Myths, Global Symbols and SOFT POWER Semiotics

## Roland Barthes and Structuralism as a Tool for Understanding Global Culture

Roland Barthes→ Mythologies (1915-1980)

- **French** literary theorist, philosopher, linguist, critic, and semiotician. Post-WWII Paris France.

- **1950s:** Series of essays in the magazine *Les Lettres Nouvelles* → Barthes began decoding myths, icons, trends of popular mainstream culture.

  – Influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss (creators of the disciplines of Linguistics and Semiotics)

- **VT connection:** 1957 Taught at Middlebury College.

- **Book:** <u>Mythologies</u> (1957) a full collection of his essays on popular iconic culture. Translated worldwide.

  – Barthes examines "the tendency of contemporary social value systems to fabricate/create **modern myths** about itself and its people and the important prioritized cultural values.

  – Barthes looks at the <u>process</u> of myth creation→and the people or organizations that are involved.

Roland Barthes→ 2nd Level Semiotics

- **2nd Level Semiotics** → people, objects, organizations, designs are ELEVATED to the level of mainstream symbolic ICONS or MYTHIC figures through media and cultural <u>repetition</u>.

- Semiotic ICON/Myth analysis is a key foundation of cultural studies and STRUCTURALISM (sociology, anthro, social sciences).

  – <u>Structuralism</u>. Every social system has a structured order of signs/symbols which we use to derive individual identities, meaning and relationships.

  – Cultural Niches or sub-cultures | MARKETING

  – **Agenda Setting POWER.** Whoever controls "meaning-making" structures or "norming" processes also tends has true POWER in our society. SYMBOLIC→economic →political POWER
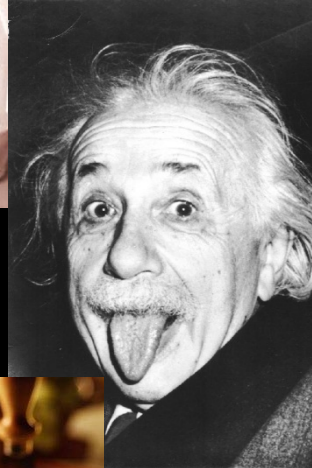
The RISE of SOFT POWER

1950s-60s: The Culture Industries ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

▷ **Hard POWER** = Political Forces (Laws, Courts, Governments, Military, Police, etc.)

▷ **SOFT POWER** = MEDIA products and services. Areas associated with ENTERTAINMENT and Leisure.

1. **RAPID RISE of Mass Media and The "CULTURE INDUSTRIES"** →
   - Music
   - Fashion
   - Celebrity
   - Fads/Trends
   - Popular books/fiction
   - Magazines
   - Movies
   - Sports
   - Video Games
   - Food

2. **MEDIA STUDIES as an INTERDISCIPLINARY SOCIAL SCIENCE DISCIPLINE** (both the Technologies AND Techniques) Anthro, Soc, Bus, Econ, Psych, Health, Environment

3. **MEDIA RESEARCH: AUDIENCE Behaviors, Trends, Enculturation, Education,** and Identities (Mass and individuals)

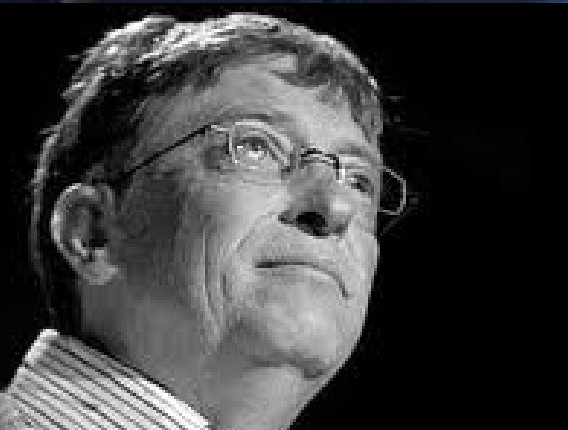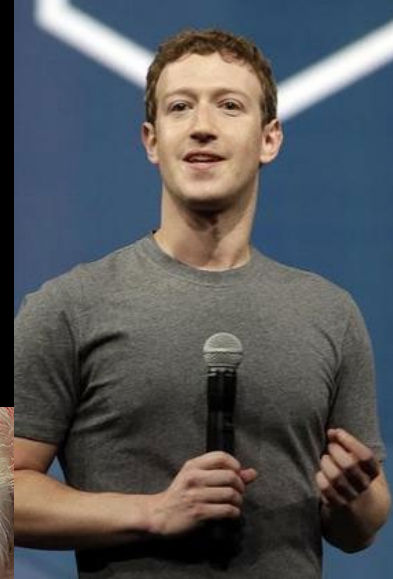4. The "**ENGINEERING**" of people, behaviors, markets &POPULAR CULTURE

Celebrity POWER (Social, Political, Economic, "Spiritual")

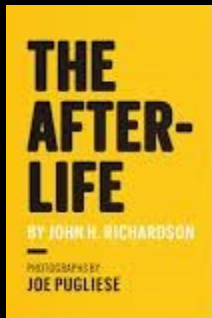# Poltical & Economic Power

Global Transnational Corporate Logos

Manufacturing/Engineering Iconic Figures

- **Systmatic**
- **Media scaffolding**
- **Media mgt.**

When does the SOFT POWER "engineering" of icons, stories, and practices turn into cultural imperialism?

- **Definition of Cultural Imperialism:**
  - The imposition by one usually politically or economically dominant community of various aspects of its own culture onto another, nondominant community. It is a form of imperialism in that the imposing community forcefully extends the authority of its "way of life" or mainstream norms over the other population by either transforming or replacing aspects of the nondominant community's culture.


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NQMp-0tU7qk

Myanmar: Copy Stars

r Emerges: Mock Stars

More from

Joel Best

Flavor of the Month: Why Smart People Fall for Fads

- **Baseline Questions:**

  - **FADS/FASHIONS/CULT BRANDS: WHAT ARE THEY?**

  - **How are they formed and initiated?**

    - **How do things become COOL/Popular/CULT LEVEL STATUS?**

  - **Role of the People's own desires vs. Media, technology, corporate cycles of GLOBAL MASS production?**

    - **Connection to childhood, identity, and family life?**

    - **Connection to History?**

    - **Connections to global consumption?**

  - **Conditioned Cultural Consumer Life?**
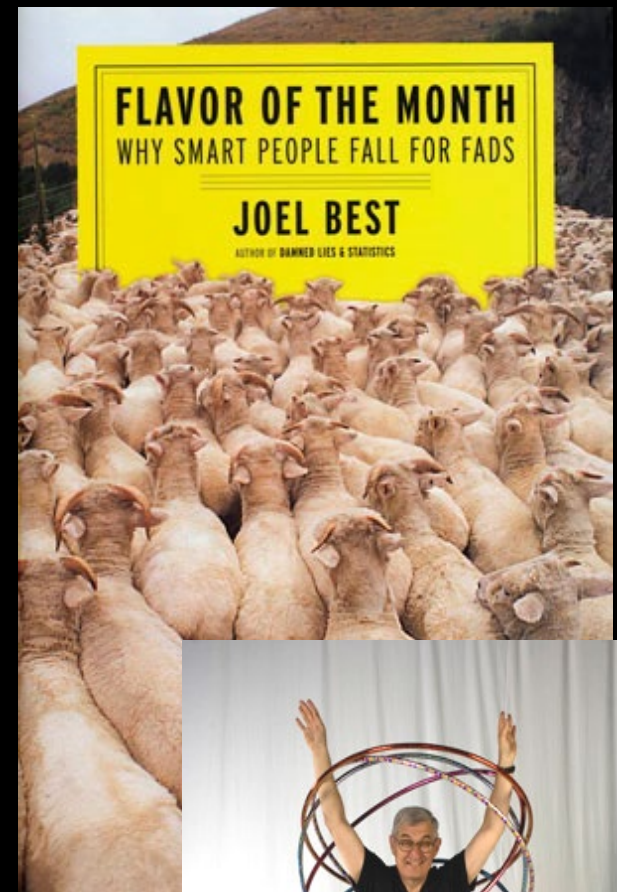
Conceptions and Misconceptions about Fads

☑ **Too easily dismissed as "trivial" or "non-essential" OR just passing…**

☑ **Fads have a strong association with entertainment/fashion cultures.**

☑ **Fads have a strong association with TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT.**

☑ **Strong associations with Education and Schooling**

☑ **Strong association with youth and "youth cultures" or a specifically susceptible age/stage/demographic**

☑ **Newness → Novelty**

  ☑ **Rapid rise in popularity**

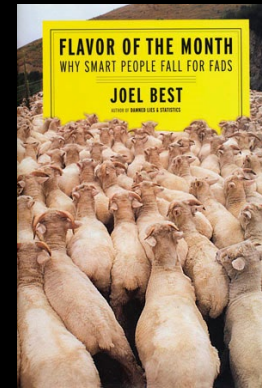 ☑ **Equally rapid fall in popularity**

Arguments

Flavor of the Month: Why Smart People Fall for Fads

- **Fads, Fashions are a central part of our social, cultural and consumption lives as humans.**

    - Yes, they are Episodic – RECYCLED FASCINATOINS and short-lived-seasonal fandoms.

    - Fads and Fashions are a CENTRAL form of CULTURAL CONDITIONING!

- **In terms of MEDIA and Global CORP CONSUMPTION, FADS are extremely <u>SYSTEMATIC</u> and HIGHLY <u>calculated</u> in their occurrence AND central to our Culture Industries.**

    - **In 2022 worldwide toy market sales topped $110 billion** (U.S.)

    - **$350-700 avg amount spent on toys per child per year.**

- **They DEFINE YOUTH/CHILDHOOD, IDENTITY, EDUCATIONS and FAMILY!**

    - **NARRATIVE FRAMING (our <u>memories</u> and our) <u>imaginations</u>**

- **THEY help FORM our CULTURAL LIVES with or without our active participation. Our lives are consciously and unconsciously conditioned by these fads**

Fads vs. Innovation vs. Fashion

FIGURE 6.5 Shapes of curves of diffusion for innovations that spread over various periods of time
source: Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, 3rd ed. (New York: Free Press, 1963), p. 11.

Fashions

- Unpredictable but cyclical
- "Regularized Transience"

- "High Society" or High Culture
- Trickle Up/Down/Sideways
- Economic Hierarchy/Tier system of Fashion (Georg Simmel (German Sociologist)

- **Innovations**
  - S-curve diffusion
  - New invention or service
  - Built upon/improved
  - Tend to be enduring
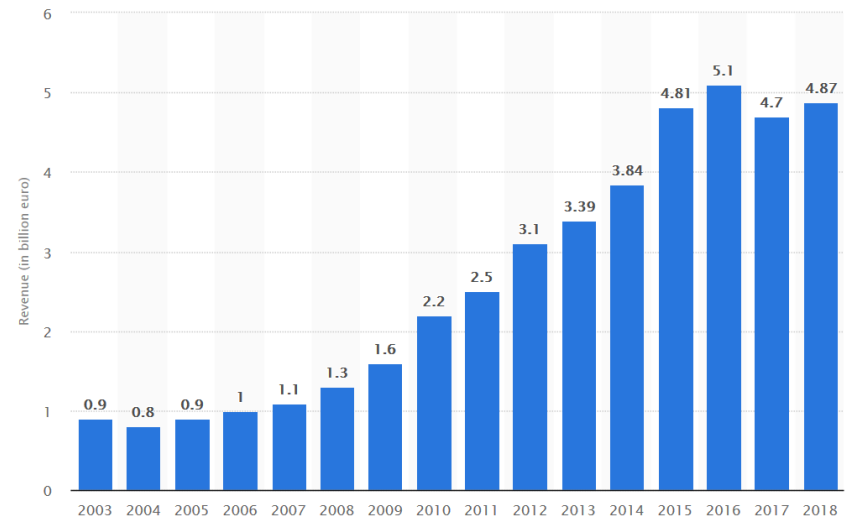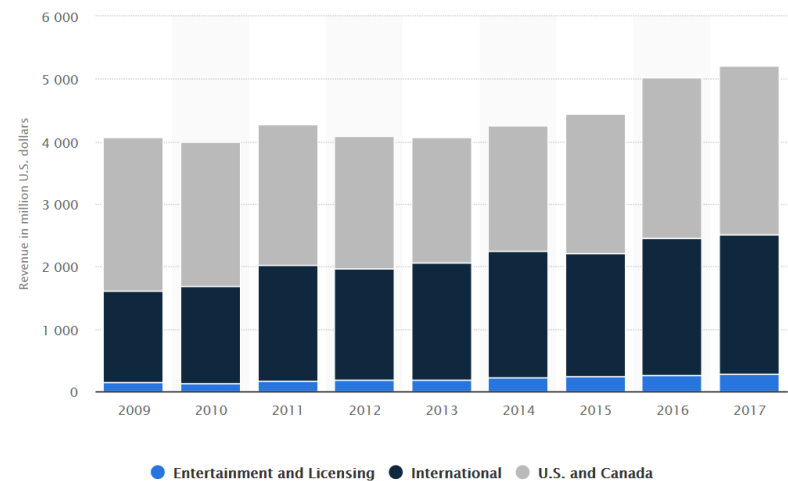 - Become a more permanent "fixture" in a culture
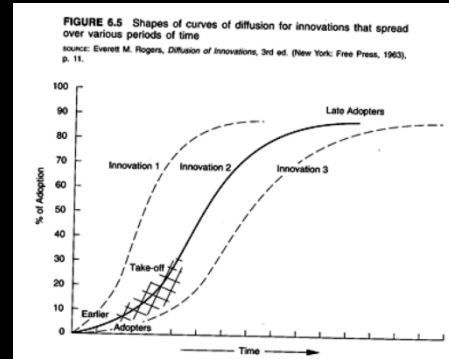
Top Toy Companies Worldwide

- 1) LEGO A/S
- 2) Bandai Namco (Japanese)
- 3) Fisher-Price
- 4) Barbie
- 5) Nerf
- 6) Mattel
- 7) Mobile Suit Gundam (Japanese)
- 8) Hot Wheels

Revenue of the LEGO Group from 2003 to 2018 (in billio

Hasbro revenue breakdown by geographic region from dollars)*

Top Selling Toys 2020

1. **Wowee Fingerling Hugs**

2. **Hatchimals surprise pets**

3. **Let's Dance Elmo**

4. **Imaginext Jurassic World Jurassic Rex—**

5. **Harry Potter Hogwarts Great Hall LEGO Building Kit—**

6. **Barbie DreamHouse—**

7. **Really Rad Robots Mibro R/C Robot—**

IMPLICATIONS for Visual Media

1) <u>Fads – Fashions –Innovations – Technology Diffusion</u> are all at the heart of SCREEN and visual media production

   a. Visual media are needed to "sell" any new fad, fashion, innovation

   b. Visual media are also themselves fads, fashions

2) <u>Popular Culture</u> (i.e., all media) CONSUMES the "new," the "fringe," and the "counter-culture." THEN, the media repackages the ideas/sentiments from those areas and sends them back to us for our mass consumption.

3) <u>Human Costs</u>

   a. Independence?

   b. Individuality?

   c. An "image" life

4) <u>Ethical/Moral/Intellectual Considerations</u>:

   a. Authenticity

   b. Truth

   c. Proof