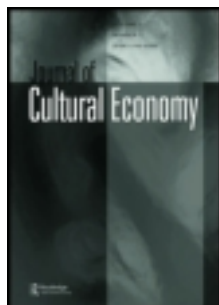


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# BRAND AS ASSEMBLAGE

## Assembling culture

Celia Lury

*This paper draws out the continuities between understandings of mass product as developed in the Frankfurt school with contemporary understandings of assemblage by way of an investigation of the brand. Drawing on recent developments in mathematics, it argues that the space of the assemblage is a space that is simultaneously mapped and brought into being in a logic of complex topological functionalities. It proposes that it is the implementation of the rationality of this new logic of space – and the emergence of abstract, ‘optimizing’ objects such as brands – that is captured in the notion of assemblage.*

KEYWORDS: brands; assemblage; Kracauer; topology; surface; value

As Jeremy Bullmore has said ‘people build brands as birds build nests, from scraps and straws we chance upon’. (Meyers 2003, p. 23)

### Introduction

In what follows, I want to draw out the implications of describing the brand as an assemblage, and of thinking of branding as a process of assembling culture. At one level, it is relatively straightforward to describe the brand as an assemblage, if this is a way in which the heterogeneity of the processes that comprise branding may be acknowledged. To assume that branding is a single process would be to mistake the multiple and sometimes diverging layers of activity that currently converge in what is called brand development. Brands are the outcome of diverse professional activities, including marketing, graphic and product design, accountancy, media, retail, management, and the law, with each of these professions having multiple histories, being internally divided, in tension with each other, and sometimes being contradictory or opposed in their relation to specific instances of branding. And consumers, of course, are also involved in making brands through their participation in activities of recognition, communication, and identification and the purchase and use of goods and services. To describe brands as assemblages is, then, at the very least an acknowledgement of the trajectories of diverse practices, technologies and ideas in processes of branding. It may also be taken to imply that the composition of brands is heterogeneous. In my earlier work (Lury 2004), for example, I describe brands as having a multi-levelled ontology – including a technical or physical support, and a set of conventions that articulate or work on that support, and an

image or logo. But perhaps there is more to describing brands as assemblages than this, something more that can be ascertained by considering whether and how branding assembles culture (Ong & Collier 2005; DeLanda 2006). To do this, it is necessary to adopt a method of working that not only looks *back* from an object toward 'the system of mutual implication, the system of regularities, and the coherent network of conditions of possibilities that give the object its body and its sense' (Kwinter 2001, p. 215; see also Haraway 1999, pp. 92–93, 95) but also looks *forward* to the object as a set of possible relations and connections.

### Brand as Assemblage

The phenomena that are now described as brands are diverse, and any attempt to define the brand is caught within conflicting frameworks and is able to call upon multiple histories, each of which gives branding a different origin. But for present purposes, it will be suggested that branding becomes a visible force in the organization of production in industrialized countries in the second half of the nineteenth century, and increases in significance – in fits and bursts – over the following one hundred and fifty years. Anne McClintock (1995) shows that during this initial period, the stretching of markets over national and international space, the growth of national and international trading networks of circulation and distribution, together with economic competition between nations created a climate within which the aggressive competition between producers became ever more intense. This competition contributed to the first real innovations in advertising, the development of modern consumer markets and the early stages of the emergence of branding. In England in 1884, for example, wrapped soap was sold for the first time under a brand name. McClintock argues that this event signalled a major transformation in the economy: generic items formerly indistinguishable from one another – soap sold simply as soap – came to be marketed as distinctive through the use of corporate signatures or brand names, such as Pears and Monkey Brand. From the 1880s onwards, corporate logos were increasingly used to promote a whole range of mass-produced products such as Rowntree's Fruit Pastilles and Fruit Gums, Bassett's Liquorice Allsorts, Campbell's soup, H.J. Heinz pickles and Quaker Oats cereal. In 1886 in the USA, a medicinal product or 'nerve tonic' started being sold as Coca-Cola; as quickly as the late 1890s, it was being promoted as the 'national drink'.

The early stages of the development of the brand were intended to allow the producer to speak 'directly' to the consumer through presentation, packaging and other media. In other words, the development of corporate and product personalities that characterizes the early stages of the development of the modern brand was in part an attempt to circumvent or limit the role of the retailer as markets were stretched geographically. But it involves not simply a dis-intermediation (of the evaluative role of the retailer), but also a re-intermediation (the development of brand logos, identities or personalities to speak for the product). Unsurprisingly then this period also sees the emergence of retail outlets as brands themselves: for example, large multiple stores such as Woolworths and J.C. Penney's in the USA and Thomas Lipton's stores in the UK began to standardize the quality of service in their stores. This stage in the history of brand development is thus closely linked to changing relations between manufacturers and retailers, and these conflicts – and alliances – have continued to be important ever since.

A further actor in the rise of branding is the 'performative discipline' of marketing (Callon 1998; Cochoy 1998), especially insofar as marketing concerns the definition of products both as objects within competitive market relations and as objects of consumption. More particularly, it is through the use of market information, both about competitors, but also, crucially, about consumers, that the discipline of marketing has come to play an active role in the (ongoing) production of objects-for-markets. Indeed, it was through developments in techniques for communicating with and acquiring knowledge about the consumer that the discipline of marketing really begins to emerge. However, from a present-day perspective it is possible to see even these early stages of the development of the brand in terms of an intervention in the system of production rather than in terms of (add-on) communication alone. While marketers may have initially only been concerned to describe the existing ways in which products were brought to market – finding out what functions and firms were involved in making goods available to consumers – in a very short time they acquired a more active, interventionist role. In his overview of the development of marketing as a management science in the USA, Frank Cochoy identifies a series of overlapping developments:

Firstly, marketing pioneers tried to train themselves in the empirical study of markets and to educate similar specialists ... Marketers reached that first objective by inventing special human and conceptual frames for market knowledge and practice ... From that point onward, the adepts of the discipline of marketing played the game of managers and management, of economist and the economy ... Eventually, they reshaped [not only] their own activity, but also the market and the economy altogether. (1998, p. 195)

Cochoy suggests that it is from the early twentieth century that the marketing function first begins to be institutionalized alongside the emergence of a new body of industrial disciplines, regulatory bodies and management specialisms. (For example, the US Food and Drug Administration was established in 1906 to regulate corporations selling such goods.) Significantly though, he suggests that it was the Roosevelt administration that really opened the door for marketing to participate in the increasingly technical management of market exchange in the USA. This administration co-ordinated the standardization of market practices and organized the development of principles of industrial classification and marketing codes and conventions. This was also a period that saw a call for marketing knowledge to lead rather than to follow practice, for a shift from descriptive to prescriptive approaches, and from inductive to deductive methods of analysis (Cochoy 1998). But this call was not taken up uniformly. There were clear differences in the development of marketing in different countries, linked to the position of this new discipline in a complex of commercial practices, including the organization of different retail forms to capture market share (Winship 2000).

By the 1950s and 1960s, however, the discipline of marketing was more able to consolidate its subordination of production to a technical operationalization of knowledge of the consumer not only in the US and the UK but more widely. Thus, 1960 saw the publication of Theodor Levitt's manifesto for a global marketing revolution. The distinction between selling and marketing was crucial to his argument. Selling, he said,

... focuses on the needs of the seller, marketing on the needs of the buyer. Selling is preoccupied with the seller's need to convert his product into cash, marketing with the idea of satisfying the needs of the customer by means of the product and the whole

cluster of things associated with creating, delivering and finally consuming it. (quoted in Mitchell 2001, pp. 76–77)

The consolidation of the role of marketing was linked to the changing role of retail; no longer a passive activity, driven by the manufacturer, it was increasingly becoming a complex and aggressive activity in which information about the consumer was a pivotal resource. So, for example, major retailers were able to exert greater control over the supply chain through their use of information systems technology to co-ordinate and organize store management, logistics and the distribution chain. The post-war period also sees the rise of self-service systems in retail outlets, in which the 'silent salesman' of brands, promotion and packaging was able to co-ordinate selling. But the increasing legitimacy of marketing was also a consequence of internal developments: the abandonment of institutional economics by marketers and the adoption of a combination of quantitative techniques and behavioural sciences (Cochoy 1998). On the one hand, the implementation of operations research and econometrics led to the birth of marketing science, a research stream that could model and optimize market activities. On the other, the importation of statistics, psychology and behavioural analysis gave birth to what has come to be called consumer research. This involves the use of economic, social and psychographic demographics to map the target market. The combined use of these methods secured a growing authority for marketers, an authority that legitimated an increasingly important role for marketing in product development, product differentiation and product classification.

In marketing as it began to be institutionalized, products come to be defined in terms of their similarity or difference from other objects that might occupy the same social space (in relation to competitors) *and* in terms of their integration in social life (in relation to consumers) (Slater 2002). Marketing work on product definitions thus involves destabilizing and re-stabilizing the product in terms of optimum positions within the practices of both competition and consumption and thus also involves a de-framing and re-framing of the market (Callon 1998). Crucially, the active role awarded to marketing in branding practices involves a re-organization of processes of product qualification and re-qualification, and – increasingly over the last twenty to thirty years – has put more and more emphasis on differentiation. As Callon says, this 'implies specific metrological work and heavy investment in measuring equipment' (2002, pp. 198–199).

The measuring devices involved in the process of qualification-requalification (or product qualification trials) included statistical devices which increasingly showed that 'beyond prices, the result of competition depended on the management of the multi-dimensional aspects of products – above all, brands, services, packaging. As a consequence of the role of marketing in these qualification trials, the bundle of characteristics or attributes comprising the product was both multiplied and dispersed across different stages of production and distribution. Attributes that had previously been held constant (apparently fixed properties) were now made variable. This contributed to the rise of what might be called a multiply differentiated, distributed product, in which the previously existing distinction between the processes of production (as the source of value) and those of distribution (as a means of exchange) begins to be eroded. More specifically, what emerged in this period was a widely adopted programme of marketing management. This involved the idea of the 'marketing mix' which sought to present the best marketing policy as an optimal and controlled combination of the 4 'P's – price,

promotion, place and product strategies. The implementation of this programme was typically enforced through the systematic use of a Taylorian model of planning, analysis and control (Cochoy 1998).

In the following years the commercial success of the 'marketing mix' led to further shifts in the role of marketing in the qualification and re-qualification of products. Marketers found ways to show that products are not adequately defined by their functional properties alone; instead, qualification trials demonstrated that the product could not be limited to its physical characteristics, that is, they demonstrated that a product's existence extends beyond being a discrete physical good. In short, product qualification in terms of physical or functional properties was increasingly found inadequate for the disciplinary or performative purposes of marketing. Instead, the pattern of customers' needs was identified through the use of the behavioural sciences in consumer research. Products were classified according to the way they were perceived, used and bought by consumers, resulting in the creation of product categories such as 'convenience', 'shopping', 'speciality' and 'unsought'. The 'nature' or 'essence' of products understood in this way was thus directly linked to a framing of the market in terms of consumers' perceptions, needs and practices as construed in the knowledge practices of marketers.

This key stage in the emergence of the brand occurs in the second half of the twentieth century and is linked to a changed view of the producer-consumer relationship: no longer viewed in terms of stimulus-response, the relation was increasingly conceived as two way. This shift was closely linked to the intensification of processes of mediation and re-mediation. Historically, this includes, first and most importantly, the rapid expansion of radio and television broadcasting, and was followed in later years by the growing use of home computers, video, computer games, and the Internet. In a key article written just as television had taken over radio's position as the main marketing channel, Gardner and Levy (1955, cited in Arvidsson 2006) argue that marketers needed to invest more in positioning brands within media culture and less in attempting directly to persuade consumers to buy products. One consequence of this view, so Arvidsson argues, is that it became increasingly accepted that sales were most effectively made as a result of *the positioning of the brand* in what has become an increasingly media-intensive culture, in which the distinction between advertising, promotion, and media message is increasingly blurred. What becomes increasingly important, in short, is the effect of media (or media effects), that is the successful communication of a signal against a presumed background of noise.

This changed view of communication was advocated most explicitly by the proponents of a new organizational model for advertising agencies, which put 'account planning' at the heart of the advertising process. In this model, the account planner, whose role is to act as a representative of the point of view of the consumer within an agency, co-ordinates the various other aspects of the advertising process. The role was designed to provide the client with a view of the consumer's experience and to ensure that the identity of the brand was maintained throughout the execution of the advertising design or creative process (Julier 2000, pp. 19–20). In the UK – and to some extent elsewhere – this attempt was associated with the rise of what was called 'creative advertising' in the 1980s and 1990s (Lash & Urry 1994). This genre of advertising not only promoted the use of new forms of consumer research (especially lifestyle research, attitudinal and motivational research, and psycho-demographics), but also aimed to

construct for consumers an imaginary lifestyle within which the emotional and aesthetic values of the product were elaborated (Nixon 1997, p. 195). There was also an increased 'reliance on sounds and shapes, which tapped into the feelings of consumers, rather than on logical propositions' (Mort 1996).

From this period onwards – the 1980s and early 1990s – there is a move away from the branding of stand-alone products (that secured demand and often a price premium for the manufacturer by guaranteeing the consistency of quality) to the branding of product ranges and the branding of services. The product mix – or brand object – that is produced in this way is sometimes said to have three dimensions: width, depth and consistency. The dimension of width refers to the number of different product lines established by a company (or brand proprietor). The depth refers to the average number of items offered by the company within each product line, while the consistency refers to how closely related the various product lines are in end use, production requirements, and distribution channels. Or to put all this the other way around, the establishment and maintenance of links between a product item, a product line and a product assortment come to be increasingly organized in relation to brands through the implementation of brand-names, multi-brand decisions and brand repositioning strategies. To understand what is at issue here think of the respective positions of the brands Wilkinson Sword and Gillette, both of which include razors in their product ranges. However, while Wilkinson Sword claims to be 'the name on the world's finest blades', Gillette says that it is 'the best a man can get' and is the brand name of a wide range of products including not only razors but also after-shaves and deodorants (Lury 1998, p. 66). The brands respectively position themselves in the 'blades' or shaving market and the broader men's toiletries market, and have different profiles in the dimensions outlined above.

Crucially, once the brand is developed in this multi-dimensional way it is able to function as a mechanism for new product or new service development. For example,

One general rule with the Levi's brand is that all innovations must be 'Levi's-like'. What that means is that innovations are pursued or rejected based on their compatibility with the core values and attributes of the brand. (Holloway 1999, p. 71)

This process of product development is sometimes described in the marketing literature as brand extension. Thus, for example, the Persil trademark for detergents has been extended to Persil washing-up liquid, the Mars trademark for chocolate bars has been extended to ice creams, and Smirnoff vodka brand introduced a citrus-flavoured, single-serve drink, Smirnoff Ice. Similarly, starting with women's skin-care products, Nivea has been extended into men's products, including deodorants, shampoos and electric razors. In all these examples, the company makes use of the dynamic, multi-dimensionality of the existing brand to enter a new market more cheaply, establish the product or service more quickly and increase the overall exposure of the brand. As the CEO of Nike, Phil Knight, said in a widely cited interview:

For years, we thought of ourselves as a production-oriented company, meaning we put all our emphasis on designing and manufacturing the product. But now we understand that the most important thing we do is market the product. *We've come around to saying that Nike is a marketing company, and the product is our most important marketing tool.* What I mean is that marketing knits the whole organization together. The design elements and functional characteristics of the product itself are just part of the overall marketing process.

We used to think that everything started in the lab. Now we realize that everything spins off the consumer. And while technology is still important, the consumer has to lead innovation. We have to innovate for a specific reason, and that reason comes from the market. Otherwise we'll end up making museum pieces. (*My italics*, Willigan 1992)

In the last twenty years or so, practitioners have sought to develop yet other new roles for branding in reorganizing marketing activity and even shaping business strategy itself. So, for example, brands are also increasingly held to be a locus for business strategy, 'talent' recruitment and employee management (Moor 2007). Further, as symbols of ongoing relationships between consumers and businesses, they have come to be recognized as wealth generating financial assets, and as such, have been the focus of legal and other activity relating to trademark and other forms of proprietary knowledge including franchising and merchandizing.<sup>1</sup> Simultaneously, the branding concept is being applied to more organizations than ever before, including governments, cities, faiths, charities, web communities, financial services, education, new media, and the public sector with the consequence that specific agencies known as brand consultancies and the institutionalization of brand management positions in private and public organizations have now been established. Indeed, Liz Moor goes so far as to argue for the need to 'decouple branding from simplistic ideas about "commodification" and to reveal it instead as something more akin to a managerial technique or resource that seeks to use broadly "cultural" . . . materials for a range of strategic ends' (2008, p. 88). In short, branding proceeds in different ways in different institutional contexts. It involves a range of forms of imaging, techniques and technologies, and makes use of different kinds of relationships for different strategic purposes. It embodies numerous additional functions and possibilities above and beyond its dual historical roles of reassuring consumers of quality and origin and differentiating otherwise similar (generic) products. It is thus – in a descriptive sense – clearly an assemblage. However, in order to analyse the capacity of the brand to act as a platform for the organization of these diverse possibilities it is helpful not simply to describe brands as assemblages but to consider branding as a process of assembling culture.

### Mass Products

To consider how it is that brands assemble culture however I am not going to turn immediately to recent discussions of assemblage, but rather to consider the writings of an earlier generation of writers, that of Simmel (1990)[1907]), Benjamin (1970)[1953]) and Kracauer (1995)[1963]), whose conceptions of 'mass' culture, I will suggest, are of relevance for understanding the cultural implications of processes of assembly. This is because, for these writers, 'The society of mass production is to do with the production of mass in the special sense of producing and reproducing the mutability and "bewildering abundance" intrinsic to mass' (Cooper 2001, p. 23). In the writings of these critics, mass products draw in the public at the level of the senses, and lead to the restructuring of the very conditions of experience, subjectivity and the body. Of course, brands are sometimes counterposed to mass products, when those products are understood as the standardized commodities of (Fordist) industrial production. But the brand as described above is a mass product in the sense that it is a medium in which the masses are continuously cut up, differentiated and integrated in the co-ordination of a more-or-less constant flow of products, services and experiences. In brief, brands are like other mass products such as the crowd, the



public, and the mass media, insofar as they are transient 'in the multiple sense of being evanescent, incomplete and moving on' (Cooper 2001, pp. 17–18). The understanding of the mass that is invoked here is thus as the source of ever-changing possibilities, as the movement of complex and variable relations. It is in this respect, I suggest, that the writings of these authors on mass culture anticipate the contemporary understandings of assembly that focus on not only the heterogeneous and the ephemeral, but also the emergent (Deleuze & Guattari 1988). To make this argument in more detail, let me address some characteristics of brands as mass products before returning to the question of how brands assemble culture.

First, as is characteristic of many uses of mass, what is at issue in contemporary brand development is whether and how mass may be dispersed and collected, aggregated and dis-aggregated, differentiated and integrated. The contested nature of these processes is one of the sources of tension between sociology and marketing, as they compete in their understandings of the common people, the multitude, the mass. On the one hand, sociologists have been critical of marketers for what is seen as a bewildering array of market models in which there is no apparent desire for consistency between product markets, no underlying categories of status, identity or taste. On the other hand, marketing has simultaneously attacked and disaggregated macroscopic (sociological) categories – race, gender, class, and social and cultural status. It has put forward – in effect if not in intention – an understanding of mass (markets) neither in terms of any essential attribute, nor in terms of some grouping of class or otherwise, but as fundamentally comprised in processes of de- and re-composition, that is, in terms of dynamics. Moreover, at the same time as holding onto myriad competing micro-segmentations of the masses, marketing does not require or enforce a linear relation between micro- and macro-level understandings of the market, instead preferring to proliferate shifting, continually changing mini-masses – lifestyles, tribes, groupings of various kinds (which to much sociological thinking seem superficial and ephemeral). Some sociologists slide into suggesting that marketing is simply unable to find relations between micro- and macro-levels of analysis for lack of adequate rigour in methodology.<sup>2</sup> However, an alternative view is that (some of) brand development is concerned with markets not as (social or cultural) groups or (media) audiences, but as populations (DeLanda 2002; Callon 2002), a term that invokes a mass in which heterogeneity is normal.

Second, the mass at issue in the practices of brand management is similar to that described by Benjamin and Kracauer in that it is neither simply amorphous nor a stable thing, but is rather demanding, open and incomplete. Kracauer writes,

Certainly, the addiction to distraction is greater in Berlin than in the provinces, but the tension to which the working masses are subjected is also greater and more tangible; it is an essentially formal tension, which fills their day fully without making it fulfilling. Such a lack demands to be compensated, but this need can be articulated only in terms of the same surface-sphere that imposed the lack in the first place. (1995[1963], p. 325)

Most obviously, mass is implicated in a desire for distraction (Morse 1998; Cray 2001). In the case of the brand, this implication of mass is brought about in relationship with the image. This is a relationship that may be understood in terms of fascination (Baudrillard 1994), that is, in terms of a perception that deprives images of their fixed qualities in order to amplify their intensities (Terranova 2004). And here the importance of the logo as icon, as a sign of the brand, is especially important. To take just one example, the name 'Orange'

was recently used to brand a telecommunications company because market research found that people believed the name and the colour to be distinctive, friendly, extrovert, modern and powerful. Attempts were made to incorporate these values in the Orange promotional ethos:

**Refreshing.** We constantly look to do things differently and in a better way. We give colour to all that we do. We are ready to push the boundaries and take risks.

**Honest.** We are always open and honest. We say what we do and we do what we say. We have nothing to hide and we behave responsibly.

**Straightforward.** For us, clarity comes through simplicity. We recognize that we are people communicating with other people. We are always direct and easy to understand.

**Dynamic.** We want to make a difference to people's lives. Our optimism is contagious. We are passionate about what we do and we have confidence in ourselves.

**Friendly.** We enjoy working and succeeding together by building close relationships. While we have a sense of purpose, we also have a sense of humour. We consider the needs both of our customers and of each other.

Thus the colour orange itself – used in a square logo – was described by Michael Wolff, co-founder of the agency Wolff Olins, as 'a way of using red without its stridency, urgency and alarm – it keeps the vibrancy but is warm and cheery. Tesco's red means cheap but Sainsbury's orange is red, but not quite'. Other marketers say, 'Orange is attention-grabbing without being aggressive . . . It can be calm, warm and rich as well as fresh and healthy' (Marksteen Adamson, international creative director of Interbrand), and 'Orange is warm and friendly as opposed to the cold, blue tones used by telecoms companies and banks' (Robbie Lawson, Wolff Olins creative director) (all quoted in Day 2001). The strap-line for the launch advertising campaign was, 'The future's bright. The future's Orange'.

The implication of mass in a desire for distraction is also achieved in brand development strategies that draw on design and architecture to foster the active transformation of bodily habits. In retail management and retail design, 'theming', event-based and ambient-marketing sub-disciplines, there is a clear concern with habits and precepts, and attempts to understand the temporality of a body by plugging it into a field of action. In all of these fields, the brand may be staged as a performance or an event of some kind. Minute and apparently inconsequential decisions become the active site of intervention. Examples of dedicated retail stores that function as marketing devices include Original Levi's Stores which are said to provide 'an invaluable test-bed for new ideas, such as powerful point-of-sale strategies related to our advertising campaigns' (Holloway 1999, p. 76). Sony showrooms located in global cities such as Tokyo, New York and Paris are furnished with 'lifestyle settings' such as bedrooms, offices and lounges, and consumers are encouraged to play with Sony products.

Their behaviour and preferences are closely monitored by Sony staff. The showroom thus becomes a laboratory for analysing consumer reactions to different products. This information is passed on to Sony headquarters which then feeds into subsequent product research and development. (Julier 2000, p. 106)

Similarly, Niketowns are designed to encourage consumer activity in the space of the store: visitors are invited to try on shoes and clothing, test athletic equipment, watch videos, listen to music, and, in some stores, use an indoor basketball space. In discussing the use of the Niketown in Chicago, Arvidsson (2006) notes,

... interaction frequently takes place across generations, as the store is full of parents who bring their children. Consumers are thus not just awed by the Michael Jordan statue, but that awe is enacted collectively as parents and children interact. Together they perform an event where the truth of Nike values – that you can ‘Just Do It’ – acquires a significance that goes far beyond the accomplishments of a particular athlete. (2006, p. 79)

The concern with contact, tactility, mobility and forms of distracted perception can be seen in terms of a wish to implicate brands in a dynamic modulation of the organization of a physical environment. In such practices, brand managers seek to incorporate mass understood not only in terms of (aspects of) aggregates of individual consumers but also (aspects of) the sub and the supra-individual habits, single actions, series of actions and the contexts of use or wider environment.

### Assembling Culture

The argument proposed in the last section is that the writings of an earlier generation of critics on mass culture anticipated many of the ways in which brands assemble contemporary culture today. What then is added by the notion of assemblage? Let me try to elucidate this by reference to Kracauer’s famous description of mass products – or the mass ornament – in terms of a ‘turn to the surface’. He describes the mass forms of his day – the hotel lobby, arcades, the Tiller girls and bestsellers as well as cinema and photography – as practices that ‘display an elective affinity with the surface’. Importantly, this surface is not presented as a symptom of a world lacking the meaning that could give it substance (Levin 1995, p. 19) but rather as the outcome of the penetration of (mass) culture by *ratio*; Kracauer says, ‘The ornament, detached from its bearers, must be understood *rationally*’ (1995, p. 77). As Thomas Levin notes:

Suspending the traditional opposition of (merely decorative) applied ornament and functional structure ... Kracauer here casts the geometry of the mass of Tiller Girls as both an ornamentalization of function and a functionalization of ornament. (1995, p. 18)

Surface is not understood by Kracauer in opposition to mass; surface is not outside or on top of mass. Rather, surface is understood as a vector of the movement of mass. But while the argument presented here has been that the brand might be added to the list of mass products, its addition suggests that the organization of the dynamics of this surface – the ground and expression of difference – has changed. Most importantly for the argument being developed here, the rationality that organizes the contemporary economy can no longer be characterized as a ‘linear system’, nor does it take the form of ‘Euclidean geometry’ or the ‘elementary components of physics’; it is, rather, organized in terms of a non-linear logic (Lash 2001; Lazzarato 2004). It is the significance of this shift in logic or ratio for the notion of surface that is captured in the term assemblage, for it is a direct response to the recent developments in the natural sciences and mathematics that have contributed to new forms of logic and calculation.<sup>3</sup>

When Kracauer describes the mass culture of the Weimar Republic in terms of a turn to the surface, he proposes that the logic of this surface can only be determined from above: ‘The [mass] ornament resembles *aerial photographs* of landscapes and cities in that it does not emerge out of the interior of the given conditions, but rather appears above

them' (1995, p. 77). But, there is not a fixed internal or external position from which the surface of contemporary assemblages such as brands may be viewed.<sup>4</sup> This is because not only is it not the sheen or superficial appearance of mass, it is also not a surface of vectors as described by Kracauer. Let me explicate this a little further, first by way of mathematics. In relation to a mathematical surface such as a curve, a vector may be established by mapping a tangent to a curve in relation to axes of ordinates. What developments in topological thinking have achieved in mathematics however is to make it possible to map a set of points on a given curve (a rate of change, for example) without reference to a pre-given orientation of axes of ordinates, but in terms of continuities in multi- or n-dimensional space. The contemporary mathematical surface is thus a space that is simultaneously mapped and brought into being in a logic of complex topological<sup>5</sup> functionalities. It is a space that is known and acted in without reference to supplementary or external coordinates; that is, it does not emerge *in* space, but is rather 'a space in itself' (Kline, cited in DeLanda 2002). And it is the implementation of the rationality of this new logic of space – and the emergence of abstract, 'optimizing' objects – that is captured in the notion of assemblage.

The growth of such a rationality may be explained by linking it not only to developments in mathematics but also to the expansion of quantitative calculation in contemporary societies, that is, to the growth of – and transformation in – ideas and procedures concerned with number, counting, logic, and consequent forms of spatial and temporal configuration, and the combination and organization of these operations into systems (Thrift 2007). It is, for example, easy to understand the increasing significance of a calculative logic of continuities or flows as a consequence of the widespread application of computing power through the medium of software and the associated proliferation of 'social' transactional data (Savage & Burrows 2007). Yet, as numerous writers (Hayles 1990; Herrnstein-Smith & Plotnitsky 1997; Stafford 1999) have pointed out, the use of analogy and analogical thinking (that is, the drawing of a relation of internal similarity) is intimately interconnected with the digital in social practices. Consider, for example, how the use of communications and information technologies in the production of products, services, and experiences involves a translation into wider circulatory practices of ordering and coding, of constituting and regulating difference. And more generally it may be argued the implementation of a rationality involves both proportion (a certain ratio) and participation (performance), both abstraction and translation. Certainly as described above the rise in the use of hard, extensive techniques of quantitative calculation in brand management, including the use of statistical techniques of probability in mapping movements and masses, have been complemented by an expansion of the soft, intensive methods of design, visual imagery and imagineering. The relations between quantitative and qualitative methods may be changing,<sup>6</sup> but both are still implicated in the assemblages characteristic of a knowing capitalism (Thrift 2005; Burrows & Gane 2006).

Let me return to the case of the brand to illustrate this further. As outlined earlier, brands are devices for the reflexive organization of a set of multi-dimensional relations between products or services, subject to statistical testing and the rapidly changing pressures of mediation, stylization and practices of commercial calculation. But the brand as assemblage is not 'simply' a social construction since the brand plays a part in the production of itself (and other things, including products and markets). Nor is the reflexivity at work in the coordination of markets by brands representational, in contrast to, for example, the reflexive coordination of price. The brand – as it is put to work – is a

way, not of representing, but of modeling markets in many dimensions. Another way of putting this is that while price – an earlier market device – links the economy to the daily world via representation, branding is non-representational (Thrift 2007): a brand comprises (some of) the world itself (Kwintar 2001). And it does so in n-dimensional space-time. What is proposed here then is that, as the consequence of the adoption of techniques in which the relationality of social life is variously mapped, accessed, routed, tagged, and marked, the brand as assemblage emerges in a series of experiments in auto-spatialization. That is, the intensive topological possibilities of a particular set of points in marketing space – a set of relations between products labeled or named in some way – is explored experimentally to build brand continuity and extension in multiple markets. As Burrows and Gane put it in their account of the use of geo-demographic classifications in marketing, a classification is 'trained' by seeing how well it predicts spatial variations in consumption and lifestyle variables, recalibrated and then labeled (2006, p. 796). And then the process is repeated. To describe the brand as an assemblage is thus to acknowledge that it is one of a number of devices that embody a logic of calculative continuities and the modelling, manipulation and naming of relations of variation so as to multiply possibilities.<sup>7</sup> As such, such devices or assemblages 'represents a fresh attempt to synthesize the formal, the social and the technical' (Cache 1995, p. 3).

Indeed, insofar as the space of the brand – a (mass) market – is not defined by a single set of external coordinates, its modeling of mass is of something indeterminate, comprised of neither individuals nor communities:

The masses are not specific social classes, but more of a generalized dynamics that takes over when you take away all attributes, predicates, qualities of references, from a large number of people. The mass, that is, is a lowest common denominator. Not in the sense of a loss of quality but as a kind of pre-individual and collective potential to be affected. This is about the physical capacity of a large number of bodies to form a kind of passive mass – a receptacle for the affective power of images. (Terranova 2004, p. 136)

As Michel Callon remarks in relation to a marketing analysis of consumers of cruises:

It turns out that how customers judge the reception, the sale of drinks, and the length of the cruise all depend on whether they live in or near Paris. In this way we discover the unexpected significance of a population from the Parisian region with its own expectations and preferences. These customers are mostly employees, they have been on cruises before, they take their families with them, and they do not visit the Eiffel Tower – all of which is also tested in focus groups. What sociological theory would ever have dreamed up such a population? (2002, pp. 210–211)

This is a modeling of mass as population that is not defined by size or quantity since its defining characteristic is the nature of its convertibility, its capacity to de- and re-compose, which is driven by intensities or qualities. It is what informs the vocabulary of thresholds, fronts and edges that is characteristic of contemporary brand development.

## Conclusion

A number of issues arise from this analysis of the brand as not simply mass product but as assemblage, perhaps the most important being that of value.<sup>8</sup> One implication is that the value created in processes of assemblage is a consequence of the particular kind

of difference that is made: that is, a difference in an assemblage is always a difference in the assemblage as a whole at a particular time and in a particular place. That is, values are produced in – and produce – an assemblage that is spatio-temporalized: value is created if a difference is established between ‘here’ and ‘there’ or ‘before’ and ‘after’ in the assemblage. But the measure of this value does not have an ontological referent in a metric outside the space of the assemblage itself. Rather it relies upon a radically relational and contextual determination of value. As such, it invites questions about the difference which something that happens makes: a difference in what? In relation to what? About what? For whom? And when? This kind of value is commonly described in brand management in terms of ‘distinctiveness’, a value that is recognized in law as the basis for the protection of brands as trade marks (Lury 2008), but it is notoriously hard to measure with any confidence. Measures of brand equity, for example, are typically no more than highly provisional validations of the ‘potential’ of relations captured in brand practices.

This brief discussion of value links to another point – that relating to the kind of knowledge that assemblages such as brands make possible and those they render irrelevant (beside but not of the point). Importantly, the non-linear or topological techniques outlined here are not external to the objects or spaces they make possible, and it is this internal relation that is also referenced in those uses of the term that derive from the French word *agencement*, as used in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (who, confusingly, use the French word *assemblage* rather differently). As John Phillips explains, *agencement* ‘designates the priority of neither [a] state of affairs nor [a] statement [about that state] but of their connection, which implies the production of a sense that exceeds them and of which, transformed, they now form parts’ (2006, p. 109). This is an important meaning of assemblage to remember since, as Phillips further points out, the knowledge of the world produced in such assemblages (of subjectivity, of cultural change, of populations) is formed of ‘second-order ideas: concepts that are adequate – a good fit – to the unities composed by bodies in connection’ (2006, p. 109).<sup>9</sup> In short, if the use of the notion of assemblage is appropriate in relation to contemporary culture it transforms the kinds of knowledge that make sense. In other words, assembling culture provides a new surface of and for both value and knowledge.

## NOTES

1. In this regard, it might be argued that branding is contributing to changes in traditional producer and exchange markets (Lury 2004, 2008). Certainly, branding continues to shape markets as a device for intra-organizational negotiations of relations between producers and consumers but they are not simply means for distribution and exchange, or ways of organizing markets in terms of matching supply and demand. They also display some elements of financial markets in that they contribute to a logic of investment and speculation: brands are not used up by market-external consumption, but enter the process of price and product formation, motivate the reproduction of markets, are valued and bought and sold as wealth generating financial assets, as well as being the focus of legal and other activity relating to trademark and other forms of proprietary knowledge including franchising and merchandizing.
2. Kracauer writes, ‘Although the masses give rise to the ornament, they are not involved in thinking it through. As linear as it may be, there is no line that extends from the small sections of the mass to the entire figure’ (1995, p. 77).

3. As Couze Venn notes, assemblage is one of a series of new concepts for addressing 'the problem of determination, of process, and of stability and instability regarding social phenomena' (2006, p. 107). Indeed he suggests that, as with previous sets of concepts in the social sciences, notably the notion of structure, these concepts 'derive from developments in the natural sciences and mathematics'.
4. Nigel Thrift suggests that assemblages make 'room for space'. He continues, 'Assemblages will function quite differently according to local circumstance not because they are an overarching structure adapting its rules to the particular situation but because these manifestations are what the assemblage consists of' (2005, p. 94).
5. For some discussions of topology, from a range of disciplinary perspectives, see [www.atacd.net](http://www.atacd.net).
6. Put rather differently, Manuel DeLanda argues that while 'in taxonomic essentialism the role of analysis is purely logical, decomposing a genus into its component species by the successive discovery of necessary differences, for example, in assemblage theory analysis must go beyond logic and involve causal interventions in reality' (2006, p. 31). For DeLanda intervention is necessary because the logic at issue here is non-linear and, so he suggests, a non-linear logic requires not conceptual but causal analysis.
7. The argument being made here is that topological functionalities make possible the creation of new kinds of continuity – of flows, of reflexivity in 'real' time – in which objects such as the brand are multiply iterated and widely distributed but still recognized as consistent or invariant.
8. The assembling of culture described here is an instance of the general form of value of informational capital as described by writers including Lash (2001) and Lazzarato (2004), that is, the exchange value of communicability – the ability to be shared, listed, compiled, and connected.
9. As Savage and Burrows note, social and cultural research conducted outside the academy 'is productive and is "effective" in its own terms' (2007, p. 888). When using transactional data, it can 'bypass the principles of inference altogether and work directly with the real, complete, data derived from all the transactions within the system' (p. 891). This is perhaps why the notion of efficacy as described by Francois Jullien (1999) is of interest to some contemporary critics of the economy.

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