.

The same styling changes above have been used for the Power Macintosh, which became the Mac Pro, and laptop lines. The Power Macintosh G3 was introduced in 1997 with three different body styles - all
in beige. In 1999 the G3 was completely redesigned to resemble Apple’s new image established by the iMac, featuring blue and grey translucent plastic. Seven months later the G4 was introduced with a slightly different color scheme. In 2001, another cosmetic change was introduced and nicknamed “Quicksilver” for the color scheme change. Then, a year later another change to the appearance of the machine was introduced to separate the newer model from the old; the overall aesthetic changed in minor iterations. A radical redesign came about in 2005 with the introduction of the G5. It closely resembles some of Dieter Rams’ work for Braun dating back some 40 years. The Power Mac turned into the Mac Pro in 2006 and minor aesthetic tweaks came with the changeover; this design has become the most stable for Apple.

On the other hand, the laptop line has been the least stable in appearance having a number of lines dating back to 1999. The iBook had six different styles over seven years, and the MacBook has gone through four major style changes since its introduction in 2006. The argument for this may be to differentiate each model from its elder, less capable parent. However, each tweak helps give the consumer the sense of being left behind and out of date without completely alienating them. But there is some alienation, and I believe this is the primary point of aesthetic change. Alienate the buyer by letting them know without being told that they have fallen behind and now have an “old” device. After all, it is the consumer’s job to keep up-to-date and not get left behind.

The Walled City

The keystone in Apple’s walled city is the iOS. With all previous operating systems the user has had the option, if not the ability, to develop and distribute software for Apple computers. This required no licensing or approval from Apple. Now, with iOS, Apple controls the distribution of software through its iTunes storefront. All software must be submitted to Apple and it is either approved or rejected based upon Apple’s criteria. Software must be sold through iTunes and Apple gets a 30% cut. Given the buggy nature of the many applications available for iOS devices, marred
with their constant bug fixing updates, we can be sure that quality assurance isn’t their motivation, but content and profitability is. Furthermore, any and all marketing data that can be gleaned through the use of applications is processed for internal use and sold off to third parties for profit. This is a lesson Apple has taken from video game consoles. Whether or not this model will extend to their laptop and desktop machines remains to be seen, but it would not be surprising if it does happen.

Apple has established an incredibly loyal customer base built by enabling fantasy and wish fulfillment. They have created the specter of Other to rebel against in IBM. They further mystified the process of using a computer through their ad campaigns, thus breeding a group of people who fanatically believe that other machinery and operating systems are too difficult to use. They held up great people and claimed them as their own with the Think Different campaign, and built a lifestyle for consumers to pursue through commodity purchase.

Through the aid of design and engineering the loyal and the new are called upon annually to freshen their displays of loyalty. They disguise their designs as something good and clothe them in associations of Dieter Rams and the Bauhaus, forging a non-existent past and legitimizing their aesthetic approach. All of this is nothing more than a justification for planned obsolescence. Still, the customers happily line up. The indoctrinated Apple consumers do not question the company’s motives because they believe in the brand and the promises made by the company, real or imagined. They are creative individuals and rebels, and the rest of the world knows this because of the products they consume. They line up outside Apple’s walled city willing to pay the toll to be in the presence of the prophet, if only by proxy. The irony is they have achieved this image through the consumption of mass produced products, thus eliminating their individualism.

1984 wasn’t like “1984,” but with each passing year we get a little closer. Instead of walking lock step to watch Big Brother speak, we sit at home and watch with baited breath for our favorite shows and movies at the cost of subtle product placement and sustained commercial interruption. We experience fleeting moments of doubt in which we are diseased, with age
or inexperience, failing to meet our full potential. We begin to see ourselves as too fat, too stupid, too tall, too short, too different, too alike and on. We should be anything other than who we are, and who we are can be changed through consuming the all-healing elixir of product. It amounts to an abusive relationship where we chase the carrot because we are being whipped whether we are conscious of it or not.

With iPods, iPhones, Androids, and iPads, we voluntarily “check-in” to locations using GPS enabled apps. Gladly, we upload our pictures and eagerly tell our friends what we are thinking and how we are feeling with our Web-Connected-GPS-Camera-Smartphones. We rarely give these actions a second thought because everyone else seems to be doing it. Plus, we get the reward of external validation with every “Like” and “+1.” In our virtual worlds we achieve a false sense of accomplishment through the belief that we’re doing anything other than clicking a button. We surround ourselves with shiny objects with self-indulgent properties, but we don’t mind because we can customize them to further express our individuality. All the while our words and actions are being watched.

Would we invite marketers, psychologists, anthropologists, and linguists into our homes and let them follow us around so they could record and analyze every word we utter? Would we let them read our diaries and personal correspondences so they could get in our heads in order to aid them in figuring out how to appeal to us on an emotional level? Would we tell them our life story, our greatest ambitions, and our greatest fears so they can help guide our narrative? Because that is exactly what we do with the use of all the products I have mentioned. As a result, 1984 is not like “1984” because we willingly and enthusiastically submit to the authority of Big Brother, because we think sharing our photos, our current whereabouts, and our thoughts was our idea.

III. Conclusion

Apple is a relatively small player in the PC and smart phone market, occupying approximately 5.5% and 9% of the market respectively. As I stated earlier, none of these issues applies exclusively to Apple. Cellular phone providers
drive waste and inspire short product life cycles with “free” phone upgrades upon the signing of a service contract. The stock market and the drive for quarterly profits drives not only Apple, but the entire economy. Communications, computing, pharmaceuticals, transportation, food, home appliances, banking, fashion, furnishings—all of these industries make use of these practices to varying degrees. So why focus on Apple? Because they are considered to be one of the best brands in the world, and we tend to follow the leaders. Apple has done some good design work, especially in the realm of interface design. Relatively speaking, they have democratized certain technologies by making interaction more intuitive and approachable and they should be acknowledged for their work in this area. However, we need to call Apple out on their continued use of planned obsolescence and propaganda to drive sales. We must critically question what Apple and other industry leaders are doing, otherwise, we are complicit with their actions, directly or tacitly.

We are not fools blindly following the whims of marketing campaigns. We are people trying to make their way in a world where we have had no say in the rules that guide our culture or way of life. We do very specific jobs with very little training to do anything else. This is the nature of industrialized production and the resulting division of labor. All processes outside our own are mystified through ignorance. We sustain our lives on credit to fulfill our needs and desires. We attempt to build and maintain cultural capital so that we remain relevant to our peers. We have been sold on the idea that in order to have a good, stable career that we need a college education and that a job will be waiting for us once we graduate. We need cars to get to work, homes to live in, food to eat, clothing befitting of our station or desired station in life. All of this costs money, so we take out loans and charge it to institutions built upon the idea infinite, compound interest in a world of very finite resources. And very few of us are in a position to take a stand and say, ‘No. This is wrong, and we are not doing this,’ because there are plenty of other people who can take our place. Without a job, without credit, there is no car, there is no home, no food, or a means to live. Short of being a vagrant, there is no life outside of this system. So we keep quiet and bear it because we have to take care of ourselves and those dependent upon us.

The propaganda system and planned obsolescence are symptoms of profit over labor. Labor is not exclusive to people making products; virtually all people are laborers. The working class has been subdivided into middle-class consumers, blue-collar laborers, white-collar managers and well-to-do gentry. Your life and your
family do not fall into the considerations of corporations beyond the extent that you provide income through your work and your capital. We design it, we build it, we finance it, we subsidize it and we buy it one more time so that we may call it our own. Propaganda is there to distract us from our problems or sell us the solution. The underlying formula with all forms of planned obsolescence is this: make it cheaper and faster, kill it sooner and sell it more often, then make a larger profit than last quarter. Products are poorly made and repair costs are high; we are more likely to buy a replacement than repair something that will just break again.

So, how do we fix this? We can work within the system or outside of it.

Outside of the normal channels there are a few options. Peaceful protest has proven itself to varying degrees in the cases of Women's Suffrage, the liberation of India and the Civil Rights Movement. The recent movements dubbed the 99% protests and the Arab Spring have been aided through mobile communication technology. Although, I am notcondoning violent revolution. We only need to look at the history of war to see that victory on the battlefield does not guarantee anything but death, suffering, and destruction. I mean to draw attention to our increased ability to remotely communicate in real time and share information. Whether it is used to organize protesters or share with the world how to repair an appliance, there is great potential there. Within informal channels the internet may be our greatest boon. The Maker subculture, Slow Design, Slow Food, and Organic Food movements have all benefitted from the ability to communicate through open forums. The organizations are ad hoc and like all grass roots efforts are slow moving, but they certainly show promise for exposing problems and developing solutions. We can contribute to these organizations through sharing what we know, making better communications tools and interfaces, and promoting their causes. The issue is competing with established powers co-opting and transmuting these movements into pop-culture phenomena, which are then turned around and used to sell more goods. The Green movement or Green Design was gobbled up by companies in the transportation business like Toyota, Ford, and British Petroleum. They have been able to hijack and redefine the movement on their terms. Eventually grass roots movements die out or are absorbed into the system.

Creating solutions within the existing organizing structures are a viable possibility as well. This is an oversimplification, but the solution is three-fold. First, we must elect officials who will take action on the behalf of people and not corporate profits. Second, we must all play by the same rules. Third, we must become more independent and self-sufficient. This may seem impossible, as many
feel powerless, but the answers can be found in our nation’s rich labor history.

For the better part of a century, manufacturers used child labor despite protests about morality and practicality. Children were exploited as cheap labor, and it cost them life and limb. Companies that abhorred child labor had needed it for the savings and competitive advantage it provided. Those exploiting child labor could lower prices and undercut their competitors; this is similar to the problems of today. What began as a grassroots effort to abolish child labor eventually found footing as the Great Depression loomed. Jobs were scarce as the nation faced over 25 percent unemployment. The nation had an opportunity to reduce the labor pool for the better and it took action.

China and India are a hotbed for credulous cheap labor. Companies that use this labor are scrutinized because those were once US jobs. Additionally, some of those companies have been known to use sweatshops that exploit child labor or have abhorrent, coercive conditions, such as Apple manufacturer, Foxconn. Preventing these practices is near impossible as these are companies backed by corrupt governments in developing countries. We need legislative protection against companies that exploit sweatshops and child labor. If we take legislative action to prevent companies like Apple, Intel, Microsoft and Motorola from engaging in business agreements with offshore labor camps, we can create a system that brings jobs back to the US. We need to impose trade tariffs to equate the wages of foreign laborers to our own. It would no longer be cost effective to harvest our national resources, ship them overseas and then return them to the US in the form of consumer products.

There are simpler ways to end planned obsolescence. Give smaller local companies a chance. Give your business to local businesses and stay away from the multi-national corporations. Work locally for smaller companies where you know who you are dealing with. In order for smaller companies to succeed we need to cultivate a skilled labor force with a broad multidisciplinary education. Let’s return to teaching vocational skills alongside academics: woodworking, auto repair, textiles, drafting, welding, printing, culinary arts, agriculture, electrical training, plumbing, carpentry, building construction, etc. In education we can plant the seeds of local collaboration though the connections built through multi-disciplinary study. We need people capable in many trades, not specialists whose focus is so narrow that they cannot see the forest through the trees. With the rebirth of local industry we may have a better chance of finding the quality and accountability we desperately need.

We as consumers and producers can use our influence and ingenuity to
create higher-quality longer-lasting products with the return of manufacturing to the US. In times like these we will witness a growing trend where the market demands higher-quality products because we do not have the surplus income that we once had. We can no longer chase fads because we don't know if we will have the paychecks next season. What we buy better last and it better be the best. As designers, engineers and manufacturers, we will have the chance to take pride in our work and who we promote. We will no longer mass-produce disposable frivolous garbage. We will not work just for a paycheck; we will work for our families, our reputation and ourselves.
End Notes

1. (MillwardBrown 2011)
2. (Dougherty 1984), (Elliot 1995), (Nobel 2007), (iF Design 2010)
4. (Zac 2007)
5. (C. Chang 2011), (Whitney 2011)
6. (Hornby 2010)
7. (Hornby 2010)
8. (Wichary 2004), (Damer 2004)
10. (Computer History Museum 2012)
11. (Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 2012)
12. (Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 2012)
13. (Slivka 2010)
14. (International Movie Database 2012), (International Movie Database 2011)
15. (Jobs circa 1997)
16. (Jobs circa 1997)
17. (Jobs circa 1997)
18. (Jobs circa 1997)
19. (Jobs circa 1997)
20. (Apple, Inc. 2012)
21. (Engst 2011)
22. (Parrish 2009)
23. (Apple, Inc. 2012)
24. (Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 2012)
25. (Maniak 2012)
26. (Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 2012)
27. (Mohrs 2005)
28. (Weins 2011)
29. (Neistat 2007)
30. (Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 2012)
31. (Jade 2005)
32. (Ionescu 2010)
33. (Ionescu 2010)
34. (Gross 2012)
35. (Hertzfeld 1981)
36. (Apple Inc. 2012)
37. (A. Chang 2011), (Elmer-Dewitt 2012)
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