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Writing II

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Before I had a cup of coffee from a café other than a Starbucks, I had already downed a couple hundred Ventis to at least claim that my taste buds were already acclimated to the taste. So entering an independent coffee house in New York City, suggested by a friend of mine, I was immediately humbled and amazed by the place as a whole. Tucked inside the foundations of a building on the corner of Sullivan Street, Third Rail Coffee’s shoebox like interior created a claustrophobic but somewhat intimate environment, coupled with tables in the size of records. Sure, the coffee bar was barely the size of a surfboard, but with a trusty Marzocco hissing away as it steams milk and dedicated baristas trashing even the slightest of blemished espressos in order to achieve caffeinated perfection, I couldn’t help but forgive the minuteness of the wooden plank. And of course, the coffee was tasty and sweet enough to drink it without a grain of sugar. At first sip, the humble drip produced a sensory overload, containing fewer amounts of bitter, more amounts of sour and acidic, and a balance of fruity and sweet; basically it was a step above Starbucks Arabica based coffee. It helped that the menu contained a variety of beans that more resemble a united nations of South America, provided by coveted bean roasters Portland based Stumptown and Coffee Culture. Indulging in tasty coffee, in lively conversation exchanged by beautiful people, in a picture-perfect scene of solitude, I found myself indulging in my own daydreams in this coffeehouse: coming to Third Rail to read books, bring friends, listen to music, or everything altogether. Perfect shop, perfect experience.

Yet to my dismay, the vignettes racing through my mind were not my original creation but ideas implanted by caffeine driven culture. To characterize what I was thinking as cliché sounds harsh in its bluntness, but brutally true due to clever marketing and the science of coffee; unveiling the illusion otherwise known as “ideal” immediately loses its zeal. Like some high school students going to college, I convinced myself that coffee was the solution to the problem almost every person is conflicted with: how do I stay productive? Coffee in itself is rather a chemical concoction instead of a leisurely beverage. Inside each twelve ounce cup, there are 100 sulfur-containing components such as the fecal odor creating dimethyl disulfide and difurfuryl sulfide (chemical article). Frankly none of this even matter compared to the almighty diuretic Caffeine. When coffee is ingested, caffeine is then quickly “absorbed from the gastrointestinal tract into the bloodstream (caffeine article). Thus the chemical prepares to distribute itself throughout the entire body and is eliminated by metabolism in the liver (caffeine article). The behavior effects of caffeine are slightly ambiguous once caffeine is acting in the body due to various placebo-controlled studies, but what is universally accepted is that caffeine users show higher levels of perceptual activities and increased attention (caffeine article). In short, coffee will make you focus better, pee a lot, all the while keeping you as alert as possible.

Considering caffeine is addictive, all drugs cannot sell alone by their enticing qualities, but require a distributor to spread to the masses and clever methods of marketing. Good marketing gives a product that the consumer asks for, but great marketing creates a cultural relevance and entices by way of implanting loose yet connected ideas. In this case, coffee was already an old-timey luxury rooted in the celebratory respite of the 1940s, but had a slump in consumption when the carbonated giants of Coke and Pepsi kicked coffee off the perch for America’s caffeinated drink of choice (New Yorker). Why drink something that was so bitter when a sweet and tasty alternate was already available to the masses. As America reveled in the bubbly and refreshing fizz, Starbucks emerged from the ashes of coffee’s so-called death (New Yorker). In 1990, there were approximately 200 coffee houses in the United States. Along came Starbucks which would cause that figure to balloon over 14,000 where Starbucks would own 30 percent of that total. European countries had already supplanted a rich coffee culture with its cherished espresso and public coffeehouses, but America would later create its own niche where the Seattle giant would later subvert our ideas of the opaque drink (starbucks conversation). What was earlier regarded as a “yuppie drink” later became a consumer good for the public that served all the multifaceted demographics of America; the intended audience is usually female, college-educated, and politically-moderate.

Manipulative or not, implanting attractive ideas associated with coffee helped bring it to the mainstream, and for added force, chains started monopolizing every corner in seeing distance of each other (New Yorker substitute, 631). With every chain came the straight googlization of every store where each café attempted to become a forerunner of culture by way of blasting “catchy” music on the stereo, all the while offering free wifi so that the workaholic would stay for many hours at a time; go to your neighborhood Starbucks and count how many people are clacking away on their laptops (Starbucks conversation, 675). Even in Starbucks vice president Dave Olsen’s book, *Starbucks passion for coffee: A Starbucks coffee cookbook,* Olsen outright, without shame, describes the coffeehouse as “the ideal place for people who want to be alone but need company for it” where the masses “can study, sketch or write. (Starbucks conversation 675)” **Of course every successful business needs its copycats and so spawned the privatization of space in restaurants where the primary goal of every manager was to keep you at their respective chain as long as possible: examples include Dunkin Donuts, McCafe, and almost every single food chain.** Whether or not coffee is sold at a food chain, the general trend is to provide a public space where one can maintain privacy simultaneously. I must admit that I had written this essay in cafes not just because I know I will succumb to the infinite number of distractions in my own privacy, but because I can work in a little private bubble while the public eye pressures me into either working or reading.