

# **Brands and Continuous Economies**

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## Declaration

I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Wherever contributions of others are involved, these are clearly acknowledged.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gerlitz". The letters are cursive and somewhat stylized, with the "G" being particularly large and looping.

Carolin Gerlitz

## Abstract

This thesis provides a sociological investigation of contemporary branding practices and their increasing investment in consumer involvement, participation and co-creation. Revisiting the role of brands in contemporary capitalism, it shows that brands are not discrete, purely economic entities, but emerge in relations to multiple actors and are distributed across a series of spaces, societal issues and temporalities. The key objective of this thesis is to explore how brands are involved in (re)organising the boundaries between economy and society, allowing for a multiplication and continuation of value production.

In an empirical exploration featuring two case studies on Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty and American Apparel, this thesis brings together social and digital research methods in order to trace and map the distributed becoming of both brands. Attention is directed to three key intersections: the embeddedness of brands in relations, the distributed spatialisation of brands, and the role of bodies and sexuality as issue deployed in branding practices. What a brand stands for, I argue, cannot be limited to its strategic 'making', but is tied to its emergent and distributed 'happening'.

Informed by my the fieldwork, I develop the claim that contemporary brands are increasingly partible, as they are reliant on their constant re-appropriation by a variety of actors and are therefore entangled in a 'becoming topological', as they are defined through relations which can only be accounted for from the inside. Brands emerge as a specific socio-economic form involved in what I call 'continuous economies', in which economic value production increasingly arises from non-economic activities and becomes inherently partible in social activities. Such continuous economies are being animated by the brands' capacity to create multi-valence, in which consumer activities are at the same time social, cultural and economic acts. Continuity, in this context, addresses a specific mode of boundary making, one that brings together brands and consumers without dissolving them into each other but that maintains a specific imbalance and asymmetry between them. Brands do not, as suggested by some sociological critique, merely subsume social activities into exploitative labour, but enable the organisation of continuity and discontinuity between the social and the economic in immanent ways, while at the same time displacing value production temporally and pre-structuring its potential futures.

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# O

## **Introduction – Branding as Boundary Making Practice**

In late 2003, the brand management team of the cosmetics company Dove responded to the request to achieve a specific sales target by setting in motion a campaign against beauty and body norms. Dove's response was an intriguing move, as it suggests that economic value can be achieved by associating Dove with a social cause. Rather than lowering the price, making specific promotional offers, improving the quality of their products, or altering the packaging to sell less for the same price the brand management decided to start by associating the brand with a social issue. Subsequently, Dove launched its still ongoing Campaign for Real Beauty, a campaign designed to criticise the fabrication of media beauty and to promote wider body ideals. Obviously, the brand management acted based on the opinion that getting involved in issues around media beauty, self-confidence and eating disorders will at some point result in the production of economic value. In the course of the next few years, Dove gradually developed this campaign, first by commissioning an academic report on female bodily experience and the role of media, then through a series of advertising campaigns, events, competitions. But the campaign also featured collaborations with national charities to conduct workshops in schools and, later, deployed viral dynamics with educational videos in social media and enacted debates on consumers' own experience of social media. The brand also launched a Dove Self-Esteem fund and continued working with an advisory board of academics, charities and beauty industry professionals.

All of these activities evolved around addressing the fabrication of media beauty and its impact on female bodily becoming. According to the brand management team, the objective of the campaign was to make the brand 'iconic', that is, to give it a particular stance and enable it to inform societal debates and industry conventions. Yet, how is it that a global corporation like Dove - which is part of Unilever - comes to create a link between increased surplus profit and the questioning of body norms? Why does a



corporation seek to increase its sales by getting involved in debates on media and beauty? What motivates brand managers to make diverse audiences discuss how they feel about their bodies rather than telling them about the advantages of their products in enhancing their bodies? Yet the most interesting question is: how does social and economic value come together in the case of Dove and what is the role of the brand in this?

This thesis seeks to explore contemporary branding practices focusing on the dynamics of consumer involvement, participation and co-creation and their capacities to create relations between economy and society. It offers an empirical study on how branding has come to create a very specific relation between economic value, consumer lives and societal issues and how brands have made the production of economic value increasingly non-linear and distributed across actors, spaces, activities, issues, dynamics and temporalities. What are the conditions under which stimulating discussion amongst consumers and wider audiences about the production of body and beauty norms might result in the production of economic profit for Dove? I understand the objective of this thesis both as a response and a particular perspective on the increasing involvement of consumers in branding practices. In this framework, the brand is not imagined to be a fixed set of values, strategies and material embodiments defined by companies, but is brought into being in a distributed way through the involvement of multiple actors.

It was during the early 2000s, just before the popularisation of social media, that branding discourses and practices came to be informed by a growing interest in the involvement of consumers in tasks previously conducted by brand managers. Consumers were invited to share branded content for viral purposes, to feed back ideas for product improvement and development, to support each other in service questions, to submit motives for advertising campaigns, to participate in brand events, or to discuss brands. Soon, such an interest in assigning consumers an active role in the branding process was framed as a so-called 'co-creative approach towards branding', a term formalised by the marketing theorists Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004). They suggest that involving a series of new actors in the making of economic value forms a key competitive advantage, reworking linear models of value production and setting up a not-so-company-centric notion of the brand, which is brought into being through the interplay of a wide range of actors, spaces and practices. Brands, the authors claim, are not only made, they also happen to be made and are made to happen.

Fuelled by the subsequent rise of social media with their specific affordances for interactivity between media users, the idea that brands are (and can be) co-created by a

variety of internal and external actors has reconfigured industry practices substantially over the last few years. It has resulted in the emergence of a series of specialised agencies focusing on consumer involvement, that is, co-creation agencies, social media and digital agencies, but has also led to the publication of a series of co-creation manifestos in marketing literature (Ind, Fuller, & Trevail, 2012; Prahalad & Krishnan, 2008; Ramaswamy & Guillard, 2010). Critical theory and economic sociology have also responded to the industry's increasing investment in consumer participation, firstly by questioning the demarcation between consumption and production (Cova & Dalli, 2009; Ritzer, 1993; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Toffler, 1981; Zwick, Bonsu, & Darmody, 2008), and then by deploying neo-marxist perspectives for a critique of consumer exploitation.

This thesis sets out to create a sociological investigation of contemporary branding practices characterised by their investment in consumer involvement, co-creation and utilisation of social and spatial dynamics, as well as a particular orientation towards the future. It does so by contextualising the current interest in co-creation in marketing theory within a longer trajectory of scholarship in economic sociology which has already put overly discrete boundaries between production and consumption into question. It focuses both on the brand as a specific entity and form, and on branding as practice. Although branding is used and matters to a wide range of organisations from public to third sector (Moor, 2007), this thesis focuses on commercial brands only, following the research objective to explore how brands rework boundaries between economic and social activities. Furthermore, the thesis mainly gives attention to the brand rather than companies, although the latter are being taken into account at points as well.

Departing from my initial observation that brands seek to create economic value by deploying social relations and connecting brands to social issues, this thesis focuses on the following research question: How are contemporary branding practices involved in the (re-)configuration of boundaries between social and economic life?

I explore these capacities of branding through empirical fieldwork bringing together social and digital research methods. The focal point of this thesis are two case studies on brands which for several years have sought to deploy social issues evolving around bodies and sexuality, as well as to attempt to insert themselves into multiple social relations and formations. These are the above-mentioned Campaign for Real Beauty by Dove and American Apparel, a US clothing brand which has developed a particularly contagious aesthetic which has been taken up and taken further by its global consumer base. Engaging with empirical case studies, I trace the brands' endeavours to expand

into social formations, into multiple spaces and to become entangled with a variety of societal issues - which, in relation to my case studies, mainly evolve around bodies and sexuality.

Drawing on recent sociological work on brands (Arvidsson, 2006; Lury, 2004; Moor, 2007), I understand brands as being only partly defined and materialised by the strategic endeavours of corporations, but also as being shaped by the activities and affective investments of multiple stakeholders and their negotiation in space, practices, bodies and interaction. I argue that contemporary branding and its interest in co-creation is characterised by a relational approach to the production of economic value, situating the production of value in a distributed fabric and enabling it to sink into the background of social and cultural dynamics, while at the same time trying to pre-structure them. Brands emerge through the interplay of relations, spaces, issues and practices which allow economic activities to extend in multiple spatio-temporal ways just as they allow social and cultural activities to impact on economic production. Hence, in what follows, I unfold the argument that branding has come to operate as a boundary making practice, extending into social relations, spaces and societal issues, but has also been informed by these relations, spaces and issues themselves. In my empirical fieldwork, I set out to trace the affordances and practices that enable such boundary making.

Such a reworking of boundaries between economic and social life, so I argue in the course of the thesis, is not limited to the realm of branding but addresses a wider tendency in contemporary capitalism that has been operating since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In what follows in this introduction, I map out previous interest in the interrelation between economy and society as conceptualised in accounts of informational and immaterial economies, knowing capitalism or economies of signs and spaces (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2006; Lash, 2010; Lash & Urry, 1994; Lazzarato, 1996, 2004; Slater & Tonkiss, 2001; Thrift, 2005, 2008; Virno, 2004). Furthermore, I take departure from contemporary sociological work on brands (Arvidsson, 2006; Lury, 2004; Moor, 2007). This body of work has recently advanced the understanding of brands beyond mere logos or entities controlled by corporations and put forward an understanding of the brand as a highly flexible object in transformation (Lury, 2004). Following the flexibility of brands further, sociologists' interest in brands is in the increasingly pervasive organisational rationale of brands extending beyond the corporate sector (Moor, 2007), as a topological object (Lury, 2009) and as a key entity of informational capitalism, putting social relations and dynamics to work (Arvidsson, 2006, 2011; Arvidsson & Colleoni, 2012).

Drawing on my fieldwork, I develop the claim that contemporary brands - as well as their relations, spaces, aesthetics, and issues - are becoming increasingly partible (Foster, 2011; Strathern, 1990), as they are reliant on their constant re-appropriation by a series of actors and are entangled in a 'becoming topological' (Duffy, 2006; Lury, 2009), as they are defined through relations which can only be accounted for from the inside. Brands, so I conclude, provide a specific socio-economic form that enables what I call 'continuous economies', in which economic value production increasingly arises from non-economic activities and becomes inherently partible to social activities. Such continuous economies are being animated by the fact that ever more social and cultural activities can be made multivalent, producing social and economic value at the same time. Continuity, in this context, addresses a specific mode of boundary making, one that brings together yet maintains the difference, imbalance and asymmetry of relations between brands and consumers.

In what follows in this first Chapter, I set up a framework of key topics which surface from the interdisciplinary theoretical framework in which this thesis aims to operate. To open the discussion of how it is that brands seek to create economic value by deploying societal concerns such as beauty norms, I start mapping out a wider set of debates around the expansion of economic value production into life itself. In doing so, the non-linearisation of production, the role of ambiances and worlds and the relation between production, consumption and sociality, as well as the role of the making of possible futures, come to matter. From here, a series of interrelated concerns emerge, which are taken up and revisited throughout the thesis. In the next sections, I unfold my perspective of branding as a boundary making practice and I clarify the particular contribution this thesis seeks to make in the field of economic sociology and the sociological theory of brands.

### **Reworking Boundaries**

My study on contemporary branding practices departs and takes inspiration from how economic value production is imagined as increasingly responsive, flexible and porous and the various ways in which economic sociologists imagine how economic and social dynamics dissolve into each other in knowledge-intensive, immaterial economies. The boundaries of economic value production have been put into question by the emergence of so-called knowledge intensive production (Thrift, 2005), immaterial or soft capitalism (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2006; Lash & Urry, 1994), the cultural turn of capitalism (Arrighi, 1994; Ray & Sayer, 1999), the economy of qualities (Callon & Méadel, 2002), or

post-Fordist modes of production (Barry & Slater, 2005; Slater & Tonkiss, 2001). Despite their divergent focal points, these authors refer to a set of historical shifts which took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s in which economic production underwent a transformation from the enactment of economies of scale towards knowledge-intensive, post-industrial forms, in which flexible, specialised and immaterial production successively overtook standardised mass production. Addressing this transformation towards post-Fordist flexible accumulation, Lash and Urry (1994) for instance offer a particular periodisation of capitalism, suggesting that the 19<sup>th</sup> century was mainly defined by liberal and local capitalism, followed by organised capitalism of material goods on an increasingly national scale in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. From the second half of the last century onwards, Lash and Urry contend that capitalism has become progressively disorganised, fragmented and flexible, now operating beyond national borders: “This transformed political economy is both ‘post-Fordist’, in that it succeeded the era of mass production and mass consumption” (1994: 1).

More precisely, linear models of mass production targeted at rather homogenous audiences are understood as having come under pressure through saturated and declining mass markets, differentiating consumer desires and new technical possibilities for more flexible production. In response to this, capitalism has implemented modes of specialised and flexible production, in which a company’s ability to adjust to changing market conditions by developing its intangible assets are now the key to profitability. These assets provide the capacity to generate and process relevant market insights, but also a differential position and a long-term business strategy. This process also came with the increasing outsourcing of production to low-wage, economically developing countries and a focus on immaterial aspects of production, leading to what Barry and Slater (2005) call a ‘dematerialisation of the economy’.

The idea of dematerialised economic production takes two key forms within economic sociology. Lash and Urry suggest that economic production is “progressively emptied of material content” (1994: 3) as it is only the informational, symbolic or aesthetic value of goods which can produce surplus. That is, if consumer goods are increasingly becoming similar and difficult to distinguish within saturated markets, securing competitive advantage can only be obtained through immaterial differentiation, for example, by addressing niche audiences, developing design strategies or adding symbolic and sign value to material offerings. As a consequence, what counts as value is also gradually dematerialised and situated in the realm of qualities, reputation or brand value. As Slater and Tonkiss argue, value is “increasingly made up of informational and symbolic work on goods that are themselves increasingly ‘non-material’” (2001: 176).

Secondly, dematerialised production draws attention to the impact of immaterial labour (Lazzarato, 1996), which comprises knowledge and information about consumers, cultural and economic trends, market developments, and production procedures, and this is most prominently framed by Lazzarato (1996) but also by Thrift's idea of knowing or soft capitalism (2005). Thrift proposes that the most valuable resource in contemporary production is not capital itself, but knowledge and information, as well as corporations' ability to act upon them in order to operate flexibly and to capitalise on the dynamics of innovation and the anticipation of consumer desires. He says: "Knowledge becomes an asset class that a business must foster, warehouse, manage, constantly work upon, in order to produce a constant stream of innovation" (Thrift, 2005: 133). Knowledge and market insights are not considered as descriptive, but bear performative capacities which can be enabled through immaterial labour, as they provide the foundation for flexible and responsive operation in changing market conditions.

Following Callon's seminal analysis of the economies of qualities, that it is the discipline of marketing in particular that is able to make use of insights and information about consumers and markets in a performative way to de- and re-frame saturated markets and to create consumer attachments to rather homogenous goods (Callon & Méadel, 2002). However, the authors also outline how such a qualification of generic goods cannot only be achieved through strategic activities of corporations, but involves processes of 'happening', that is, through emergent consumer activities, attachments and associations with brands. It is the interplay between fabricated and emerging forms of consumer appropriation of brands, goods and services which contributes to the negotiation of their value. Callon addresses this de- and re-qualification of goods as follows: "The product is thus a process, whereas the good corresponds to a state, to a result or, more precisely, to a moment in that never-ending process" (Callon in Barry & Slater, 2005: 31). Competition hence does not primarily evolve around market shares and sales, but first and foremost focuses on the detachment of consumers from competitors and their attachment to one's own market offerings, interrelating value production and the reorganisation of relationships with consumers. It is in this vein, Lury contends (2004, 2009), that economies of qualities allow the movement beyond a mere competition on price, addressing consumers as rational agents, but situating competition in the making and breaking of relations between brands and consumers. To do so, knowledge and information figure as central, since knowing about potential audiences, trends and markets allows for the strategic differentiation and highly

specialised addressing of niche audiences - key elements of both marketing and branding (Barry & Slater, 2005; Slater & Tonkiss, 2001).

Recent sociological accounts of brands position branding as a key rationale of such immaterial modes of production (Arvidsson, 2006; Lury, 2004; Moor, 2007;). The work of Moor (2007), in particular, has traced the rise of branding as a means of organising diverse forms of knowledge, including market and consumer insights, academic knowledge and knowledge of socio-cultural trends. Moor considers brands as a key form of reflexive capitalism, "in which a range of actors are encouraged to reflect upon the organisation and practices of firms, and to construct generic models to embody the latest ideas about the best way to run a business" (2007: 5).

Lury (2004) on the other hand addresses how brands allow corporations to be responsive to feedback loops of information about markets, consumers and production procedures in real time, enabling them to flexibly accumulate. That is, she understands the brand not as a fixed and discrete set of values that inform the strategic operations of a company, but as an interactive, flexible and open-ended object, that enables corporations to navigate between internal strategies and changing market conditions. Lury draws on Knorr-Cetina's work on post-social relations (Knorr-Cetina, 2005; Knorr-Cetina & Bruegger, 2002) in order to understand brands as agentive and relational objects, which use information to adopt internal processes, while at the same time responding to them and imbuing organisations with the performative capacity not only to operate in but to shape their very markets. This capacity to be responsive to feedback loops might suggest that branding renders corporations fully porous and flexible. However, this is not the case, Lury contests, as in practice the flexibility of brands is framed by their own strategic objectives and values, posing a 'manageable flexibility' (2004: 154) rather than being fully free-floating.

Following Lury, brands do not aim at dissolving the boundary between consumption and production, between the market and the corporation, between the inside and the outside, instead they enable corporations to operate within them and to reconfigure their limits. Before Lury, Callon (1998) addressed such boundary making as an instance of framing, drawing on Goffman (1986), as brands create infrastructures in which relations between different agents matter to economic production. He reflects on the impact of externalities along the lines of framing and overflow, that is, the interplay between giving market conditions structure and the event of unplanned and unintended market responses. In the process of framing, structure produces its very own overflow, the happening of the unplanned, which contributes to its productivity.

In her recourse to the new media theorist Manovich, Lury (2004) suggests that brands can be thought of as new media objects, resembling the dynamics of programming and computation. Just as programs use feedback loops of information to operate particular tasks or to fulfil defined objectives - while constantly being upgraded and updated - brands are animated by similar processes. Thinking of the brand as a new media object comes with two implications. Firstly, it allows the brand to be understood as a responsive yet pre-structured looping device, organising relations between markets and organisations. Secondly, it draws attention to how brands negotiate the boundaries between company and consumers, enabling modes of tacit engagement, as opposed to direct insights into and interaction with corporations. It is in this sense that the brand as looping device turns into an interface or simulation (Turkle, 1997), as consumers do not encounter the organisation as such, but only the (inter)face of the brand, embodied in the logo. Boundaries between consumption and production are not dissolved or merely extended, they are constantly framed and reframed.

Arvidsson has taken up Lury's considerations in order to propose that brands embody "not only the status of objects in the information age, but also the very logic of informational capital" (2006: 124). He goes further, suggesting that brands form the 'ontological paradigm of capital' in immaterial post-Fordist economies, just as factories and mass production did in Fordism (2006: 124). Arvidsson's work draws particular attention to how brands, through being predominantly immaterial, descend into the background of social and cultural life. Brands, and with them economic value production, are not located in a clearly defined space such as the factory, but constantly operate in new spaces, media, everyday practices, social relations and, as the next section unfolds, life itself.

### **The Interplay of Life, Work and Worlds**

As one of the key consequences of the centrality of information and immaterial production a reconfiguration of the distinction between leisure and labour time emerges, which is closely connected to, yet not to be collapsed into, the difference between production and consumption and between life and work (Hardt & Negri, 2005; Lazzarato, 2004; Virno, 2004). The above mentioned centrality of immaterial labour processes refers to working processes in which employees do not produce actual goods, but instead generate their cultural and social context or the knowledge that is needed to produce these goods (Lazzarato, 1996; Slater & Tonkiss, 2001). It draws attention to the fact that within contemporary conditions of work, not only professional and



straightforwardly productive activities contribute to value creation, but that personal interests, social relations, individual abilities and cultural knowledge come to matter to immaterial workplace performance. Or put differently, for Lazzarato contemporary capitalism “is about putting life to work” (2004: 205).

A further key element of such ‘putting life to work’ has been a progressively productive account of consumption emerging in sociological, anthropological and economic notions of consumption. Anthropological work, in particular, has outlined how the value of goods is embedded in social relations, in their circulation within relations and their capacity to make them. Before Callon’s economy of quality, the discipline of anthropology had focused on consumption as the collective qualification of goods and sociality, most notably in the early work on gift economies (Malinowski, 2011 (1922); Mauss, 1970; see also: Strathern, 1990; Weiner, 1992). Different from the exchange of commodities for an agreed exchange value, gift giving is relationship making, as it renders the receiver immanently connected and indebted to the giver, creating a fabric of mutual expectations and obligations whilst also attaching social value to the gift itself. Here, the notion of giving while keeping becomes of relevance, as the value of goods is determined by the social and affective attachments of givers (Weiner, 1992). Following Foster, who draws on the anthropology of goods to discuss participative branding, such a qualification process is at the core of the making of brand value: “Keeping while giving also describes the circulation of branded products. The branded product (indeed, the brand itself) is a cumulative outcome of the qualifications of many people, including many consumers in addition to marketers” (Foster, 2011: 48). Other anthropological work explores the role of consumption beyond gift exchange, increasingly drawing parallels between consumption and work (Douglas & Isherwood, 1996; Miller, 1987; Sahlins, 1972).

A similar blend of work, labour and consumption can be found in economic sociology, especially accounts inspired by neo-marxist thought. Lazzarato’s claims that “the post-industrial commodity is the result of a creative process that involved both the producer and the consumer” (1996: 142) and Toffler (1989) suggests that consumption - or rather ‘prosumption’ - has always been a productive activity in history. Sociologists deploy a similar argument claiming that the strategic utilisation of productive consumer activities is ‘putting consumers to work’ (Zwick et al., 2008), fabricating ‘working consumers’ (Cova & Dalli, 2009), and ‘prosumers’ (Ritzer, 1993; Ritzer, Dean, & Jurgenson, 2012; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Such perspectives often culminate in a critique of consumer involvement as double exploitation (Cova & Dalli, 2009): firstly, by

involving them in the making of brand value, and then secondly, by reselling the brand at premium prices.

The notion of working consumers and double exploitation might rightly draw attention to the reworking of boundaries between consumption and production as well as the asymmetries between them. Yet, such notions are also problematic, as they seek to collapse work and consumption into each other. Productive consumption, however, is not directed at the production of economic profit per se and can only be made economically profitable through specific instances and infrastructures. This thesis sets out to explore exactly this specificity and to investigate how consumer engagement is operating along multiple evaluative, motivational and value axes. Rather than subsuming consumption into work and social into economic life, I am interested in explicating the background conditions that allow consumption to be entailed in value production.

More precisely, the question of the continuity and redistribution of production across actors, space and time poses a central layer of my interest in boundary making and leads to the claim that brands operate as key forms of what I understand as 'continuous economies'. Rather than contributing to narratives of subsumption and exploitation, this thesis sets out to frame these concerns in relation to continuity and boundary making and asks how brands contribute to the organisation of continuity and discontinuity between social and economic life. As John Bell says:

The word "continuous" derives from a Latin root meaning 'to hang together' or 'to cohere'; this same root gives us the nouns 'continent'—an expanse of land unbroken by sea—and 'continence'—self-restraint in the sense of 'holding oneself together'. (Bell, 2005: 1)

Thinking continuity as holding together refers to a state of relationality that imagines entities as connected yet distinctive, as interrelated without dissolving into each other. It is in this sense that continuousness becomes an element of boundary making, as a boundary brings together whilst keeping separate. The making of boundaries is at the same time a making of divisions and a making of continuation. More concretely, this thesis explores how brands enable economic value production to continue into the social or cultural realm and vice versa, and how this continuation reconfigures the relations between both. This perspective introduces a specific understanding of continuity which is based on Bell's account of hanging together and which understands continuous relations as being defined by being connected without dissolving into each other.

## Background Conditions

Imagining goods, market offerings and brands as constantly de- and re-qualified by multiple actors from within and outside of companies entails specific reconfigurations of the production of value. Here the work of Lazzarato is of relevance, as he suggests in this seminal quote: “the enterprise does not create its object (goods) but the world within which the object exists” (2004: 188). Instead of fabricating finished and discrete commodities, which consumers can use according to predefined objectives, the outcomes of economic production need to be imagined as open-ended and partly indeterminate objects. Hence, the surplus that they might generate does not lie in the exchange value that they achieve in the moment of sale or aftersales, as suggested in Porter’s linear value chain model (Porter, 2004).<sup>1</sup> Such an idea of economic production comes with an eventive character: instead of controlling this process and turning it into a linear chain of (Fordist) production, companies can create environments in which particular events are more likely to happen than others.<sup>2</sup>

What is at stake in such a world-making is the strategic design of ‘background conditions’ (Thrift & French, 2002) that impact upon the behaviour of actors involved and therefore make particular futures more likely than others. To address the making of such conditions, the work of Sloterdijk in the Sphere trilogy, but also on atmospheres and ‘air-condition’ becomes of relevance (Sloterdijk, 2009, 2010, 2011), as it contributes to the explication of the role of spatiality as ‘manufactured engineering’ (Thrift, 2008: 234). It is the strategic design of ambiances, climates and environments that figures the key locus of contemporary politics and capitalism, so asserts Sloterdijk in his daunting claim: “Anybody wanting to grasp the originality of the era has to consider: the practice of terrorism, the concept of product design, and environmental thinking” (2009: 9). Politics, warfare and capitalism do not aim at directly addressing their audiences or opponents, but rather focus on creating conditions that will immanently impact their addressee through their affective, aesthetic, immaterial and bio-physical qualities. That is, they create ‘air conditions’, as “air constitutes an implicit condition of existence” (Sloterdijk, 2009: 93). Marketers, in his sense, “become atmosphere designers

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<sup>1</sup> Economic theory has long imagined value production as a sequential process, most notably based on Porter’s value chain (1998), which suggests that value is gradually added through different corporate activities, such as research and development, innovation, production, distribution and the moment of sale and after-sale when consumers move in. These company- centric and aggregated accounts of value production have been gradually put to question, when economists like Norman and Ramirez (2004) outlined a more complex, multi-layered and distributed notion of value production which takes into consideration the contributions of a wider set of stakeholders, including consumers.

<sup>2</sup> In a similar vein, Lazzarato continues on to question if the focus on world-making alters the role of work and workers: “the enterprise does not create its subjects (workers and consumers) but the world within which the subject exists” (2004, 188).

and climate guardians” (2009: 89) and production, if we follow Sloterdijk, is not only sinking into the background, but is based on the explicit making of implicit conditions in order to impact on the foreground. The notion of explication is of double relevance to Sloterdijk, as it allows him to address the fabrication of air conditions, but also offers a starting point for analysis and critique.

Sociological accounts of brands have taken up the idea of the creation of worlds, tracing the implications of branding in their making (Arvidsson, 2006; Lury, 2004; Moor, 2007). Lury sees brands as platforms for generating knowledge and acting upon this very knowledge. By drawing on Andrew Barry (2001), she demarcates the boundary between advertising and branding as a distinction between Foucauldian discipline and governmentality. While advertising tells consumers exactly how they should relate, think, feel and experience brands, the techniques of brand management alternatively create offers, invitations and climates for interactivity in which consumers are implicitly invited to perform certain actions rather than others. Disciplinary technologies, so Barry argues (2001), follow the logic of “Buy! You must!”, while interactive approaches make a suggestion: “Discover! You may!” (Barry in Lury, 2004: 109).

Barry’s distinction is also key to the work of Arvidsson who contends that brands do not tell consumers what to think, do and feel, but rather create environments, events and campaigns in which desired thoughts, affects and actions emerge from within, from the inside of ambiances connected to the brand. Branding, he continues, seeks to direct the freedom of consumers to de- and re-qualify goods into desired directions by setting up incentives and resistances that make some actions more likely than others. There are two dimensions to this argument, as brands are on the one hand thought spatially in an abstract sense, as creating climates in which everyday activities, life itself and social relations are mediated into value producing activities which can evolve in desired directions. Yet, on the other hand, brands emerge as tools and invitations which need to be taken up and completed by consumers and in doing so, inform their activities, affects and social relations.

Moor’s (2007) work on branded spaces and the expansion of what counts as media in branding offers a particular pathway to think about the spatial continuity of branding. In her historical account of the rise of brand management, Moor’s historical analysis shows how branding agencies have expanded their notion of promotional media, considering ‘everything as (unpaid) media’ potentially. Media, she stresses, are not discrete spaces for addressing pre-defined audiences, but rather contexts and environments in which brands exist. This allows brands to reconfigure boundaries

between economic production and social life as “part of a broader trajectory in which the spaces and surfaces of everyday life are used as points of communication and as technologies for the governance of human conduct across a range of spheres of activity” (Moor, 2007: 2). In tracing branding as a boundary making practice, this thesis takes a particular interest in the entanglement of brands with the making of worlds and the continuation of both into each other.

### **Futurity**

While it has been noted that the creation of worlds contributes to a continuation of the production of social and cultural activities, it also comes with a temporal extension which stresses the role of anticipation, pre-structuring and future orientation. Creating worlds and platforms for action in brand management means creating ambiances in which a particular engagement with the brand is more likely to evolve than others. World-making as opposed to product-making situates economic productivity at least partly in the future, Arvidsson contends: “Brand management contains a variety of techniques that all aim at controlling, pre-structuring and monitoring what people do with brands, so that what these practices do adds to its value” (2006: 82).

The apprehension of the future is not only addressed in branding theory, but is key to economic sociology and new media theory as well. Immaterial and knowing capitalism with its continuous feedback loops of information, Thrift (2008) suggests, is based on a twofold orientation towards the future. First of all, operating in the constant inflow of market and consumer insights, corporations are required to establish a “certain anticipatory readiness about the world” (Thrift, 2008: 38) in order to remain flexible and to keep multiple evaluative criteria at play (Stark, 2009). Contemporary capitalism, rather than decomposing, analysing and weighing problems in a stable framework of what counts as value, is operating through the exploitation of uncertainty, multiple evaluative criteria and continuous possibilities for economic value creation. Such a perspective contributes to the de-linearisation of value creation and its transformation into an immanent and experimental procedure. This also works through the evocation of a particular futurity, never settling on already-known opportunities, but opening up the possibility of finding new avenues for creating value by creating linkages between previously disconnected entities.

Placing the ability to respond to the inflow of feedback loops and changing market conditions as a priority for companies, situates economic value production at the same time in the present and in the future. Thrift suggests: “In other words, value increasingly

arises not from what is but from what is not yet but can potentially become, that is from the pull of the future, and from the new distributions of the sensible that can arise from that change” (Thrift, 2008: 31). In my engagement with my case studies, I develop a particular attentiveness to the role of brands in such a fabrication of futures and explicate how brands deploy different means to pre-structure their own futures through the activity of others. As Thrift notes, this “pull from the future” (2008, 31) is not necessarily a novel development, yet I show that contemporary branding practices deploy and offer a number of new forms - spatial, affective and social- to organise and capitalise upon future orientation.

### **Becoming, from the Inside**

So far, brands - but also contemporary capitalism - have been introduced as being characterised by their capacity to change, or more precisely, to adapt through the constant monitoring, responsiveness and modulation of market developments, consumer activities and social dynamics. These capacities have been addressed as seeking to impact on consumers not in a straightforward way, but by creating background conditions, and extending into social, cultural and also future life. These background conditions bring me to a final claim which draws attention to brands’ capacity to operate immanently, to impact on companies, audiences, processes and goods from the inside. Brands, in particular, sociologists claim, do not enter markets from the outside, but emerge in the shaping of these markets from the inside. Operating as both a navigational device to handle multiple feedback loops and as a maker of background conditions, the brand functions as both animated and animating entity. Brands, so Lury adds (2004), have performative capacities comprising a set of values that they themselves bring into being.

Such immanent performativity bears particular spatio-temporal conditions, as the work of Knorr-Cetina (2005; see also: Knorr-Cetina & Bruegger, 2002) on post-social relations and performativity of financial trading suggests. In her empirical observation of trading rooms, Knorr-Cetina focuses on the relation between screens and traders. She investigates the interface of the screen as a device of post-social and performative relations together with particular software, which is capable of enacting the financial market as animate and alive: “it has life in and of itself, you know, sometimes it all comes together, and sometimes it’s all just sort of, dispersed, and arbitrary, and random, and directionless and lacking cohesiveness” (Knorr-Cetina, 2005: 128). Grossman, Luche and Muniesa (2006) further observe that the setting of screen and software is not designed to enable literal market transparency, that is, to show traders what is actually

happening in the market in the greatest detail, but instead seeks to enable their engagement with the market from the inside, creating what the authors understand as abstract transparency.<sup>3</sup> Facilitated through trading software, traders might not entirely understand the market, but can operate within it whilst it unfolds like a stream of multiple simultaneous events in front of them, requiring immediate responses. Knorr-Cetina's notion of the stream provides an interesting analogy in order to capture multi-focal and relational change. Yet, it does not address the interrelation and interactivity between the very stream and the trader, the ways in which they inform each other and to what extent boundaries between the two can be held up.

This draws attention to questions of intensity and extensity in contemporary capitalism and branding, that is, the interplay between immanent forces and more fixed actualisations (DeLanda, 2002, 2006). In his exploration of intensive culture, Lash (2010) claims that contemporary economies are defined by an interplay between intensive and extensive forms: commodities are fixed, extensive and comparable, while other forms like brands are characterised by internal change, non-comparability and relations. He states that brands constantly 'actualise' as "they generate products or commodities that we do encounter. Brands in this sense are not actual but virtual. Brands are thus intensities that actualise into extensities" (Lash, 2010: 4). What is at stake is not the production of goods but of newness, difference, relationally and the cutting across of distinctions of im/materiality. Lash says: "This new intensive-material is informational information is the materialisation of ideas" (2010: 126). Intensive capitalism is thus the accumulation of difference, embodied in information *and* matter, or put differently, in the making of background conditions and their affective capacities.

### **Branding as Boundary Making Practice**

So far, the question of 'what is a brand?' has been left fairly open, if not ambiguous. My study seeks to revisit sociological accounts of brands by drawing on empirical fieldwork and emergent branding practices. I therefore chose not to begin by predefining the 'brand', but instead to set out a plane of concerns alongside which the empirical research will investigate brands. I started with an interest in the impact of co-creative and participative approaches in contemporary branding practices and focus on the research question of how brands reconfigure boundaries between economy and society. The emergence of a series of such boundary negotiations has been addressed in economic sociology, including the reconfiguration of value production, the social

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<sup>3</sup> Such abstract transparency has been discussed as simulation (DeLanda, 2011; Turkle, 1997).

embeddedness of brands, their temporal continuation and world-making. Let me now move on to explicate the notion of boundary making in relation to brands in general and in regard to its impact on this thesis in particular.

Sociological branding theory has mainly engaged implicitly with the role of boundary-making so far. In the work of Arvidsson (2006), Lury (2004), Moor (2007) and Kornberger (2010), brands have been conceptualised as highly flexible objects, constantly expanding in their field of application and the fields they intend to affect. The work of Lury (2004, 2011) addresses most explicitly boundary making. As mentioned above, she suggests that brands enable economic competition to move beyond mere competition on price, but to compete based on qualities, relations and differences. This is possible, Lury claims, by creating particular relations between products and by organising the entire production process in alignment with a set of brand values and a differential position on the market. Creating these relations enables brands not only to operate within markets, but to shape these very markets by producing new demands and desires, defining the boundaries of new audiences and opening up new avenues of value creation. In this framework, brands emerge as a rationale for organising the inside (production) and the outside (audiences and stakeholders) of a company. In her most recent work, Lury relates branding explicitly to boundary making:

In many respects, brands may be seen as boundary objects as defined here: they inhabit several communities at once, are plastic yet robust, and may be abstract or concrete. (...) Brands in contrast are boundary objects in the sense that they variously – and not always consistently – multiply relations with a series of environments while still preserving the internal organisation of the brand so that it may be identified and owned. (Lury, 2011: 53)

Lury develops her notion of the brand as boundary in response to Star and Griesemer's seminal definition of the boundary object (1989; see also Bowker & Star, 2000) as inhabiting multiple communities which do not necessarily need to share common values and practices: "Boundary objects are a sort of arrangement that allow different groups to work together without consensus" (Star, 2010: 602). Following Star, boundary objects have little general structure and gain their relevance and capacities through individual use contexts, allowing for interpretative flexibility. Lury departs from Star's initial definition of boundary objects, suggesting that brands rather provide boundary-method-objects, as brands do not presuppose symmetric relations between communities but can operate across non-symmetric relations and often create the very entities they enable to connect.



In the context of this thesis, the focus however is placed on branding practices and processes, rather than the brand as an object. I ask how branding is deployed and defined by a series of boundaries between economy and society and I seek to develop an empirical account of whether and how branding operates as a boundary making practice. In doing so, this thesis gives specific consideration to the idea that the value of goods, brands and companies is not only defined by strategic activities, but emerges as distributed across actors, spaces, relations and events. Branding is approached here as a practice of bringing disparate entities into interplay and of creating relations and equivalences between social, cultural and economic dynamics, whilst continuously reconfiguring their boundaries and being subject to those boundary- reworking practices themselves. To develop a starting point for my exploration of brands, I approach brands as a set of values, attributes and promises which are defined by corporations and brought into being in a distributed, relational and not always linear fashion both within and outside of corporations. What a brand stands for and what its value entails are the outcome of their strategic making and eventive happening, informed by feedback loops of information and activity whilst creating the background conditions for these to arise.

Throughout this chapter, I have drawn attention to a series of interrelated areas of concern that arise in relation to questions of continuity in branding and economic value production. They emerge in interrelation to each other and their edges are difficult to demarcate. In the subsequent empirical chapters, these concerns are translated, in response to the fieldwork, into three key focal points. Each of these focal points addresses processes of boundary making from a specific perspective. In a first step, I revisit the role of sociality and community, tracing the embeddedness of brands in social relations, or, more precisely, what forms of sociality brands bring into being and how they themselves are being produced in social relations. This focal point asks to what extent brands can only be experienced and encountered from the inside and investigates how brands organise boundaries between social, informational and economic value. The second focal point follows my interest in the distributed spatialisation of brands. I give consideration to the question of creating background conditions, as well as the affective capacities of brand spaces, which are both made and happening. I also ask what connects the different spaces related to brands and trace the specific affordances of key brand spaces. Thirdly, the question emerges as to how these social communities and brand spaces are actually held together and how the making of background conditions operates on an affective level. To address this in response to the empirical cases, I turn to the use of social issues as a means of creating branding strategies, most notably, the

role of bodies and sexuality in branding. If the becoming of brands does continue into the becoming of bodies, where does a body start and where does a brand end?

To address the processual character of branding and to give consideration to the brand's flexibility and becoming, the notion of continuity - but also topology - becomes of importance in the sense-making of the empirical material. Topology refers to a relational notion of spatiality which cannot be understood through extraneous measures, but only from the inside and constantly alter whilst remaining the same (Duffy, 2006; James, 1999). Contemporary brands, so I show, are defined by so-called invariance under deformation, by constantly adapting, de- and re-qualifying, whilst remaining recognisable and adding value to the same company. Such an account of the becoming topological of brands informs my exploration of boundary making, resulting in a final reflection on brands as being entangled in what I call 'continuous economies'.

## **The Thesis**

This thesis is both an interdisciplinary and empirical piece of work, and brings together sociological and media theory, and economic and mathematical thought, as well as a wide set of empirical research methods. It draws particular inspiration from economic sociology, the sociological theory of brands, (new) media theory, and accounts of topology, mathematics and continuum theory. It does not seek to contribute to a greater efficiency of contemporary branding practices, but approaches brands with a sociological interest, focusing on their socio-economic implications. The unfolding of such considerations in the subsequent chapters emerges from an empirical engagement with the field of contemporary branding along two lines. Firstly, it traces the becoming of brands and their continuous qualities in relation to two case studies on brands which have come to be known as investing in user involvement, co-creation and social issues. Central to these case studies is the practice of tracing, following the activities of multiple actors involved, including brand management, consumers and further stakeholders across multiple spaces and temporalities by engaging with a number of research methods. Secondly, I am interested in the dynamics of mapping, giving consideration to the relations emerging between the different activities and practices, which lead to the becoming of the brand, but which are also organised by the brands themselves. As case studies, I have chosen two brands which have been active in co-creative approaches of brand management since the early 2000s and which since then have sought to insert themselves not only into multiple social relations with consumers,

but also into public discourses by assigning themselves to issues of body norms or sexuality. The first case study focuses on Dove, a cosmetics brand by Unilever.

Since 2003, Dove has developed its so-called Campaign for Real Beauty by connecting the brand to the cause of beauty and body norms and the role of media in their production. Dove is only one of many brands of the multi-national consumer goods company Unilever which also functions as an umbrella brand for Lynx, Slim Fast, Ben & Jerry's and Pro-active among others. Dove has enacted this connection through multiple communication and engagement approaches, partnerships and corporate social responsibility programs, as well as by directly addressing what they consider to be affected audiences. The second case study focuses on American Apparel, a US clothes brand which has come to be known for its use of seemingly authentic sexual imagery, its immersion into urban hipster cultures and its capacity to drive consumers, employees and other stakeholders to engage with American Apparel's aesthetics of curating their bodies and visual appearance. Both case studies are explored through the use of multiple methods in order to trace the becoming of and engagement with the brand from the perspective of brand management, consumers, press and other relevant stakeholders. The methodological approaches employed are, as suggested, organised around ideas of tracing and mapping, but also draw attention to the difficulties of defining boundaries, relations of proximity and the background conditions of becoming. The insights emerging from these tracing practices inform all chapters of this thesis and thus, I do not unfold the cases as a uniform story, but introduce them through shifting perspectives and by posing ever new questions, in order to offer a form of sense making that is as continuous and interlaced as the cases themselves.

## **The Chapters**

The objective of the thesis unfolds in five substantive chapters, each of which uses different perspectives on the empirical material as starting points from which further theoretical considerations emerge. While the opening chapter has already situated branding within wider strands of economic sociology and introduced a series of key sociological contributions informing contemporary branding theory, the subsequent literature review features two focal points. It is interested in the rise of branding as seen through an interdisciplinary framework of sociology and marketing theory, leading to a current interest in co-creation and the involvement of multiple stakeholders. It provides a short introduction to the rise of brands oriented towards the instances that have allowed them to operate as boundary making practice. Attention is directed to established and emerging marketing accounts on brands and their resonance in actual

branding practice. Different perspectives on co-creation from economic sociology, managerial literature (Ind et al., 2012; Prahalad & Krishnan, 2008; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a) and media theory (Benkler, 2006; Coté & Pybus, 2007; Fuchs, 2010) are addressed. The centrality of co-creation is presented as tied up with a particular understanding of consumption (Arvidsson, 2006; Cova & Pace, 2006; Maffesoli, 1996; Ritzer et al., 2012; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Toffler, 1981) and the increasing migration of social relations into the centre of economic value production. To offer a different account of the making sense of co-creation and contemporary branding practices, the second part of the literature review returns to questions of de- and recomposition (Callon & Méadel, 2002; Lury, 2009), the making of assemblages and the notion of becoming partible (Foster, 2011; Strathern, 1990), opening up alternative avenues to reflect on co-creation.

Chapter 2 outlines the methodological underpinnings of the thesis, entitled 'Tracing and Mapping'. It introduces the empirical objective, the sites of enquiry and provides a series of reflections on tracing - that is, descending into and remaining immanent to one's research site, and mapping - that is, bringing into relation processes of continuity and discontinuity in contemporary branding. The notion of tracing in particular gives consideration to the intensive, relational and distributed production of brands and the involvement of multiple actors, spaces and issues. The primary methodological focus is on how practices of branding allow for dynamics of continuation and on what forms of life, sociality, spaces, bodies, value and temporality they produce. Such tracing and mapping affords the use of multiple research methods and I discuss how these are assembled to create a particular interplay. The suggested methodology draws particular inspiration from ideas of 'liveness' and 'liveliness', that is, the interaction between current topics and their variation over time (Marres & Weltevrede, 2012). In doing so, it also engages with the recent interest in methodologies of the surface (Adkins & Lury, 2009; Savage & Burrows, 2007, 2009) which do not emphasise causation, but explore effects and affects of practices, forms and relations between brands, consumers, companies, spaces, objects, bodies, affects and debates. I also draw particular inspiration from Lash and Lury's object oriented method (2007), focusing on the becoming of brands in relation to their environment, whilst not thinking the brand as an object. Emerging from the interest in surface and enactment, the focus further moves to the particularities of engaging with digital spaces, introducing what has been developed as a medium-specific approach to digital culture by Richard Rogers (2009, 2012).

The first empirical chapter, '(Re)Composing Sociality', traces how consumers encounter and experience brands within social relations. Starting off from the current interest in

deploying existing or emerging social relations for branding, the chapter maps out the particular sociality relevant to the case studies of Dove and American Apparel. Instead of subsuming brand sociality into rather homogenous notions of brand communities and tribes, as focused upon in marketing theory (Cova, 1997; Cova & Cova, 2002; Cova & Pace, 2006; Maffesoli, 1996; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), I develop a sensitivity for the ongoing de- and recomposition of sociality in branding. The chapter traces the multiple relations Dove and American Apparel seek to deploy, but also directs attention to how the brands are being made into an element of social formations themselves. To address the making and happening of the multiple social formations, I draw on the notion of the assemblage (DeLanda, 2002, 2006; Lury, 2009) and ask what holds these assemblages together. Relations of proximity within and between assemblages are addressed, as well as recent attempts to create a particular relation between social and economic value in social media environments deployed by brands. The chapter hence situates the becoming of brands in close interrelation to the becoming of multiple relations, opening up a relational understanding of brands as becoming topological.

Chapter 4 'Brand Spaces' brings the relationality or the becoming topological of brands into relation with questions of spatialisation. Departing from the finding that the experience of brands is spatially distributed and unfolds as a series of events specific to both social and spatial relations, this chapter traces the role of spatialisation in branding. It offers a reconfiguration of existing notions of branded spaces (Cronin, 2010; Moor, 2007), which focus on the strategic fabrication of environments, and suggests thinking brand spaces as touchpoints between brands and consumers, but also between consumers in relation to brands. Such spaces are not understood as empty containers, but as having performative capacities, brought into being by their relations to brands, just as they impact the brands themselves. This chapter addresses brand spaces in the context of exploring the background conditions of the becoming of brands and traces the specific affordances of online spaces and the forms of engagement with brands happening in them (Lazzarato, 2004; Sloterdijk, 2009; Thrift, 2008). Furthermore, I show how social media spaces offer specific affordances for the transformation of social activities into data form, therefore making them exchangeable and potentially economically valuable. From here, I draw attention to how such spaces are tied up with the delineation of particular horizons of possibility (Langlois et. al, 2009; Grusin, 2010; Manning, 2009) for the becoming of both brands and social relations. I arrive at the question: what is it actually that consumers engage with - the brand or its socio-spatial materialisation?

The last two empirical chapters focus on the role of social issues as being part of contemporary branding practices. Chapter 5 'Brands and Bodies' maps out how a particular outlook on bodies and sexuality has come to be implemented in the strategic positioning of Dove and American Apparel. It situates this discussion in previous feminist media theory exploring the relation between promotional culture, brands and bodies, suggesting a focus on their mutual interplay. This chapter traces how both brands operate with a specific idea of their consumers' and other stakeholders' bodily becoming, seeking to enable the development of bodily self-confidence in the case of Dove, or fostering specific aesthetics and modes of sexuality in the case of American Apparel. The chapter offers a specific outlook on the impact of brands on bodies and vice versa by drawing on Massumi's notion of the 'naturing body' (2009). In regard to my case studies, I show that brands affect bodies along multiple lines, which do not add up to a whole, but create heterogeneous 'vectorfields' of affection (DeLanda, 2002; Manning, 2009).

Chapter 6 'Intimacy, Atmospheres and Modulation' takes these considerations further by linking the making of background conditions and atmospheres with questions of intimacy and their affective capacities. It moves into a detailed exploration of how brands actually affect and inform bodies, by becoming part of intimate relations or creating climates of intimacy. Returning to topological thought, such a fabricated intimacy is partly accounted for as 'extimacy', creating a seamless movement between closed and open forms of intimacy (Palombi, 2009). From here, the chapter develops the claim that the making of background conditions of intimacy not only operates as a mode of world-making, but also on the level of affective modulation and biomediation (Clough, 2008; Thacker, 2004), directly informing the bodily becoming of actors involved, whilst being informed themselves. What emerges is a mode of de- and recomposition of bodies and brands, or a form of abstract sex (Parisi, 2004), in which it is not entirely clear where a body ends and where a brand begins

Chapter 7, 'Brands and Continuous Economies', functions both as a conclusion and as an extension of the arguments developed previously. Bringing together the multiple instances of boundary making explored in relation to American Apparel and Dove, it outlines a relational and topological perspective on brands, suggesting that brands can only be accounted for from the inside as emerging in multiple relations. The notions of distributedness and partibility become of relevance again here: drawing together my observations, I make the final claim that brands emerge as part of what I understand as 'continuous economies', in which economic value production and social relations emerge in interrelation without dissolving into each other. Instead, exchange and

interaction processes between corporations and consumers expand across time, space and relations, being distributed and reconfigured temporally. Drawing on Marres' notion of 'multi-valence' (2011), I return to the initial question of how brands organise the relation between the economy and the social, and suggest that rather than collapsing work and life, production and consumption, brands enable the making of conditions in which economic value production and the making of sociality exist simultaneously and in interrelation. In doing so, they deploy a logic of continuation which can also be found in debt relations (Graeber, 2012), creating environments in which the exchange between brands and consumers is never balanced out and in which relations are continuous yet asymmetric and non-reciprocal. Activities, affects, relations and value are not confined to one of these realms, but open up an interplay between continuity and discontinuity, the economic and the social, bringing them together in asymmetric relations.

# 1

## Literature Review – Assembling Brands

The introduction opened up a discussion on contemporary branding practices as investing in consumer involvement and co-creation and set out to explore this tendency as a boundary making practice. So far, I have mainly situated branding in a wider framework of informational and immaterial production and traced the role of boundary making- but also continuity - across reflections on contemporary modes of production in economic sociology. This chapter provides a more detailed exploration of debates emerging in the context of sociology and marketing theory on brands, while connecting these to the rise of brands and transforming industry practices. As Arvidsson (2006) and Lury (2004) outline, brands have a long history and there are multiple ways in which this history can be told (Moor, 2007). The particular narrative unfolding in this chapter brings together previous scholarship on brands, as well as on their history, to outline the gradual explication of branding and its extensive and intensive expansion (DeLanda, 2002): extensive expansion, as brands have come to inform a series of business practices and non-commercial organisation; and intensive expansion, as the ways in which brands address and entangle consumers is constantly transforming (Moor, 2007). This chapter traces how marketers attempt to render ever more aspects of social, cultural and communicative life as potentially productive for the brand and so contribute to a more distributed and more participatory notion of branding, which, however, also becomes increasingly partible (Foster, 2011) and topological (Lury, 2009).

After outlining key instances in the history of branding, I introduce recent sociological accounts on brands in detail, most notably the work of Lury (1999, 2004, 2009) Moor (2007) and Arvidsson (2006, 2009, 2010), contrasting them with marketing perspectives (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2002; Kapferer, 2008; Olins, 2005). Subsequently, attention is directed to the interest in participatory and community oriented accounts of brands in both theory, but also practice (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Tapscott & Williams,



2008; Cova & Cova, 2002; Ind, Fuller, & Trevail, 2012; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) and their relation to media theory (Benkler, 2006; Fuchs, 2010; Coté & Pybus, 2007). This recent focus on co-creation is tied up, so I show, with a particular understanding of consumption as inherently productive (Ritzer & Jurgenson 2010; Ritzer et al. 2012; Maffesoli 1996; Toffler 1989; Cova & Pace 2006a; Zwick et al. 2008; Cova et al. 2011; Cova & Dalli 2009) and the increasing migration of social relations and social interactivity into the centre of economic value production. From here, the chapter questions current strands of co-creation critique (Cova & Dalli, 2009; Cova et al., 2011; Zwick et al., 2008), which criticise the growing subsumption of consumer activities as labour or work, and by engaging with notions of de- and re-assembling and becoming partible this chapter outlines the horizon for an alternative pathway to co-creation critique.

### **The Emergence of Brands and Branding**

Looking into the emergence of brands a series of historical lineages can be found, addressing their history from a variety of angles (Lury, 2004, 2009; Moor, 2007). The particular viewpoint offered in this chapter focuses on instances of their intensive and extensive expansion (DeLanda, 2002) rather than producing an exhaustive historical account. Very early occurrences of brand-like marks on goods can be traced back to Roman and Greek cultures (Mollerup, 1997), functioning as markers of origin added to rather generic products and fabricates. Such markers, which can be found across different preindustrial times (Lury, 2004), first operated as indicators of ownership and later of geographical origin. It was mainly the second half of the nineteenth century, which led to major explications of these practices facilitated through political, industrial and technological change (Moor, 2007). In the course of the last 150 years, brands transformed in multiple steps, from first being mere descriptive signs of ownership and origin, to second, prescriptive sets of values informing organisations, to thirdly, performative entities having their very own life. In the late twentieth century, the geographic growth of markets and the increased interest in using means of design to distinguish one's products majorly contributed to brands moving beyond mere markers of origin (Lury, 2004; McClintock, 1995).

Following McClintock, it was especially the discipline of design and the possibility of mass production that facilitated early forms of branding in emerging industrial societies, such as the creation of distinct packaging for generic goods like soap, flour or sweets. Design became a means through which consumers could recognise specific producers

and start developing a relationship with them (Moor, 2007) which was no longer just mediated by store owners (Lury, 2004). According to Ellwood, the 1890s marked “the first golden era for the modern brand mark” (2002: 13), as consumers could buy individually packed and distinguished products for the first time, such as Uncle Ben’s rice, Quaker Oats’ cereals or Aunt Jemima’s pancakes. New modes of transportation and the impact of colonial politics put companies under pressure to operate in wider geographical areas. Through the emergence of factories and the first instances of industrial designs, companies could standardise their packaging and more easily build relationships with consumers across bigger distances. Until the early 20th century, emergent forms of branding kept following a descriptive approach, that is, outlining the qualities, origin and use scenarios of goods. Following Moor, it was during the interwar years when an increased interest in linking goods to a more abstract set of values moved in, and in which the country of origin no longer came to be used as a descriptive marker but came to stand instead for a set of national values. Subsequently, design processes started focusing on the incorporations of values, beliefs and points of view (Moor, 2007; Julier, 2008).

The turn towards linking brands with abstract values is connected to a changing perspective on consumers, who have been mainly imagined as rather a homogenous mass in Fordist modes of production (Slater & Tonkiss, 2001). Brands should not only incorporate values, but ideally these values should be aligned with those of consumers. To select values that matter to consumers, the mid 20th century was characterised by a growing interest in researching consumers’ specific needs, desires and interests. Early forms of explicating consumer research contributed to the formation of strategic marketing in the second half of the 20th century (Slater & Tonkiss, 2001; Callon et al. 2007), shifting attention away from the needs of the seller to the needs of the buyer. In this context, marketing emerged as a discipline that was concerned with both creating relationships and difference (Callon 2005; Callon, Meadel, & Rabeharisoa, 2001), or following Callon, detaching consumers from competitors and attaching them to one’s own brand. This was accomplished by associating a selected set of values to one’s offerings that differentiates them from other offers in the market, establishing a differential position in relation to competitors, whilst making offerings to create relationality with or between consumers (Slater, 2002; Cochoy 1988).

As a consequence consumption, which was long imagined as the rather passive end of marketing efforts, is increasingly perceived as productive (Arvidsson, 2006) and the relation between producers and consumer is “no longer viewed in terms of stimulus-response” but “was increasingly conceived of as an exchange” (Lury, 2004: 24).

Subsequently, techniques and approaches to understand consumers are proliferating (Arvidsson, 2006; Thrift, 2005). It was in the 1960s when consumer research started to move beyond the demographic segmentation of traditional ABCD typologies to more complex explanatory models of consumer desires, habits and forms of belonging, shifting towards psychographics, internal motivations and more finely grained life-style clusters (Arvidsson, 2006). As consumer behaviour was perceived as constantly altering, so research methods were required to be faster and more responsive (Thrift, 2005). At the same time, Arvidsson continues, advertising strategies moved from so-called 'realistic modes' of communicating the use value of offerings to the strategic creation of moods, feelings and experiences (Arvidsson, 2006; Pine et al., 1999).

However, in the 1970s these early marketing or branding efforts came to inform wider areas of companies, a development addressed as the formation of corporate identity. The work of Olins (1978) and Pilditch and Scott (1965) in particular advocated an understanding of branding not only as an add-on to a company's market offerings, but as a fundamental governing principle informing the entire organisation. Early accounts of corporate identity focused on the strategic design of a growing number of touchpoints to organise internal and external audiences, leading towards a streamlining of its appearance (Moor, 2007). The concept of corporate identity also entailed the alignment of employees under a set of corporate values and visions, resonating with the changing role of labour in post-Fordist economies, which is supposed to shift from the execution of predefined tasks to more complex, immaterial and collaborative undertakings (Slater & Tonkiss, 2001).

It was in the 1980s when these developments were brought together under the framework of brand management, mainly facilitated through new dimensions of mergers and acquisitions (Lury, 2004). The rise of neoliberal societies and conservative governments in the UK and US fostered the increasing liberalisation of markets and the privatisation of organisations, creating a climate of increased takeovers. Most interestingly, the actual value of most mergers by far exceeded the costs of tangible assets held by the companies. This discrepancy was based on - and brought to attention - the increasing financial value of brands and led to the first attempts to measure and evaluate this value (Trevillion, 1999; Salinas, 2011), hence establishing branding as a new focal point of financial departments.

At the same time, so Moor (2007) suggests, a formerly diffuse set of practices, including promotion, corporate identity, marketing and design among others, was gradually explicated as branding and accompanied by a growing number of specialised branding

agencies. The explication of branding was tied up with an equally strengthened role of consumer insights and the rise of the account planner, a role dedicated to the interconnection of consumer insights and strategic brand development (Arvidsson, 2006; Moor, 2007). In their attempts to entangle consumers, marketers further developed an interest in deploying social relations, by inserting brands in sub-cultures, creating brand communities (B. Cova, 1997; B. Cova & Pace, 2006b; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), or neo-tribes (Maffesoli, 1996). In the 1990s, marketing practices focused on orchestrating the proliferating touchpoints with internal and external audiences through integrated campaigning bringing new media formats into interplay. Brand communication gradually expanded the means of addressing its audiences from discrete mass media slots by utilising the background of potentially all kinds of everyday activities, so Moor (2007) suggests, and become immanent, or to put it with Thrift, increasingly 'sink into the its taken-for-granted background' (Thrift & French, 2002). Yet, branding also came to inform internal corporate cultures through employee branding, brand engagement and the alignment of wider sets of business operations with brand values (Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Kornberger, 2010; Buckingham, 2008).

By the late 1990s, brands were not only informing a wider set of actors, spaces and practices, they came to be understood as increasingly happening and being made by the actors they intended to affect themselves (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Managerial and sociological accounts of branding shifted attention to emerging possibilities for interactivity enabled by new (online) media (Arvidsson, 2009; Lury, 2004). Participatory web culture, in particular, resulted in a new capitalist frenzy to involve consumers in producing, for example, user-generated adverts, open innovation processes, feedback and research, the spread of viral videos or the membership of brand communities. Such developments have been explicated as so-called co-creative branding (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004), collaborative or open branding (Pitt et al., 2006) or 'prosumption' (Zwick et al., 2008; Cova & Dalli, 2009; Cova et al. 2011; Ritzer et al., 2012; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). The following sections of this chapter explore the discourses evolving around such contemporary, participatory and distributed notions of branding in greater detail.

### **Sociological Accounts of Brands: On Interactivity and Flexibility**

Besides a long tradition of marketing accounts of brands, a number of sociologists started to address the socio-economic implications of branding, most notably Lury (1999, 2004, 2009), Moor (2007), Arvidsson (2006, 2009), Kornberger (2010), Zwick

(2008; 2011), Cova and Dalli (2009), among others. Their work is characterised by thinking the brand as object, as practice and as platform for action. Thinking brands as objects originates from the work of Lury (2004), who situates her sociological study of brands in process philosophy, object oriented sociology and new media theory. Lury understands brands as open-ended, flexible and constantly altering objects, informed by ongoing feedback loops of information regarding consumer preferences, market dynamics, trends, production processes and other evaluative operations within organisations. Just as brands create these loops, they are informed by them as well. However, this capacity to create and respond to information enables organisations not just to operate in markets, but to organise and expand markets by inventing new offerings, segments, audiences and desires, so Lury contends. In doing so, brands move competition and decision making processes beyond a focus on price by reintroducing values and qualities into markets. They do so by differentiating companies based on the sets of values associated with their brands that the relation between buyers and sellers is not only organised on price, but on shared viewpoints, modes of attachments, relations and qualities which function as “alternative devise[s] for the calibration of the market” (Lury, 2004: 4).

Lury further understands brands as platforms for activity patterning, or as “a mode of organising activities in time and space” (2004, 1). This process informs both internal and external operations by functioning akin to a frame (Callon, 1998; Goffman, 1986), that is, enabling some actions whilst ruling out others. Put differently, brands frame by establishing a set of values that inform production processes, create relations between products, structure how employees behave, how organisations interact with different audiences and how audiences relate to brands and each other. With reference to the work on boundaries by Beatriz Colomina (1996), Lury (2009) contends that brands operate as interfaces between organisations and external audiences or between organisations and employees, complicating the idea of the inside and outside of brands. Brands emerge as an open and responsive interface, informed by ongoing feedback loops and real-time responsivity to markets and consumers. Yet, brands are equally defined by the limits of their responsivity, as the interaction processes they enable are not endlessly open and free floating, but immanently structured, allowing only for ‘manageable flexibility’ (2004: 127). The relation between organisations and consumers in particular might appear potentially open, as consumers can increasingly talk back to brands, but these relations remain asymmetric, Lury claims, as it is the brand management that finally decides on which requests to respond and which to ignore. Brands thus are indeterminate, but not open-endedly flexible: “The indeterminacy of the

objectivity of the brand is not absolute; uncontrol is not the same as lack of control” (2004: 127).

The relation between brands and consumers, Lury continues, can be understood as a processes of simulation (Turkle, 1997), as brands do not address consumers as such, but as profiles. These profiles are mediated through and simulated by consumer research insights which create an abstracted account of their desired audiences, instead of interacting with actual consumers individually (Zwick & Denegri Knott, 2009). Consumers equally do not encounter the organisation as such, but only as mediated through brands and materialised in the logo. Lury considers the logo as the material facialisation of the brand and assigns it an especially central role, as it turns into the face of the organisation, marking it as distinct whilst putting it in relation to its competitors. The meaning of a logo is at the same time temporality determined to allow consumers to relate to it, and in flux, as each interaction might introduce change, both active and passive:

To put this another way, the ubiquity of Nike is such that it is able to insert its logos transparently into everyday scenes, transforming the field into what might be described as a *mise en ordre sensible* (Hosokawa, 1984: 178) in which the logo both informs and is informed by what is going on, what surrounds it. (Lury, 2004: 79)

The focus on ongoing interactivity as key to branding also introduces a particular directionality and future orientation, in which branding can be understood as an organisational response to operating in uncertainty. Branding does not seek to eliminate uncertainty, but to put it to work and navigate it. Lury’s account of brands therefore stresses their performative and more-than representational capacities of brands (Thrift, 2008), as brands constantly refer back to what they have produced themselves (Lury, 1999). The centrality she assigns to the logo, however, is critically revisited in the course of this thesis, as the discussion of brands, the relation to brands and the association of societal causes to brands are not necessarily organised through the logo. Rather, I take departure from Lury’s idea of brands by proposing that brands are inherently incomplete, in circulation and emerging in interaction with their environment.

Liz Moor (2007) continues the double focus on brands as cultural forms and practices from a different perspective, offering a historical account of the rise of brands by focusing on their entanglement with design practices, the proliferation of touchpoints and their expansion beyond the corporate sector. Coming from a design perspective, Moor puts forward a material notion of branding as an “attempt to give concrete physical form to abstract values and concepts” (2007: 143). She traces how abstract brand values are being translated into different sensory forms, that is, how branding is a

process of alteration between the abstract and the concrete. Expanding touchpoints, branded media and spaces allow for new possibilities for such transposition processes to take place. With reference to Lash's account of informational media (Lash, 2002), she highlights how brands have become ubiquitous, turning any space into a potential media format: "Media", in this sense, "are not a discrete entity or set of entities; they are simply the context in which all marketing takes place" (Moor, 2007: 46). Her perspective draws attention away from directed brand communication to the creation of environments and background conditions of tactile and immersive brand experience (Pine et al., 1999). These experiences are multi-sited and multi-faceted, as they are not necessarily homogenous across all touchpoints, but nevertheless hold together through the brands themselves, resembling Lury's accounts of framing:

This spatial consolidation of brands is not only a multiplication of opportunities for purchase (although increasing profits is, of course, the bottom line), but also an attempt to intensify the flows between consumer, product, experience and brand, by making different spaces and experiences refer back to each other. (Moor, 2007: 48)

An implicit layer of Moor's argument is therefore the brand's capacity to change yet remain the same, as the transition between abstract and material embodiments of brand values can take on different forms and engender different experiences whilst referring to the same brand and the same set of values. Thinking branding as boundary making practice, Moor's work draws attention to the reworking of boundaries of the brand itself and its capacity to be transformed into ever new forms and contexts, a perspective that is explored empirically in my case studies.

The sociologist Adam Arvidsson (2006) offers a different perspective on brands, as he understands them as a key embodiment of post-Fordist informational capitalism and he focuses on their capacities to put sociality to work. Deploying a post-Marxist analysis of branding in contemporary economies, Arvidsson develops an interest in new means of utilising the productivity of consumption. He draws particular inspiration from the work of Virno (2004), Lazzarato (2004, 1996) and Hardt and Negri (2004), claiming that "the workplace can no longer be privileged as the place for the production of value" (2006: 12), as brands contribute to the blurring of the distinction between production and consumption. As with Lury (2004), Arvidsson stresses the incompleteness of brands, as their values can only be partly brought to life by the brand management and need to be accepted, taken up and engaged with by consumers, as brands "become valuable through their ability to manage and program human communication and appropriate the ethical surplus" (2006: 7). He understands brand management as the interplay between the strategic immersion of products, brands and associated topics into existing

social formations and the creation of ambiances that foster this immersion. As a consequence, he traces such a relational notion of branding back to pre-modern times, as exercised, for example, by the porcelain manufacturer Wedgwood who “put the aristocracy to work” (2006: 67). In order to establish the brand as the key manufacturer for the emerging bourgeoisie, Wedgwood deployed the taste making capacities of aristocratic circles by providing with samples of their products. Being used and seen in aristocratic homes would allow Wedgwood to attach shared meanings and a “socially constructed ‘aura’” (2006: 67).

Following Lazzarato’s seminal claim about the production of worlds (2004), Arvidsson understands branding as less concerned with actual goods or services, but more focused on the strategic creation of the contexts in which these products are being used. Brand management poses a series of attempts to create shared meanings, common ground and relations to and between consumers, mostly through the strategic enactment of ambiances in which consumer activities are likely to evolve into a desired direction. Consumers are not addressed by disciplinary means, telling them exactly what they ought to: ‘Buy! You must!’, but with the rationale of Foucauldian governmentality, suggesting ‘Discover” You may!’ (Barry, 2001). Consumer freedom is not obviously restrained, it is modulated from the inside, as “the task of brand management is to create a number of resistances that make it difficult or unlikely for consumers to experience their freedom, or indeed their goals, in ways different from those prescribed by the particular ambience” (Arvidsson, 2006: 74). Branded goods, hence, take on the role of tools and brand management that of creating the ambiances in which these tools are to be put to work. Key examples of such processes are branded spaces, viral marketing or the insertion of brands into existing social communities “making the becoming of subjects and the becoming of value coincide” (2006: 93). When branding and social interaction enter a form of relation, both extend into each other intensively, rendering the becoming of brands immanent to the becoming of consumers: “The brand becomes a hyper-socialized, de-territorialized factory” (2006: 82). Following Arvidsson, brands appropriate the ‘happening’ or emergent productivity of the social in a twofold sense: by enacting it into desired directions and transforming it simultaneously into informational feedback loops. Brands therefore pose a form of ‘crystallized knowledge’ (2006: 7) and emerge as the ontological paradigm of contemporary informational capitalism, just as factories did in the Fordist mode of production.

Throughout this thesis, I seek to cross-connect, but also revisit, a number of key focal points put forward by Moor, Lury and Arvidsson: thinking concerns of spatiality and sociality together; putting in question the centrality of the logo (Lury, 2004); assessing



the importance of the translation of values into material form (Moor, 2007); and drawing special attention to brands as working, making and happening.

### **Marketing Accounts of Brands: On Strategy and Distributedness**

In a next step, I turn to marketing accounts of brands and emergent branding practices (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2002). As with the sociological debate on brands, the marketing discourse comes with multiple accounts of brands and conjures up definitions that even turn into an act of self-branding for the associated author. Broadly speaking, marketing accounts of brands, such as the work of Aaker & Joachimsthaler (2002), Kapferer (2008), Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2002), Kapferer (2008), Kotler (2009), Keller (2008), Olins (2003), but also Hatch and Schultz (2008), imagine brands as a set of values that inform both internal and external activities, relations and visions. In what follows, I discuss the contributions of these authors alongside four key themes emerging from their understanding. Most interestingly, these key themes are connected to questions of boundary making and negotiations. Different to sociological perspectives, marketing theory entails an advisory component and also seeks to enable practitioners to advance their branding activities. The notions of brands put forward by these authors are therefore not only developed as sense making of current branding practices, but are intent on shaping and informing branding in its development into particular directions. In the context of this thesis, I draw on these marketing accounts to map the business perspective of brands, but also to trace changing practices. Therefore the last part of this section explores how new branding concepts translate into strategy building and are in dialogue with changing practices.

First, the idea of the productivity of brands, as stressed in sociological perspectives, materialises in different ways in the marketing discourse. Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2002) imagine the brand to be defined by companies yet as coming with a productivity of its own. Brands function as managerial tools to achieve a set of objectives by offering pro-active and long-term guidelines to internal and external actions, the authors suggest. In this context, brand values are not descriptive, but prescriptive and even performative:

In the brand leadership model, strategy is guided not only by short-term performance measures such as sales and profits but also by the brand identity, which clearly specifies what the brand aspires to stand for. With the identity in place, the execution can be managed so that it is on target and effective. (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2002: 13)

A different perspective is offered by Hatch and Schultz (2008) who imagine the brand as a rationale organised by values, informing all aspects of a corporation and thus operating on a more immanent level in the background (Kornberger, 2010). In their organisational approach to branding, Hatch and Schultz translate such a value-driven account into the idea of the corporate brand, consisting of: a brand vision, devised by the management; an organisational culture which embodies and executes the vision internally; the stakeholder image, that is, the external perception of the brands by consumers, media and partners; and finally, the brand image which refers to the self-perception of the organisation. This perspective differs from Aaker and Joachimsthaler's company centric notion of the brand, as what a brand stands for is not only defined by the corporation itself, but negotiated and materialised both inside and outside of it.

Second, marketing accounts develop different perspectives on brands as being reliant on external stakeholders, that is, consumers, media or cooperating partners which mainly manifest in accounts of brand equity and brand image. Following Aaker and Joachimsthaler, "brand equity was defined as the brand assets (or liabilities) linked to a brand's name and symbol that add to (or subtract from) a product or service" (2002: 17).<sup>4</sup> Brand management emerges as a tool to strategically create and valorise such equity. Hatch and Schultz's approach does not distinguish between brands and their external perception and interaction, as the authors imagine brands to be "symbolically created through acts of interpretation that occur throughout the population of stakeholders who keep it alive by producing, reproducing and sometimes changing its social and cultural meanings" (Hatch & Schultz, 2008: 29).

Third, marketing accounts also focus on the means to organise temporalities and ensure the duration of brands into the future. Aaker and Joachimsthaler in particular argue that short-term, reactive approaches to branding are detrimental and explore the possibilities for long-term, vision lead strategic approaches. A key element in this long-term perspective is the idea of brand identity, a set of values which is designed to inform the internal behaviour of organisations, but is also set up as an aspirational goal partly situated in the future: "Brand identity is a set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain. These associations imply a promise to customers from the organization members" (2002: 43). The authors propose a modularised account of brand identity, divided into a core and its extension, held together by the so-called brand essence which "can be viewed as the glue that holds the core identity elements

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<sup>4</sup> The authors further delineate equity in terms of brand awareness, perceived quality, association and loyalty, including both product associations, as well as more abstract modes of attachment and sociality (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2002).

together, or as the hub of a wheel linked to all of the core identity elements” (2002: 45).<sup>5</sup> The variety of different concepts at play in managerial accounts of brands introduces an interplay of temporalities, as brand image is situated in the present, while brand identity is at least partly situated in the future, as is brand essence and brand equity. Yet, brand essence and identity are often implicated in the corporation’s past - its history, founding stories, previous products, campaigns and key managerial figures - which inform corporations’ current and future values (Hatch & Schultz, 2008).

The entities that are understood to secure the temporal expansion of brands are also considered as starting points for the expansion of corporations into new markets. When developing brand extensions, Kapferer argues (2008), corporations utilise established brand identities and equity to get involved in new markets or to reconfigure their brand architecture, that is, the relations between the portfolio of sub-brands and the corporate umbrella brand. Brand extensions open up questions of the scaling and continuity of brands, using established values to facilitate connections into new markets and therefore alter the brand itself. This process is tied up with the negotiation of the relation between brands and their competitors or strategic positioning, Kapferer continues, in which brands are required to balance differentiation and relationality: “Positioning a brand means emphasising the distinctive characteristics that make it different from its competitors and appealing to the public” (Kapferer, 2008: 175). In this interplay, strategic positioning aims to create non-comparability whilst acknowledging one’s relations with competitors, as suggested by Lury (2004), and this imagines brands as being at the same time relational and singular, non-comparable and situated in contrast to other brands.

Last, organisational perspectives imagine branding as striving towards ubiquity and embeddedness in all aspects of the organisation (Olins, 2008; Hatch & Schultz, 2008) by letting brand values inform as many activities, touchpoints, processes and communiqués as possible in a top-down fashion. Olins argues: “In all its transactions, the organization will in some way be presenting itself, or part of itself - to some or all of the groups of people with whom it has relationships” (2008: 25). Hatch and Schultz propagate a similar top-down model, stressing the need to align brand vision, organisational culture and external image in their VCI model: “The combination of vision, culture, and images represents in one way or another everything the organization is, says, and does” (2008: 13). From this perspective, branding emerges as the interplay between the strategic

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<sup>5</sup> In practice, agencies and corporations often operate with proprietary models to address brand identity or essence, such as the ‘brand key’ (Unilever), ‘bulls-eye model’ or ‘footprint’ (Johnson and Johnson) (Kapferer, 2008).

definition of values and their actualisation and materialisation in appearance and behaviour, as suggested by Moor (2007). Such translation is also approached in terms of so-called 'laddering' in which brand values are being transformed from abstract to concrete, to actual products, services, campaigns or actions (Keller et al., 2008). Olins (2008) differentiates this scaling practice by introducing four vectors of materialisation of brand values: products or services; behaviour, including production and distribution processes; the environments of production, purchasing or experience; and brand communication. As a consequence, organisational perspectives on brands suggest that brand values are becoming immersive as they are being transfigured into new forms, actions and experiences across a growing number of touch points.

### **The Making and Happening of Branding Strategies**

Finally, the question arises as to where brand values actually originate from. The majority of marketing accounts of brands acknowledge that not all brand values have a straightforward strategic origin, but can be implicit or explicit, emergent or deliberate. Kapferer (2008) outlines that all companies have a set of values that impact their actions, but not all organisations are aware of and explicate these values or deploy them strategically. He says: "Does branding affect all companies? Yes. Are all companies aware of this? No." (2008: 50). Equally, marketing theorists suggest that all organisations have an image, as they are being perceived in particular ways by internal and external audiences, yet not all organisations seek to strategically modify this image (Olins, 2008). In his exploration of strategic thought, Mintzberg (1998) distinguishes between deliberate and emergent strategies, between intended and realised approaches, drawing attention to the fact that strategic action does not imply full corporate control and that strategies are not always executed in a linear fashion but are both made and happening.

Such conceptual accounts of flexible strategy are being pushed further in the increased industry interest in consumer involvement, interactive forms of branding and the rise of digital branding and, most notably, are manifest in the propagation of agile planning deployed in digital branding agencies (McMurray, 2010). Inspired by the agile computing movement, agile planning seeks to cut across strategy and tactics and is designed as a reiterative, non-sequential process. This planning approach favours doing over planning and considers strategic action as the capacity to adapt, monitor and respond in contexts of uncertainty rather than only following long term goals. Designed as a ability to respond, agile planning re-situates strategic action from the future to the present, suggesting that attention to currently changing environments is more important

than adherence to long-term goals: “You can talk and think about stuff for ages and ages before doing something or other. Why not just do something straight away and learn from that?” (McMurray, 2010). More precisely, agile planning involves the speeding up and collapsing of traditional steps of planning processes. It suggests departing from the chain of research, strategic planning and implementation, and instead starting from a rather intuitive working hypothesis, that is constantly tested, adjusted and revisited in practice. Although agile planning remains an approach specific to digital, interactive and co-creative branding approaches, a wider series of similarly adaptive accounts of strategic branding are emerging.<sup>6</sup> Such an interest in distributing the making of brands in terms of actors, but also temporally, has been increasingly formalising under the discursive framework of co-creation or participatory branding since the late 1990s.

### **Deploying Incompleteness: On Co-Creation and Participation**

So far, both sociological and marketing accounts understand brands as inherently incomplete entities characterised by constant extension into new markets, new products, new touchpoints, new relations and the future. Since the later 1990s, a series of approaches have taken further this notion of incompleteness of brands by exploring the possibilities of strategically involving consumers in different aspects of brand management, of distributing the becoming of brands and of deploying the productive capacities of other stakeholders under the framework of co-creation, open or collaborative branding (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a). Yet, while marketing theory presents co-creation as a response to participatory cultures and increasingly agentive consumers, I discuss this as a further instance of branding as boundary making practice and trace how it has materialised and reshaped the branding industry in recent years.

The notion of co-creation - although not a historical novelty so Ritzer (1993) and Toffler (1989) stress - has seen an increased interest in the last 20 years, mainly through its explication by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004). The authors suggest that company-centric, linear models of value production are gradually challenged by decentralised modes of value creation, for instance through consumer co-production and customisation, the involvement of consumers in innovation and branding processes, customisation and user-generated content. In response to Porter’s linear value chain

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<sup>6</sup> Fried and Hansson (2010), for instance, experiment with the ideas of un-planning, or the non-alignment of values and friction. The authors of ‘Rework’ suggest not controlling uncertainty, but embracing it and developing environments in which uncertainty can become productive and companies can adapt to changing conditions in real time, for instance, by fostering internal and external dissonance, keeping multiple philosophies in play and intervening rather than competing in markets.

model, they draw attention to possibilities of re-distributing value creation across a wider set of actors, activities and sites, while at the same time thinking the market as a forum in which consumers co-define what counts as value. Prahalad and Ramaswamy frame this process as so-called co-creation, which they develop on the one hand in response to emerging trends in branding practices, and on the other hand as a future outlook for the industry.

Following the authors further, co-creation refers to a mode of value production which is distributed within and outside of organisations and entails the strategic involvement of multiple audiences, while it does not require the alignment of the intentions of all actors involved. The economic potential of co-creation, however, does not reside within its collaborative character, but in its capacity to create so-called 'unique' - that is, personalised, affective and relational - value together with consumers which allows for premium prices and long term relationship building (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Such a 'unique value' allows the establishment of a specific competitive advantage: "defending its offerings against commoditization, while at the same time benefiting from an ability to charge premium prices for the co-created product and service" (Cova et al., 2011: 233).

The work of Prahalad and Ramaswamy has given rise to a series of further publications which explore the increasing decentralisation of value production, or, to put it in Thrift's words:

[T]his stream of thought and practice has now blossomed into a set of fully fledged models of 'co-creation' which are changing corporate perceptions of what constitutes 'production', 'consumption', 'commodity', 'the market' and indeed 'innovation'. (Thrift, 2008: 32-33)

The strategic involvement of consumers, however, has a longer history exceeding the context of branding. It was the area of user-centred design in the early second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in particular, which contributed to the emergence open innovation approaches in the 1980s (Hippel, 2005), and the strategic deployment of experience as part of branding (Pine and Gilmore, 2004) that first explored possibilities of involving consumers in value production. Furthermore, marketing theory and branding practice took particular inspiration from open source movements in computing, especially the case of Linux (Pitt, 2006). It was in the late 1990s when the first branding agencies deploying co-creative approaches emerged. The launch of Communispace (1999) in San Francisco and Sense Worldwide (1999) in London must be outlined here. Both agencies started deploying strategically selected consumer communities for market research and brand development purposes. Sense Worldwide was one of the first agencies to facilitate

such consumer communities online and was funded by NESTA, the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts in the UK.

In the early 2000s, co-creation was increasingly explicated by marketing theorists, such as the above mentioned Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), but also framed under divergent concepts such as the service-dominant logic of marketing (Lusch & Vargo, 2006), 'prosumption' (Ritzer, 1993; Ritzer et al., 2012; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Toffler, 1981), 'open source branding' (Pitt et al 2006), or 'working consumers' (Cova and Dalli 2009; Zwick et al. 2008), among others. Further agencies dedicated to co-creation emerged in the UK, for instance, Promise Communities (2003) which deployed communities, initially off-line, then online, to facilitate co-creative innovation processes, consumer research, internal branding processes and other strategic branding objectives. While Promise works with a very specific account of co-creation as a temporally limited collaboration with highly selected communities on defined objectives (Ind, 2012), Face, a co-creation agency founded in 2005 in London, offers different aspects of co-creation such as crowd-sourcing, peer-lead ethnography and social media monitoring.

In the 2000s, the majority of industry approaches, but also marketing publications on co-creation, addressed consumer involvement in relation to the rise of participatory online cultures, (Tapscott & Williams, 2008; Ind, 2011; Benkler, 2006; Fuchs, 2010; Côté & Pybus, 2007), resulting in do-it-yourself movements and craft consumption (Campbell, 2005), the perceived "complete collapse of consumption into production" (Zwick & Knott, 2009); productive and unmanageable consumption (Wipperfürth, 2006); and Axel Bruns's (Bruns, 2008) concept of the 'produser'. At the same time, co-creative approaches came to inform the practices of full service branding and advertising agencies in different forms. So-called viral campaigns, word-of-mouth-effects, user-generated content, later social media campaigns, open innovation and participatory research processes are gradually implemented into the service offerings of branding agencies, so several interview partners from the industry suggest (Wilfer, 2008).

Growing possibilities for user participation in web 2.0 and social media environments in particular (Jenkins, 2006; Shirky, 2009; Mandiberg, 2012) have introduced new avenues for strategic consumer involvement and have substantially transformed the branding, advertising and design industry in the UK in recent years. Based on the Design Council report 2012, 48% of all design businesses work in the area of digital and multimedia design and the majority of these agencies are less than six years old. Moreover, 61% of

these agencies claim that the demand for digital services has significantly increased in the last five years (Design Council, 2010). Interestingly, the majority of these newly emerging digital agencies operate as so-called micro-agencies, as 75% employ less than five people. In its future outlook, the Design Council report even stresses that social media will keep transforming the industry and facilitate the explorations of new ways to connect brands to consumers.

Thus, co-creative practices have come to inform the branding industry both explicitly, through the rise of specialised co-creation agencies, the growing importance of digital agencies and the use of social media, and implicitly, by reconfiguring the offerings of full service branding agencies. During my interviews with professionals working in the area, they claimed that the growing establishment of co-creation becomes apparent when comparing the effort they have had to make to convince clients to implement co-creative approaches as opposed to company- centric perspectives. Felix Koch, director of consulting from Promise Communities claims:

Just five years ago, we had to explain what co-creation is and what possibilities it offers to most clients in detail. We had to give tremendous attention to convince them to hand at least a fraction of power over to brand to consumers and really had to advocate a less company centric account of brands. Each client presentation used to begin with a long prelude how the market, the media landscape and consumers have changed. Today, however, most clients know what co-creation is and we have to make fewer efforts to convince them to apply it, but rather need to find a form of co-creation that fits their individual needs. (Koch, 2010)

While such specialised agencies present co-creation not only as a trend, but as a new logic of value creation (as with Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004), practitioners in full-service branding agencies rather consider it as one of many approaches. Craig Fabian, Director of Consulting worldwide at The Brand Union claims:

While co-creation offers interesting possibilities to open up the process of branding at points, brands will still be defined by brand management teams, brand values will be developed on the company side and consumers might be partially involved, but will not take over control over the brand. (Fabian, 2008)

Giles Lury, Executive Chairman at The Value Engineers adds that co-creation poses one of many trends, as he thinks the brand as a promise to consumers which can only be created and realised by the organisation itself (G. Lury, 2012). Rather than being open to the transformation by consumers, Lury claims that the strength of brands lies in their capacity to offer a perspective, a vision and a differential standpoint, rather than rendering this vision flexible for consumer negotiation.



However, the growing institutionalisation of co-creation as a key element of the UK branding industry can also be traced to the launch of several councils, collectives and organisations which bring together agencies and clients to explore the possibilities of co-creation. In 2010 for instance, a series of agencies and corporations, including Face and Unilever, founded the London based Co-Creation Hub,<sup>7</sup> to share insights and experience in doing co-creation. In the same year, the Co-Creation Association,<sup>8</sup> now a Special Interest Group of the PDMA and the premier global advocate for product development and management professionals, launched the international Co-Creation Awards<sup>9</sup> in collaboration with the US Co-Creation Forum<sup>10</sup> and the largest online co-creation agency Eureka. In the UK, many co-creation associations particularly focus on open innovation processes and online technologies. Open Business,<sup>11</sup> for instance, brings together businesses interested in open approaches to innovation, branding and business development. The initiative features an annual Open100 competition,<sup>12</sup> launched in collaboration with NESTA in 2010, which nominated the most successful companies operating in areas such as so-creation, crowd-sourcing, open business and open innovation.

The strategic involvement of consumers and other stakeholders in brand development processes, thus, has informed the industry along multiple lines. By now, industry reports consider the co-creation landscape to be increasingly differentiated. In a recent white paper, Sense Worldwide, one of the first co-creation agencies, outlines a series of co-creation approaches and their application in agencies and industry practice (Sense Worldwide, 2009), giving consideration to the variety of notions of co-creation in contemporary branding. While one form of co-creation refers to the employment of specialised co-creation agencies by corporations that bring together a preselected group of people to collectively realise a strategic objective, as deployed by Sense and Promise Communities (Ind et al. 2012), other approaches entail corporations which are directly interactive with dedicated online communities, such as in the agencies Innocentive, Kluster, Crowdsprit. More open approaches focus on setting up platforms that a wide range of users can access and contribute to, as in the case of open innovation

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<sup>7</sup> <http://ldn.co-creationhub.com>.

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.pdma.nl/vereniging/co\\_creation](http://www.pdma.nl/vereniging/co_creation)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.co-creationawards.org>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.cocreationforum.com>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.openbusiness.cc>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.openbusiness.cc/category/directory>

approaches by global corporations, such as Dell idea storm,<sup>13</sup> Nokia Idea Project,<sup>14</sup> Lego Mindstorm, BMW Innovation Lab,<sup>15</sup> or My Starbucks Idea.<sup>16</sup> Other corporations select a series of consumer advocates and collaborate with them on a more long-term and ongoing basis, as in the case of Lego Mindstorms.<sup>17</sup> Most interestingly, Sense Worldwide imagines co-creation as a rather structured and goal oriented process, while marketing theory accounts of co-creation (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a) and the use of co-creation in full service agencies deploy wider notions of co-creation as a redistributed model of value creation.

To return to conceptual discussions of co-creation, a number of authors use the emergence of co-creative modes of production to suggest that they enable the re-organisation of value production into a distributed process. What is at stake in such decentralised perspectives of value creation is, as outlined, the turn away from controlled value aggregation to its happening, emergence and distribution, so Pitt et al. suggest: “Value is not simply ‘added’ but is mutually ‘created’ and ‘re-created’ among actors with different values” (2006: 124). In this context, corporations are not understood as value producing entities, but as value enabling frameworks as, in the words of Cova et al. “the role of the firm changing from that of an autonomous and proprietary source of value to one of enabler and resource provider for value co-production (...); but the role of the consumer, too, is changing” (2011: 233). Economic value, these perspectives suggest, cannot be accumulated, aggregated and linearly assembled, but should be situated in the realm of the possible and the happening, posing a deforming force which can alter the brand, the product and the actors involved in multiple directions. Such non-linear models of value production have been pre-empted, before the co-creation frenzy of recent years, for instance by Norman and Ramirez’s (2000) critical reconsideration of Porter’s value chain. Increasing attempts to involve consumers in different, open or structured elements of brand management and the interest in non-linear models of brand value production suggest that the branding industry is increasingly attempting to exploit the inherent incompleteness of the brand.

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.ideastorm.com>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.ideasproject.com>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.hyve-special.de/bmw/index1.php>

<sup>16</sup> <http://mystarbucksidea.force.com>

<sup>17</sup> <http://mindstorms.lego.com/en-us/Default.aspx>

## Productive Consumption

Exploring the possibilities of facilitating consumer activities into valuable directions is built on top and ties into a reconfiguration of the boundary between production and consumption. In the introduction, I outlined how post-Fordist and informational ideas of production put to question a clear delineation between life and labour, as well as consumption and production. However, it was only in the early 1980s that such an insight led to the explicit reworking of too discrete notions of consumption and production in marketing contexts.<sup>18</sup> Offering a historical perspective on consumption, Alvin Toffler (1989) contends that only modern societies have instantiated a clear-cut differentiation between consumption and production while pre-modern and also post-modern modes of production are characterised by prosumption, that is, value producing forms of consumption. Toffler's contribution only found limited resonance at the time of its initial publication in 1980, but was revisited in the 1990s by Ritzer's (1993) and Norman and Ramirez's (2000) early accounts of co-creation. Towards the late 1990s, in the context of rather centralised notions of branding, such increasingly active accounts of consumption were presented as 'free and unmanageable consumers and as potential threat to brands (Gabriel & Lang, 2006). Consumers were reported to talk back to the brand, to be less predictable, accountable and stable in their preferences and attachments. Following Zwick, the marketing discourse was informed by the idea that "consumers are now in charge" (2008: 162), an insight that was at the same time heralded and experienced as a threat (Firat & Dholakia 1998).

The emerging participatory online cultures and early forms of web 2.0 (Jenkins, 2006; Tapscott & Williams, 2008) facilitated the process of formalising and fully establishing the notion of productive consumption in marketing discourses, Ritzer and Jurgenson claim (2010, 2012). The relation between participatory online culture and co-creation has been subject to much attention in both sociology and marketing theory (Beer & Burrows, 2010; Denegri-Knott, Zwick, & Schroeder, 2006; Ritzer et al., 2012; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010), as web 2.0 is widely perceived as "the ground zero for making processes of production and consumption indistinguishable" (Cova, Dalli & Zwick, 2011: 234). However, while marketers present this development as opening up new avenues for value creation by redistributing the sites of productivity, social and cultural theory responds with more critical voices (Coté & Pybus, 2007; Cova & Dalli, 2009; Cova et al., 2011; Terranova, 2004; Zwick et al., 2008), which I turn to in the final section of this chapter.

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<sup>18</sup> Although productive and collective notions of consumption have a much longer tradition in anthropology's and cultural studies' accounts of consumption (Lury, 2001).

## Productive Sociality

The co-creation debate not only draws on the idea of active consumption, but also emphasises its social aspects, as it is not the individual consumer action that is considered economically valuable, but the multiplicity of these actions, informing and reinforcing each other (Cova, 1997; Cova & Cova, 2002; Cova & Pace, 2006; Firat, Dholakia, & Venkatesh, 1995; Muniz, & O'Guinn, 2001). The focus on consumer sociality is connected to a general shift from individualised conceptions of consumers towards the interest in consumer communities which proliferated in the 1980s (Arvidsson, 2006; Cova & Cova, 2002; Cova & Pace, 2006) and drew particular inspiration from theoretical and methodological contributions of ethnography (Maffesoli, 1996; McCracken, 1990) and notions of post-modernity (Firat et al. 1995; Cova, 1997). Bernard Cova explicates the social aspect of brands as 'linking value' in his widely cited quote "the link is more important than the thing" (Cova, 1997: 307). He suggests that consumer attachment to brands results from the brand's embeddedness in social life and their capacity to enable relationship building - a capacity that can only partly be instantiated by brand management but needs to be completed by consumers. Cova's initial contribution was followed by a growing managerial interest in the social dynamics related to brands. One strand draws particular inspiration from post-modern accounts of identity and sociality, exploring the possibility of brands catering to fragmented identity performance and modular connectivity to multiple social groups (Firat et al., 1995). A different strand takes departure from previous work on tribes and neo-tribalism (Maffesoli, 1996), focusing on non-exclusive, small-scale, unstable and affectual social formations which are held together by shared ideas and habits rather than psycho- or demographic properties. Departing from Maffesoli's work, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001, 2006) as well as Cova and Pace (2006), introduce the notion of brand communities, or social formations organised by or around brands. This idea of a "specialised, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand" (Muniz, & O'Guinn, 2001: 412), is considered to be held together by activities and affective bonds emerging from a shared consciousness, rules, rituals and a degree of 'moral responsibility' for the associated brand (2001: 138). Cova and Dalli (2006) go further by drawing attention to the way in which different products create different intensities of attachment within their communities (see also: Fournier, 1998).

As shown above, current forms of co-creative branding practices rely on deploying different notions of consumer communities, which might be strategically selected and only work together for a limited time of the co-creative approach, but might also be as open and ongoing as Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) idea of brand communities. However,

thinking sociality in relation to brands as community suggests a rather internally homogeneous, explicit and manageable form of sociality - which will be subject to question in Chapter 3. Rather than trying to detect such brand communities in relation to my case studies on Dove and American Apparel, I set out to trace the different social relations that inform the making and happening of brands without reducing them to one community. Furthermore, I develop a particular interest in the exploration of relations between brands and other stakeholders, as well as social formations emerging in relation to the brand, as a means of seeking to offer an alternative perspective on brand sociality which is not limited to that of brand communities.

### **Assembling Brands**

While marketing theorists obviously promote co-creation as a new avenue for value production in brand management, its emergence has led to a series of critical responses. Sociologists, for instance, have reacted with scepticism to the narratives deployed in marketing discourses. A series of authors set out to criticise co-creation as exploitation from a neo-Marxist perspective and claim that contemporary capitalism renders potentially all social interaction, affective investment and communication into a form of labour (Cova et al., 2011; Cova & Dallı, 2009; ). Foster (2011), for instance, draws on Daniel Miller's (1987) account of consumption work to suggest that consumption is so actively implicated in economic value production that it needs to be situated in the realm of labour: "Miller includes consumption in this activity, by which he means the diverse appropriations by which consumers turn impersonal, standard commodities into personal, singular possessions. This activity of appropriation is 'consumption work'" (Foster, 2011: 44). Zwick et.al (2008) on the other hand contend that co-creation opens up avenues of 'double exploitation'. Firstly, consumers are asked to provide brands with their insights, knowledge, affective investments, social relations and enthusiasm when engaging in collaborative processes. In doing so, they are not financially rewarded, while brands can valorise their contributions as feedback loops of information (Lury, 2004), or social capital (Arvidsson, 2006). Secondly, co-created offerings often come at a premium price, as outlined by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), due to their non-standardised surplus value. Zwick et al. therefore argue that consumers are exploited in a twofold way, by not receiving rewards for their productive

activities and by paying higher prices for the brands they co-created.<sup>19</sup> Yet, different to early Marxist accounts of capitalist subsumption and exploitation, co-creation enacts a very specific and contemporary form of exploitation in which consumers actively partake. Production and consumption of brands not only blurs into each other, they are entangled in a complex way in which they bring each other into being. To put it in the words of Zwick et.al: “From this perspective, the consumption of the proposition is also the production of the proposition” (2008: 176).

What is problematic about thinking consumption as work which is subject to exploitation is that consumption has historically been entangled with processes of the social qualification of goods, as outlined in the introduction, making a too discrete differentiation between production and consumption obsolete (Mauss 2002; Douglas & Isherwood 1996; Sahlins 1972; Weiner 1992; Lury 2011; Sassatelli 2007). However, the focus on subsuming consumption to work and exploiting consumers’ productive capacities only takes consumers’ entanglement with the becoming of brands into account and not vice versa. However, when taking part in brand events, sharing viral clips, voting in user generated campaigns or when discussing brands in social networks, not only the brand is impacted upon, but also consumers, their becoming, their social relations and the spaces, media formats and issues involved. What is left out when focusing on consumption work is the tying up of ‘consumers affecting brands’ and ‘brands affecting consumers’ in which consumer activities simultaneously produce social, economic and cultural value. Giving attention to such multi-folded productivity, this thesis does not continue the existing exploitation critique. Instead, I direct attention towards the background conditions of the making and the happening of brands that allow for such simultaneity to occur and ask how this simultaneity reconfigures boundaries between social and economic value. In this sense, this thesis responds by developing a sociological understanding of brands, but also seeks to make links to wider emergent trends in contemporary economy and economic value production informed by boundary negotiations, continuity and redistribution.

### **The Partibility of Brands**

Both sociological and marketing accounts of brands give particular attention to the strategic making of the brand, either as flexible new media object (Lury, 2004), as

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<sup>19</sup> Such exploitation critique has fostered a debate about potential forms of enumeration of consumer productivity, firstly in sociology (Cova and Dalli, 2009; Zwick and Cayla, 2011), but also recently among branding practitioners as a means to overcome consumers’ growing reluctance to accept ubiquitous invitations to co-create (Ind et al., 2012). Rather than directly rewarding consumers, Foster (2011) suggests revisiting shareholder models and thinking brands as collectively shared objects rather than as intellectual property.

hyper-socialised factory (Arvidsson, 2006), or as transforming from the abstract to the concrete (Moor, 2007). Even co-creative accounts, which seek to develop a less company- centric perspective on brands, give pivotal focus to the strategic making of co-creative dynamics rather than their emergence. Beyond such deliberately strategic approaches, a series of authors (Arvidsson, 2006, 2009) have outlined how the becoming of brands also entails the happening of the brand, its non-strategised and non-deliberate emergence. In this thesis I seek to develop a twofold perspective, taking both strategic enactment and eventive happening into account. To do so, Callon's work on de- and requalification becomes of interest, as it understands the value of goods (or brands) as the negotiation of shared meaning (Callon, 2005; Callon & Méadel, 2002). What Callon addresses as an economy of qualities in relation to products and marketing - that is, the attachment and detachment of consumers and qualities to specific offerings- emerges in a similar way to co-creative dynamics, yet renders attachment as even more immanent and eventive. As Foster suggests:

Marketing practitioners, in particular, must intervene in the ongoing processes whereby products (and hence persons) are qualified and requalified. In so doing, they must deal with the sometimes unruly people whom Callon (2001) calls 'voicy consumers', people whose agency is the potential source of new qualifications for products (Foster, 2011: 45)

Co-creation, Foster continues, speeds up the dynamics of continuous qualification and requalification and distributes them across a wider set of actors than initially considered by Callon. From this perspective, co-creative branding emerges as a process of continuous reconfiguration of brand values, relationships with brands, associated practices, spaces and issues. The qualification of brands is thus entangled in the qualification of relations between the actors involved in the process: "The product singles out the agents and binds them together and, reciprocally, it is the agents that, by adjustment, iteration and transformation, define its characteristics" (Callon & Méadel, 2002: 198). Put more concretely, each encounter with the brand not only brings consumers and brands together, but often entails other actors and happens in the context of existing and emergent relations. While consumers encounter other consumers in stores, they also discuss brands with their peers, read about them in the news and use them together with other actors, each time encountering them in the framework of new relations.

From this viewpoint, sociality seems less confined to clearly delineated accounts of tribes or communities, but draws attention to different degrees and intensities of attachments. To take such a multi-layered account of relationality further, Foster draws on Marilyn Strathern's (1990) notion of partibility. Both brands and consumers can be

understood as partible, as the engagement with brands partly detaches these brands and their values from the organisation and partly attaches them to consumers or other stakeholders. When purchasing a product or a service, consumers cannot acquire the actual brand, but can only take part in its value or can 'rent' it by using its materialisation in products or services (Foster, 2011). Subsequently, consumers' discussions, use, adjustment, recommendation or critique of brands and the immersion of branded products into everyday life practices or social formations adds value to both organisations and other actors. Just as the act of buying and appropriating branded goods only partly detaches the brand from its owner, the act of co-creation only partly detaches the activity from the co-creator and re-attaches to the brand. Instead, it remains a social, personal or cultural activity whilst at the same time potentially producing brand value or profit.

What emerges is a composite account of actors involved in which "the persons of both consumers and corporations are partible. That is, we ought to think of persons much like Callon encourages us to think of products, namely, as contingent bundles of qualities or assemblages of properties" (Foster, 2011: 50). This perspective allows Foster to develop an alternative account to neo-Marxist exploitation critiques, suggesting that consumer activities, affects and values are characterised by simultaneously creating social and economic value without blending both together. Instead of collapsing consumption and labour together, Foster suggests a more complex relationship between them, in which engagement with brands and economic value production are entangled yet separate. Put differently, if consumers invest their affects or efforts in relation to brands, their activities remain social, yet bear economic value for the corporation; they are attached to themselves, to other consumers involved and the brand at the same time: "Detachment creates an object whose value exists both in respect of its origin (the detachee) and in being caused or elicited by the interest of another (the detacher)" (Foster 2011, 50). In such partible detachment, value exists both for the detachee and the detacher, rendering both interrelated and composite. The notion of partibility poses a key concern throughout the thesis and is revisited in the empirical chapters.

In her latest work on brands, Lury (2009) takes up the notion of brands as having composite and composing capacities by drawing on assemblage theory (Venn, 2006; Delanda, 2006; Phillips, 2006). She contends that brands can be understood as assemblages, as being composed of an unstable interplay of practices, actions, agents and products. Yet, brands also bear assembling capacities themselves, most notably in how they bring agents - producers, media, consumers and other stakeholders - into



interrelation with each other. Lury thinks sociality in relation to brands as constantly de- and recomposing assemblages, operating across micro- and macro relations. These assemblages are being brought together by the efforts of brand management, which seek to trace consumers' actions, affect, interaction and preferences and recomposes them into strategically assembled audiences. Drawing on DeLanda's (2002) notion of the population allows Lury to put forward a relational and social idea of consumers and brands, where neither is discrete as both impact and affect one another: "This is a modelling 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" (Lury, 2009: 77). Different to notions of brand community, thinking consumers as constantly being de- and recomposed draws attention to the happening of brands and the internally heterogeneous processes of creating attachments.

However, such a recomposition of mini-masses is not only the subject of brand management activities, as originally imagined by marketing accounts on brands (Kapferer, 2008). It is an intensive process happening from the inside, that is at the interplay between strategic branding and consumer activities. As a consequence, Lury continues, contemporary branding is increasingly becoming topological: it cannot be addressed through extraneous categories, but can only be approached and made from the inside, through internal relations between actors, practices, things and spaces. Brands operate through self-differentiation and without reference to exterior values, but emerge in relation to their competitors, audiences and markets as 'surfaces that are spaces in themselves' (Lury & Moor). Thinking the brand as a surface that is a space in itself draws attention to its capacity to exist as organised from the inside, as both active and passive, impacting upon but also being impacted by stakeholders, practices and modes of attachment (Duffy, 2006). Brands are brought into being through intensive rather than extensive processes (Lash, 2010), through feedback loops of information, internal calibration and distributed and decentralised value creation, alongside a number of evaluative criteria that are themselves always subject of negotiation (Stark, 2009). Being subject to responsivity and change, brands are further becoming topological through their capacity to remain invariant whilst changing and adopting to new market conditions.

Thinking brands as both partible and invariant under deformation allows for an alternative point of departure for co-creation and branding critique, one that does not seek to collapse together consumption and labour, or social and economic life, but that

sets out to trace how brands extend into social activities and how they emerge as rational entities which can best be made sense of from the inside.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter, I have engaged with sociological and marketing accounts on brands, focusing on general considerations of what a brand is and the emerging interest in co-creation and its related themes. Key to my discussion but also key to my further analysis are sociological accounts of brands (Lury 2004, 2009; Arvidsson 2005, 2006, 2009; Moor 2007), suggesting an approach to brands, goods and services which is inherently incomplete and designed to change whilst remaining the same. Such a process of completion implicates the altering of brands between abstract values, tangible appearances and material practices. Traditional managerial accounts, although very much focusing on a company- centric account of brands (Aaker & Joachimsthaler 2002; Kapferer 2008; Kotler et al. 2009; 2008; Olins 2005), partly share the sociologists' view of brands as transforming and becoming ubiquitous. This thesis draws particular inspiration from such sociological contributions and sets out to, firstly revisit sociologists' focus on brands as entities and on branding as a strategically created process. I do this by focusing on a wider notion of branding as the becoming of brands in relation to different actors, spaces and issues involved. Secondly, this thesis seeks to connect contemporary branding practices with more general questions on the relation between economic and social life, investigating how brands contribute to the organisation- if not the reconfiguration - of this relation and how they operate as a boundary making practice.

This chapter further addressed the current investment in consumer involvement, formalising under the discursive framework of co-creation. The trend towards co-creative and participative branding comes with several implications as it renders branding into an ever more distributed process, involving a series of internal and external actors and evolving into multiple directions. In doing so, branding is becoming ever more ubiquitous and immanent, operating through the creation of climates to enact consumer behaviour, but also to happen without deliberate strategic enactment, as opposed to more discrete forms of branding via logos, product design or designated corporate communication. However, co-creation also draws attention to new forms of equivalence and relations between economic, social and cultural dynamics, rendering further forms of social interaction into value producing activities. While branding theory and practice often tend to single out co-creation as a specific instance of

branding, I am interested in tracing the entanglement between brands and consumers on a more general level, taking its making and happening into account.

In the context of these accounts, a series of tendencies emerge which this thesis seeks to take into different directions. Firstly, although acknowledging the decentralised nature of branding, the majority of authors both from sociological and managerial backgrounds pay particular attention to the deliberate making of brands as opposed to their happening. They emphasise the making of climates and the strategies involved (Arvidsson, 2006; Moor, 2007), while what a brand stands for, how it deforms into new sites, practices and appearances is organised through a potentially wider set of actors. Focusing on boundary making, this thesis seeks to give consideration to brands as assembling, but also to brands as being assembled, as I think brands and branding as forms and processes that are both active and passive, that make and are made. Secondly, current work on brands features a pivotal interest in the productive capacities of the social, the role of the community, linking value and the establishment of relationships (Cova et al., 2011). Departing from notions of assembling (Lury, 2009), I ask how brands actually assemble and reassemble social formations, how it is that sociality can actually be turned into economic value and how further consideration can be given to post-social dynamics (Knorr-Cetina & Bruegger, 2002). In doing so, I return to questions of touchpoints (Moor, 2007), the creation of ambiances (Arvidsson, 2006) and the making of worlds (Lazzarato, 2004) to give consideration to the realm of spatiality, and from there I explore the making of sociality in relations to brands (Chapter 4), as well as the role of values and issues in branding (Chapters 5 and 6). Thirdly, as outlined in the last section, co-creation critique is often framed in terms of exploitation and consumer labour. Here, the notion of becoming partible is of interest (Foster, 2011; Strathern, 1990), which asks for attentiveness to the specific interrelation between consumption and production. An intermediate layer of all of these perspectives is the becoming topological of brands, their ability to operate relationally and in a self-referential way, as well as the particular relations they create between spaces, actors and issues. In the following chapter, I take up this interest in the development of my methodological approach, exploring possibilities to study the distributed making and happening of brands.

# 2

## **Methodology: Tracing and Mapping the Becoming of Brands**

This thesis sets out to create an empirical account of contemporary branding practices with a particular interest in boundary making and the role of brands in organising the relation between economy and society. So far, I have mapped out a series of concerns and conceptual underpinnings for thinking branding as boundary making practice. In the course of this chapter, I develop my initial interest in the becoming of brands-in-relation into a methodological approach for engaging with my empirical fieldwork. The proposed methodological strategy involves two case studies on the brands Dove and American Apparel and evolves around the idea of tracing, as it seeks to descend into the relations, experiences and affects involved in the becoming of brands rather than addressing them from the outside (Adkins & Lury, 2009). Tracing is put forward as the fragmented following of trails, spaces, relations and practices rather than drawing a complete picture of all instances of branding. It opens up questions of how to combine research methods originating from sociology and digital research (Marres, 2012a; Rogers, 2009) in ways that allow an exploration of the specificity of multiple brand encounters and the affective responses of actors involved, as well as their spatial affordances.

The second aspect of the methodological strategy focuses on mapping, the bringing into relation of findings and the deployed modes of sense making within them. Here, the notion of continuity and discontinuity comes to matter, as well as questions of explication. Drawing on Sloterdijk's notion of explication (2009), I am interested in bringing to the foreground how the becoming of brands is organised in the background via relations, performative spaces, affective modulation and intensive dynamics. The notion of mapping questions further the possibility of identifying explanations, causes or interpretations. It engages with recent reflections on a sociology of the surface

(Adkins & Lury, 2009; Savage, 2009; Savage & Burrows, 2007) and the identification of relational and internal change, also addressed as liveliness (Marres & Weltevrede, 2012).

### **Brands, Relations, Spaces and Issues**

What is central to the empirical fieldwork of the thesis is its interest in the becoming of brands and their intermingling with social, spatial and issue-based dynamics (Buscher & Urry, 2009). Put differently, I seek to develop a methodological strategy that allows me to trace how brands immerse themselves into multiple social relations, and therefore bring specific social formations into being whilst being impacted by these formations themselves. My interest in exploring contemporary branding as boundary making practice emerged from the initial observation of the displacement and redistribution of value production in branding, more precisely Dove's attempt to increase sales by getting involved with a societal issue. What is at stake, so I ask, when the making of economic value is tied up with the making of relations and brands' involvement in societal issues? How do brands, consumers, bodies, and spaces bring each other into being? Or put differently: how can we account for the productive and more than representational capacities of contemporary branding (Callon, Meadel, & Rabeharisoa, 2001; Thrift, 2008), and for the making and the happening of brands? Furthermore, what are the socio-economic implications?

What I seek to trace and map is the twofold impact that brands have on relations, spaces and issues and vice versa, how they inform and utilise them whilst being utilised themselves. When addressing spaces and processes of spatialisation, I deploy a performative and emergent notion of space rather than one that is either predefined or solely created by brands (Crang & Thrift, 2000; Ingold, 2000; Warf & Arias, 2009). I understand spaces as being tied up with the possibility of engaging with brands and participating in their making. These spaces entail all touchpoints between consumers and the brand, or between consumers related to the brand, and refer to physical spaces such as stores, bars, clubs or homes, but also to media and digital spaces. Following the new media theorist Beer, "Understanding participation requires an understanding of the 'performative infrastructures' (Thrift, 2005: 224) in which this participation is taking place" (Beer, 2009: 1000). In this respect, I am interested in the specific affordances and background conditions enabled by the spaces but also media formats, that is the design of stores (Cronin, 2010; Moor, 2003), the setting of workshops or the medium-specific activities social media spaces allow users to perform (Marres, 2012a; Rogers, 2009). The

question of world-making comes to matter again (Lazzarato, 2004; Thrift, 2008), drawing attention to questions of pre-structuring brand engagement.

My interest in the relation between brands and issues acknowledges the long tradition of issue and controversy mapping originating mainly in the context of science and technology studies (Latour, 2007a; Marres, 2007; Rogers & Marres, 2000). Issues refer to topical affairs which form public debates, organise activities, involve a series of actors and happen alongside a series of focal points in distributed spaces. In this thesis, I focus on issues around bodies and sexuality in relation to brands, that is, the deployment of campaigning for different body norms as a social cause in relation to Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty, as well as the utilization of sexuality for its multiple branding practices by American Apparel.

I focus on dynamics of making and happening, that is, the strategic fabrication of brands based which is not only reliant on orchestrated brand management activities (Lury, 2004; Moor, 2007), but also emergent consumer activities, dynamics of overflow (Callon, 1998) and collective interactivity (Arvidsson, 2006). Taking this interest in both making and happening as a point of departure, this methodological approach requires a two-fold movement: I give attention to the strategic development and implementation of branding practices and their deployment of social relations, spaces and issues. The formation and explication of campaign ideas came to matter, as well as their transformation into campaign activities and the interplay between these different activities. Besides this strategic making, I am interested in the distributed processes of de- and requalification of brands (Callon & Méadel, 2002), that is, the multiple ways in which different actors - such as consumers, staff, publics, media and other stakeholders - encounter, experience and engage with the brand (Arvidsson, 2006). In what ways do brands come into their lives and come to matter for them? Is it the brand itself that they encounter, or specific aspects of the brand? Having defined branding as increasingly distributed and hypersocialised (Arvidsson, 2006; Lury, 2011a), this requires taking a multiplicity of spaces, events and social formations into account, which can be designed by brands, but which can also be related to brands by other actors.

Furthermore, the interplay between how brands enter relations and how they make relations is of importance, be these relations between people, or between people and the brand. In this context, questions of inclusion (DeLanda, 2006; Mackenzie, 2012), intensity (DeLanda, 2002) and especially affect come into play, also raising the question of how experiences and affective dynamics can be traced and explicated (Clough, et al., 2007; Manning, 2009; Massumi, 2002). How do different actors experience their

encounters with, and in relations to, brands? How do brands inform different actors - that is have an impact on them (C. Venn, 2010) - and how do actors' responses, actions and affects reversely inform brands and contribute to the making of economic value? Drawing particular inspiration from affect theory (Gregg & Seigworth, 2006; Manning, 2009; Massumi, 2002), which complicates too clear distinctions between activity and passivity, or conscious and unconscious modes of in-formation, I turn to immanent affective dynamics between actors, brands, issues and spaces, as the "logic of affective modulation is not organised through human agency or consciousness, but through a post-human ontology of matter" (Adkins & Lury, 2009: 8). Just as brands do not subsist only in the corporations that own them, affects do not subsist in the people who enable or experience them, but are distributed in the pre-individual and the collective, are both social and material. The capacity to affect, hence not only resides in both human and non-human entities involved here (Knorr-Cetina & Bruegger, 2002; Lury & Wakeford, 2012), but is also distributed across the social and the individual, and across background conditions and matter.

### **A more than Representational Approach to the Study of Brands**

Such a research approach moves beyond an exploration of how branding processes operate or what branding activities mean. It moves beyond a methodology of interpretation and meaning making towards a methodology of tracing and mapping, or following and bringing into relation. What is at stake is a methodological approach that focuses on the non-representational (Thrift, 2008) and distributed capacities (Massumi, 2002) of brands, spaces and relations in themselves but also in relation to each other. Following Thrift, the non-representative draws attention to entities in relational, embedded transformation, which are less characterised by carrying representational meaning, and more by their productive and performative potential: "Non-representational theory takes the leitmotif of movement and works with it as a means of going beyond constructivism" (Thrift, 2008, 5). Such an interest in what things, people or spaces can do directs the focus towards the pre-cognitive and the affective, but also the yet to come, the making of climates in which certain futures are more likely than others. Here, the notion of the making and the happening becomes of relevance as in the context of contemporary branding, making and happening emerge as an interrelated couplet: the strategic development of brands is inextricably tied to feedback loops of information and the responses they generate (Arvidsson, 2006; Lury, 2004). Hence, the methodological approach of this thesis gives an account of making and happening not

as discrete perspectives, but as two directions of a spectrum, informing each other whilst referring to specific practices.

In its interest in the more-than-representative, this methodology diverts from a series of previous studies exploring the relation between brands, bodies and sexuality (Gill, 2007; Gill & Scharff, 2011; Goffman, 1987; Williamson, 1978, among others). It responds to a long tradition of feminist critique on promotional culture which often focuses firstly, only on the 'made' or strategically designed aspects of brands, and secondly, addresses them via means of interpretation and representation. This work has contributed to an understanding of how mass media advertising deploys certain notions of gender and bodies, however, so I show in Chapter 5, this scholarship often limits the focus on textual and content analysis of strategically designed mass media campaigns and does not account for relational, distributed and collaborative forms of branding. This thesis starts with a different set of premises, thinking branding as a relational practice rather than a mode of representation, and thus seeks to offer an alternative feminist reflection on contemporary branding practices.

While the notion of making of brands has been subject to most sociological accounts on brands, as discussed in the Literature Review (Arvidsson, 2006; Kornberger, 2010; Lury, 2004; Moor, 2007), let me now say more about happening. The notion of the happening bears a particular tradition in sociological research. In its early application by Garfinkel (1991), the happening is framed as artistic intervention or so-called breaching experiment in the unreflected background of routine actions. In this ethno-methodological tradition, happenings are the instantiation of interventions in everyday practices explicating the background conditions of ordinary life and involving the public in research practices. Following Marres's discussion of experiments and happenings, it is their capacity of bringing routines to a halt and explicating the conditions for them to function which makes them interesting to social research: "by rendering things remote in time and space in and as movement, it made them relevant to the here and now, and as such, 'the environment' here lost its more familiar passivity, its status as an 'external' blankness" (Marres, 2012b: 89). In the context of Garfinkel's work, the happening emerges as an artistic intervention with uncertain outcomes, exposed to routine contexts with the objective of explicating and disrupting their relational embeddedness.

The notion of happening deployed in this thesis, however, does not follow its experimental character, but mainly focuses on the explication of background conditions, their generative capacities. I am interested in the emergence and transformation of



phenomena in relation to each other, in the intensive dynamics that bring brands, relations, spaces and issues into being (DeLanda, 2002; Lash, 2010). I am further interested in the relationality of becoming, its determinacy and indeterminacy. Hence, I understand happening as a mode of relational emergence and change in relation, or as the 'aliveness' (Lury et al., 2012) or 'liveliness' (Marres & Weltevrede, 2012) of phenomena in interrelation to each other. My use of the notion of the happening does not seek to directly intervene in branding practices or in consumers' engagement with brands, as Garfinkel's perspective would suggest. Yet, drawing on the concept also implies the acknowledgment that research has its very own performative capacities to enact social realities. It brings to attention what is widely considered as the politics of social research, as the making explicit is in itself a creation of worlds. Law and Urry argue: "If methods are not innocent then they are also political. They help to make realities. But the question is: which realities?" (Law & Urry, 2001: 404). This world-making quality of research has been outlined by other authors such as Barad (2007), Stengers (1997) and Haraway (1988). Barad, for instance, introduced the term 'intra-action' to capture the relational and performative impacts of doing research, as research is always entangled with the making of 'cuts', through methods and reflection, enacting particular realities rather than others. Lury and Wakeford refer to happening in yet another specific way, thinking about the possibilities of research to respond to happening, to change and transformation: "Our hope is that the methods collected here will variously enable the happening of the social world - its ongoingness, relationality, contingency and sensuousness - to be investigated" (2012: 2).

In this thesis, the study of the becoming of brands as both made and happening aims to re-calibrate the sociological focus from a pivotal interest in the strategic or meaning making aspect of branding to its distributed, relational and continuous character. The proposed spectrum between making and happening allows for the account of both perspectives, as well as their interplay, whilst abstaining from dividing these two into an active and passive parts. Rather, they are approached as being responsive to each other, as the dynamics of happening of brands create the need for brand management to respond to them, as explicated by Lury (2004). In what follows, I render the proposed approach into an actual research methodology, outlining the key case studies, drawing on a series of methodological frameworks that allow for the translation of an interest in making and happening into fieldwork activities, and explicating which methods I use and the interplay between them. In the final sections of the chapter, I explore the role of tracing and its relation to distributed analytical capacities (Marres, 2012a), as well as mapping as a form of explication (Sloterdijk, 2009) but also as a potential opening up of

a sociology of the surface and topological sense making (Adkins & Lury, 2009; Savage, 2009).

## **The Case Studies**

The empirical part of the thesis is based on two multi-method case studies on the brands Dove, a body care brand by Unilever, and American Apparel, a US garment manufacturer. The decision to focus on these two brands is based on two selection criteria. In order to explore the becoming of brands as a relational process, I searched for brands which, firstly, have been deployed in a participative or co-creative approach for several years. Put differently, I was interested in brands that have made several efforts to involve consumers or other stakeholders in the making of the brand or brands that have majorly relied on the engagement of and appropriation by consumers. The second selection criterium was the brand's investment in social issues as a key element of their values and strategic positioning, most notably around bodies and sexuality. This engagement should have informed a wide range of branding activities beyond mere mass media advertising campaigns and should have been developed in interaction with consumers, media or other cooperating partners. American Apparel and Dove both fill these criteria and enact multi-sided, multi-temporal and still ongoing sets of practices.

American Apparel is a Los Angeles based fashion company founded in 1989 by the CEO Dov Charney. The company produces basic apparel in a wide range of colours which are fabricated in a so-called 'vertically manufactured' process, as well as a series of seasonal items, shoes, jewellery and accessories. The brand claims to abstain from outsourcing production to developing countries and aims to produce all goods in their US-based factory in the garment district of downtown Los Angeles. In the early 2000s American Apparel laid the foundation for its current branding activities. The brand was in need of differentiating itself from its main competitors in the basic apparel market, Hanes and Fruit of the Loom, and it did so by making its basic garments more sexy. Firstly, it offered basic products in slightly tighter and more fitting cuts, and later, it developed a distinct visual aesthetics that is still characteristic of the brand today and is featured in lookbooks, visual communication, stores and advertising. Transforming the idea to mix everyday wear with sexuality, American Apparel's aesthetic brings together a slightly amateurish do-it-yourself style, with intimate scenes and poses partly inspired from pornography. The brand came to inform, and has been appropriated by, global hipster culture during the 2000s, and it has been taken up and made into a key element of the ironic, constantly remediating hipster aesthetics (Haddow, 2008; N+1, 2010). Exploring

the boundaries of using nudity and explicit sexuality in their brand communication, American Apparel repeatedly came to the attention of critical media and public debates. However, the brand also affected large groups of consumers who started repurposing and sharing their own appropriations of the brand's style online. Taking notice of consumers' willingness to participate in their aesthetics, the brand set up a series of instances to deploy these consumer activities, such as the possibility of applying as an American Apparel model. Particularly attached consumers are also asked to apply as store assistants for American Apparel flagship stores around the world, as the key role of these store assistants is to perform and develop the brand's style. Furthermore, the brand hosted two online calls for models and web users could vote for the next American Apparel underwear model in the 'Best Bottom' contest in 2010, or for the model for their plus size collection in 'The Next Big Thing' in 2011. While American Apparel also came to be known for its engagement with immigration politics in the US state of California,<sup>20</sup> I only focus on aspects of the brand that relate to its aesthetics and deployment of bodies and sexuality.

Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty was launched in 2003 as a long-term strategy to connect the brand to the social cause of beauty and body norms, as well as the impact media have on them. Dove itself is a Unilever brand offering body and hair care products for men and women and was initially launched in 1955. The Campaign for Real Beauty was developed, as outlined in the introduction, in response to the management's sales targets, following the objective of making the brand iconic, that is, of developing long-term relations and close ties of affection with consumers. The early steps of the campaign started off with the idea of establishing Dove as a facilitator of bodily self-esteem and wider beauty norms in the media, and the brand commissioned an academic study to gain insights into female bodily experience and to set the scene for its subsequent activities. Throughout a series of instances, Dove deployed its key themes in various forms: it showed different forms of bodies in their mass media campaigns, produced widely circulating viral clips showing the fabrication of media beauty, received a great deal of press coverage and started working with a series of cooperating partners, such as charities. As a part of the approach, the brand founded the Dove Self Esteem fund, supported by an advisory board of academics, former beauty industry professionals, models and people involved in charities, which features a website and multiple educational programmes, as well as events and workshops worldwide. Being one of the first brands to address beauty and body conventions in body care

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.americanapparel.net/contact/legalizela>

advertising, Dove came to be known as a reference point for subsequent campaigns which sought to explicate advertising mechanisms (Ringwood, 2010).

## **Tracing**

The proposed methodological approach aims to follow the idea of tracing and mapping, by descending into the environment of the brand and tracing the multiple relations, affects and actions taking place, as well as bringing them into relation with each other without subsuming them to simple 'cause and effect' relationships. Such a method is based on the idea that brands are, first of all, flexible, constantly becoming entities which, secondly, become in relation to consumers, competitors and social issues. To give consideration to these dynamics of relational becoming, I take particular inspiration from Lash and Lury's (2007) object oriented methodology. Based on the work of Appadurai (1988), the authors develop a methodological strategy with the leitmotif 'follow the object.' The object can be a brand, a movie, a cultural form or an art movement, and Lash and Lury, for example, focus on movies like *Toy Story* and *Trainspotting*, brands like Swatch or Nike, but also the Young British Artists and the Euro '96 tournament. These objects, the authors argue, cannot be encountered by reading, interpreting and analysing them, but have to be approached as open and transforming entities, which are brought into being in their interactivity with their surroundings.

The notion of the object deployed here is informed by the concept of post-social relations (Knorr-Cetina & Bruegger, 2002), which are not pre-given, but eventive and bear affective capacities themselves. Within this thesis, a similar yet different perspective is deployed: I do not follow the idea of the brand as an object, however, I do also understand the brand as emerging in its relationality. Different to Lash and Lury who focus on the trajectory of the object and its becoming in particular environments, I deploy a broader focus and am also interested in the becoming of what Lash and Lury consider to be the environment, that is, the multiple relations, spatialisations and issues involved in the becoming of the brand. Instead of focusing on the becoming of the object only, I focus on the becoming of relations, backgrounds and brands.

What is most interesting about Lash and Lury's approach is their methodological strategy which seeks to abstain from interpretation, reading, meaning making and trying to understand the object, but asks the researcher instead to follow its trails from as many perspectives as possible. Put differently, the authors suggest moving, navigating and unfolding with the research object, never exactly knowing in which

direction it might go and therefore where the research will drift: “To follow, to track objects means the investigator must descend into the world with the objects and be on the move with them. Thus the investigator is at once ontologized and mobile.” (Lash & Lury, 2007: 29). The notion of tracing aims at such a becoming immanent and mobile of the researcher, following the multiple lines of the becoming of actors and brands involved, whilst abstaining from creating an overly homogeneous picture of the different traces collected.

What is at stake in such an approach of ‘following’ or tracing is an attention to what Marres and Weltevrede (2012) describe as ‘liveliness’ as opposed to ‘liveness’: the change of entities over time as opposed to their current popularity. Marres and Weltevrede deploy the couplet of liveness vs. liveliness to address different methodological approaches for explaining the becoming of issues and public debates, which can either be accounted for in relation to their popularity at a given moment in time or can be addressed in regard to their internal change over time. ‘Liveness’, in this sense, comes with a two-dimensional measure, tracing the currency of issues and their relative popularity. ‘Liveliness’, however, operates alongside multiple measures, as an altering composition of issues can be produced by different actors or in different spaces. Happening, the authors suggest, is characterised by liveliness as opposed to liveness, by relational and immanent change. Tracing relational becoming is related to tracing such an internal variation. How is the brand altered through consumer engagement and vice versa? How do the multiple encounters with brands in different spaces such as flagship stores, clubs and media formats impact on the experience of the brand? How does the staff perform between embodying the style of the brand, their own aesthetics and their relation to consumers? Studying the happening of brands thus entails studying their liveliness in the sense of Marres and Weltevrede (2011). In what follows, I bring together a set of methods to trace the multiple instances of the happening of brands in relation to their making.

### **Assembling Methods**

Several questions arise from this perspective that need to be addressed in the methodology: How are Dove and American Apparel strategically developed? What kind of practices and knowledge feed into these processes? What are the companies’ perspectives on the issues deployed in the campaign? How do consumers use and relate to the brand? To what kinds of activities, practices and social relations is the brand connected? How do different actors, such as consumers or media, respond to and

appropriate the activities of the brands? And how do brands respond to and change in these processes of appropriation? To answer these questions I am assembling a series of social and digital methods to trace and map the becoming of brands and of other actors involved. This assembly of methods is organised in order to give attention to different actors, relations and spaces as starting points. It focuses on consumers and their multiple encounters with and relations to the brand, it examines company staff in interaction with consumers and management, it looks into the brand management processes and the media discussions evolving around brands, as well as the spaces and media formats in which such encounters occur.

### **Experiencing and Engaging with Brands**

In order to trace consumer experience with brands I conducted a total of 25 interviews, each around one-two hours, with consumers of both Dove and American Apparel. In addition to these interviews, I also conducted two focus groups with five-eight people for each brand. In each of these encounters, I began by inviting consumers to draw the associations they have with the related brand on a piece of paper. The only rule that applied was “no writing”. Here, interview partners were given the space to define their relation to the brand and set a series of topics that organised this connection. In both interviews and focus groups I then asked participants to tell me about their initial encounters with the brand and when they first bought it. Furthermore, I addressed the relationships that came to matter in their encounters with brands, as well as the spaces the participants use, see, experience and observe the brands in. I was interested in how relationships to different people, things or groups come into play when engaging with the respective brands and how different relations matter in terms of being introduced to the brand, using it, discussing it or just relating to it.

In the case of Dove, the topic of beauty and body norms and the role of the media was central to the conversations, and I asked participants to tell me when they feel good, self-confident or problematic about themselves. In addition, participants flipped through magazines to comment on different media formats featuring bodies and to narrate their experience. We then discussed different instances of Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty, and turned to the question of what participants think about the fact that Dove is campaigning for wider body and beauty norms whilst selling products to enhance the body. Further subjects of debate were the media discourse evolving around Dove and the participants’ own conversations with family or peers about the brand.

In the case of American Apparel, participants were shown different elements of the campaign and were asked to comment on and narrate their previous experiences with them. Of particular interest were their encounters with the brand in the flagship stores and online, and we discussed when and with whom they visit American Apparel stores and how they experience such visits. The key theme of the conversations, however, was the role of relations and how the brand is embedded (or not) in consumers' circle of friends, with what other social groups they associate it, how they perceive or relate to other consumers and how these relations play out in space. I also brought to attention the numerous instances of participation offered by the brand, such as the modelling competitions online, user generated campaigns in social media and the job call for store assistants, exploring participants' engagement and experience of these offers. Finally, the specific aesthetics of the brand and their development over the years was addressed and led to more general discussions about sexuality in branding and promotional culture.

What was at stake in such interviews and focus groups was the interplay of the framing of the conversation alongside these key themes, but also the tracing of the new perspectives participants brought into the discussion. I offered a series of instances in which participants could define their own relation, association and attachment to the brand, such as the drawing exercise at the very beginning, and let them revisit different aspects of the brand's communication. But I also structured the conversations around a series of concerns and used the traces that their associations offer to explore these key concerns further. In addition to conducting personal interviews and focus groups, I collected blog entries, commentary and news articles related to specific instances of both brand campaigns.

### **Happening, Online**

To give consideration to the happening of brands in relation to space, I also attend to online spaces. As part of the methodological approach, I deploy a series of digital research methods (Rogers, 2009) to identify spaces specific to the brands and to trace the ways in which brands appear, are mentioned, discussed and transformed there. For this purpose, I explore in which contexts and with which associated themes brands are discussed on the web and how these associations have changed since the early stages of the campaign. I have identified spaces in which key elements of both brands are being taken up, re-appropriated and put into contagious dynamics of transformation (Kullenberg & Palmås, 2009). In the case of Dove, a series of viral videos appeared on Youtube and were used as a starting point for a series of remakes, spoofs and parodies.

In relation to American Apparel, it has been mainly photo-upload platforms such as Flickr, Lookbook.nu or Chictopia which have been used by consumers to perform and recombine the aesthetics of the brand.

To explore these digital spaces, I draw on digital research methods, an approach developed by Rogers and colleagues (2009, 2012), that seek to deploy the specificity of online media for analytical purposes. Developed in differentiation to so-called 'digitised research methods', that is methods emerging in the context of sociology, anthropology or cultural studies which have been transferred to the digital realm, digital methods seek to focus on the natively digital and the specificity of the medium (Hayles, 2004). Following Rogers, they give consideration to the "ontological distinction between the natively digital and the digitized, that is, the objects, content, devices and environments that are 'born' in the new medium, as opposed to those that have 'migrated' to it" (Rogers, 2009: 1).<sup>21</sup>

A key leitmotif of digital methods is the concept of re-purposing online devices to study societal questions (Marres & Weltevrede, 2012; Rogers, 2009). In pursuing so-called 'online groundedness', Rogers is interested in the practice of following not the object but the medium (2009: 4). He considers online spaces as 'unstable' entities, as spaces in transformation whose processes of becoming should not be fixed by research methods. Digital research methods, he continues, are characterised by medium-specificity, "a particular plea to take seriously ontological distinctiveness, though the means by which the ontologies are built differ" (Rogers, 2009: 5). Following from here, a series of tools have been built based on medium-specific devices and practices, deploying hyperlinks, geo-IP data, tweets, time-stamps of websites, search engines, or platform based activities such as 'Liking', 'Sharing' or tweeting. The notion of medium-specificity draws on a series of authors (Fuller, 2003; Hayles, 2004; Manovich, 2002) who have taken seriously the ontological distinctiveness of media formats and who follow a materialist perspective.

Departing from the account of medium-specificity brings to attention how digital spaces are understood as performative. On the one hand, medium-specific features and web objects enable specific activities and engagement with web content. On the other hand, however, they can also be deployed in order to study the same activities which they produce. In this sense, digital methods move beyond a too neat delineation between the online and the offline, as they draw on medium-specific features to study societal

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<sup>21</sup> Although a too discrete delineation between 'digitised' and 'digital' methods is increasingly being put to question by other digital researchers. Marres (2012a) points out that many methodological strategies deployed in digital methods research can also be seen as remediation of social research methods.



conditions and aspire to make claims about the social through engaging with the online (Marres & Weltevrede, 2012). In the context of the thesis, I deploy digital methods for two purposes. Firstly, to use the analytical capacities of devices which at the same time create the affordances for interaction, such as repurposing a Google search to trace the emergence of issues and events related to my case studies over time. I am interested in dynamics of happening - which issue terms appear most often in relation to the brands at which points in time? How is the focus of the debate shifting?

Secondly, I am interested in tracing how web users are acting upon and responding to content related to, or produced by, the brands. Digital environments offer a series of affordances that allow web users to engage with content online, from regular commenting sections, to placing hyperlinks as relationship markers, to a variety of social buttons that enable users to instantly share, like, tweet or perform other social media platform related activities (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2011). To explore the dynamics of responsivity to brand related content, I trace the number of social activities performed on different platforms. Finally, I take particular interest in the dynamics at stake in American Apparel's user generated model contests and the modes of social ordering happening here, drawing attention to the role of numbers, numbering and the making of rankings as a medium-specific operation (Badiou, 2008; Guyer, 2004; Verran, 2010).

### **The Making of Brands**

While the above-mentioned approaches mainly focus on consumers' and other external stakeholders' experience of, engagement with and responses to brands, I am also interested in tracing the strategic development and making of the case studies. For this purpose, I first assembled relevant information available about both Dove and American Apparel online, including company histories, presentations, visual documentation of campaigns, press releases, activities on social media platforms and activities documented by cooperating partners. Secondly, I conducted a series of 15 interviews with employees, cooperating partners and external advisors, including people who have been involved with the making of the brands from the beginning, but also people working directly with consumers, such as sales personnel. When talking to people involved in the making of the brand, the brand's history and the early formation of the brand's values came to matter, as well as their strategic explication. Of particular interest is the role of social issues related to bodies and sexuality, the engagement with co-creative strategies and their interplay with traditional branding approaches. I trace internal processes, decision making structures and the fluctuation or stability of people involved in the making of the brand. Furthermore, I am interested in the forms of

market and consumer research deployed by Dove and American Apparel, their impact on strategic branding practices but significantly, also the brands' responsiveness to the happening of the brand. In the case of American Apparel, store staff act as a specific group of employees, as they operate at the same time as an interface between the brand and consumers, enacting their own engagement with the brand, as well as their need to report to the store management. When interviewing store staff, the multiple relations they have with the brand, its management, the products and consumers are of central interest, as well as their negotiation of the embodiment of their own - versus the brand's - aesthetics.

In the case of Dove, particular attention goes to the activities of the Self Esteem fund, especially the educational viral videos produced, the advisory board involved, cooperation with national charities and the events and workshops that they organise. Of particular interest is the website offered by the fund which features specific sections for young women and mothers/mentors, offering games and interactive applications about body perception, self-esteem and the media, as well as numerous educational video clips, reports and talks with the advisory board. Dove continues to address both mentors and young mentees through its so-called Body Talk workshop guides, and I trace the making and use contexts of these guides that are designed to enable mother-daughter conversations or classroom workshops about bodily becoming. As the guides were developed in cooperation with Beat UK, a charity working in the area of eating disorder prevention and support, I explore the making of such a collaboration, the alignment of objects involved and the ways in which both brand and charity seek to address the issue of body norms and self-esteem in their workshops.

### **Distributed Analytical Capacities**

In order to trace the multiple lines along which brands are being experienced, made and happening, the research needs to at least partially descend into the context, relations and lifeworlds of the different actors. It needs to trace the heterogeneous experiences of consumers, the multiplicity of touchpoints with brands and the relations that come to matter in them. Such research from the inside requires, so I argue, a displacement and re-distribution of analytical capacities. In my approach to tracing I partly follow Lash and Lury's (2007) idea of abstaining from analysis and interpretations, but follow the becoming of brands, spaces, actors and issues. Put differently, I make an effort to respond to the focal points offered by my interview partners, give attention to the medium-specificity of online space and the background conditions of encountering

brands in different environments. However, in doing so, the analytical capacities of the methodological approach are partly detached from me as a researcher, but are being distributed across the other actors involved in the process: interview partners, digital research tools or spaces.

Such a redistribution of analytical capacities has recently posed a key methodological controversy in British empirical sociology, yet from a slightly different angle (Adkins & Lury, 2009; Marres, 2012a; Savage & Burrows, 2007, 2009). Savage and Burrows (2007), for instance, claim that new possibilities of producing and capturing data which emerge from social and everyday practices in digital media has redistributed data access and its analysis. While sociology was considered to be the key site of sense making of social data (Savage & Burrows, 2007), in the context of digital media it is mainly corporations and public bodies which gain access to large-scale data sets, often just as a by-product of their actual service. Particularly in online shopping and social media environments, companies routinely monitor and record user behaviour, while social and cultural researchers need to develop specific infrastructures to get access to such data in the first place (Savage & Burrows, 2007). Moreover, such data-as-by-product of everyday web activities, so-called transactional data, comes with the promise of being more authentic and less pre-structured, as it does not emerge from research contexts such as surveys, interviews or discussion groups.

However, while the redistribution of access to social data might be perceived as sociology losing its predominance in the sense making of social data as Burrows and Savage (2007) argue, it can also open up avenues to explore and exploit the embeddedness of research in technical infrastructures and medium-specificity, as Marres suggests (2012a). In her recent engagement with Savage and Burrow's claim of crisis and the displacement of analytical capacities from sociology to corporate actors, Marres (2012a) contends that such a crisis of displacement might enable sociology to acknowledge that empirical research has always been a distributed and collaborative undertaking, drawing on the insights, perspectives, experiences, infrastructures and analytical capacities of different agents. Hence, instead of setting up the relation between sociological and corporate research as competitive and controversial, Marres requests a shift of attention to the reconfiguration of the internal relations of sociology and asks "whether and how online digital devices enable the renegotiation of the division of labour in social research" (2012b: 4).

Following this line of argumentation, Weltevrede and Marres (2012) claim that digital research methods, which repurpose the ordering and analytical capacities of digital

devices, reconfigure the temporality of data-collection and analysis, cutting across a linear model. What is at stake in digital research is a partial collapse of data collection and analysis, of sense making and getting involved with the field. If methods use the analytical capacities of dominant devices, such as Google, data capture partly forecloses data analysis, as the data is already pre-structured by the repurposed device. The notion of tracing proposed here deploys exactly this dynamic, however not only in the realm of the digital. Drawing on consumers' associations, phrases and experiences to make sense of their engagement with brands through interviews also partly collapses access to the field with its analysis. In such a mode of tracing, empirical social research is thought of as a partly distributed endeavour, repurposing the modes of sense making, experience and trails offered by the series of actors involved and recombining them with my own analytical approach. Re-distribution, however, does not mean that the research becomes participatory, as the multiple actors involved are not directly engaged in the analysis, nor do I seek to intervene in their relation to the brand. Rather, these different analytical categories put to question the idea of a detached researcher, but acknowledge the embeddedness and entanglement of research and its field (Barad, 2007).

Marres continues by claiming that what is in the making in such distributed approaches is a post-social mode of social research, one which does not solely rely on the analytical capacities of the researcher, nor one which only focuses on social dynamics themselves. Instead, such a post-social mode gives consideration to the interplay between spaces, media, devices, and backgrounds of sociality, and their affordances to inform social life. She says:

Indeed, this may be an appropriate definition of 'post-social' methods for the digital context: these are methods which explicitly take into account the heterogeneous contributions of a range of actors and agencies to the accomplishment of methods. (Marres, 2012b: 25)

The empirical fieldwork underlying this thesis is therefore at the same time both sociological and post-social in its attempt to trace the becoming of brands from the inside by giving attention to relations, social assemblages, media, issues, spaces and background conditions. It is post-social in a twofold sense, as it makes use of the pre-configuration of insights through digital devices, social media platforms, branding activities or other spaces (Marres, 2012a; Rogers, 2009), but also in terms of the way in which I draw attention to how social relations affect the becoming of brands and vice versa, and how spaces and background conditions intermingle with this becoming. Such a post-social approach takes departure from a longer tradition of thinking matter and

sociality as interrelated and entangled with each other (Haraway, 1991, 1994; Knorr-Cetina & Bruegger, 2002; Latour, 2007).

### **Conclusion: Mapping the Becoming of Brands**

In a final step, I take the opportunity to reflect on how to bring the traces insights, data, affects and activities into relation to each other through processes of mapping. Instead of creating too stable connections between the traces found or breaking them down to cause-effect relationships, I seek to map the becoming of brands by drawing on ideas of a sociology of the surface, as well as modes of explication (Adkins & Lury, 2009; Sloterdijk, 2009). Let me return to Savage and Burrow's debate on empirical sociology (2007, 2009) and the numerous responses it has generated once more. In a later contribution to the debate, Savage (2009) draws attention to the descriptive turn in empirical sociology, suggesting that the analytical contribution distinctive to the discipline could be found not in interpretation and detection of cause-effect relations, but in the detection of clusters, patterns, relations and sequences of association. What Savage has in mind is a sociology of descriptive assemblages or of the surface, tracing trails, mapping patterns and outlining relations without necessarily framing them as rules, categories and laws. He argues: "It follows that a core concern might be to scrutinize how pattern is derived and produced in social inscription devices, as a means of considering the robustness of such derivations, what may be left out or made invisible from them, and so forth" (Savage, 2009: 171). Similar to Lash and Lury's directive to abstain from interpretation, Savage is more interested in describing the making and happening of sociological phenomena, than trying to explain and interpret his observations.

Savage's notion of the descriptive assemblage is relevant and interesting to the methodology deployed in this thesis, as it allows the thinking of mapping as assembling, as bringing heterogeneous findings into relation to each other, while acknowledging that these relations are themselves subject to change. In what follows, I do not abstain from analysis and sense making entirely; however, I take up the idea of assembling, description and fragmentation in research. Rather than trying to craft a complete picture of the becoming of brands, I give attention to their distributedness, fragmentation and multiplicity from the inside. Hence, I am less interested in why consumers do what they do, or whether the activities of brands are positive or detrimental, but focus on traces and practices of mutual affection, interaction, responsivity, recombination and the making of relations. Put differently, the frames of analysis are not external to the cases

and my modes of sense making only make sense in relation to the specific brands. What is emerging is not a Euclidean space of categorisation and cause-effect relations organised through external coordinates and creating comparability between the case studies, but a sociology of the surface (Adkins & Lury, 2009), in which sense making is relational, local and embedded in the cases (DeLanda, 2002; 2006). Such a sociology of the surface, so Akins and Lury suggest, is characterised by becoming topological, by creating a field that is not situated in an extraneous space-time but which makes its very own space-time, defined by location variation, without the depth of causal explanations, but with multiple processes of mutual affection. Just as the notion of repurposing allows the thinking of tracing in digital media from the inside, through the analytical capacities of digital devices, the idea of relational mapping deployed suggests a case-specific mode of sense making.

Hence, rather than focusing on explanation and causes, I turn to the practice of explication as a particular instance of relational mapping. The notion of explication, mainly put forward by Sloterdijk in his studies on climates and environments (2009), was introduced as a key interest of the thesis, as the making explicit of implicit, affective and immanent background conditions of becoming. In relation to brands, such explication refers to the tracing of the interplay between the making and happening of brands, the impact of the creation of worlds in brand management (Arvidsson, 2006; Lazzarato, 2004), the tracing of the affective dynamics at stake when encountering brands and what exactly contributes to the becoming of brands. Explication, to follow Sloterdijk, is interested in the inquiry into immanent background conditions that can be pre-cognitive or affective, but bear generative capacities for processes of happening:

The average human being-in-the-world- which is another name for the modern explication of the ontological 'situation' since the loss of the old-world European certitudes - was previously a Being-in-the-air; or more exactly a Being-in-the-breathable. This was so deeply true and self-evident that arriving at a detailed thematization of air and atmospheric relations was practically impossible, apart from in poetic form or in physical and medical contexts. (Sloterdijk, 2009: 47-48)

According to Sloterdijk, explication draws attention to indirect, non-linear ways of impacting that do not address actors or entities directly, but immanently via their environment. It is in this sense that the notion of explication connects to branding. Within this thesis, I deploy Sloterdijk's idea of explication to trace and map such immanent forms of mutual affection, but also to inquire into processes of boundary

making, asking how brands and branding can bring social and economic life into relation.

Explication hence entails tracing - or at least the attentiveness to tracing - the making of conditions that foster the realisations of some futures, affects, activities and responses rather than others (Grusin, 2010; Thrift, 2008). What are the conditions and actions which focus consumer attention, relationality and interaction into some directions rather than others? Are they produced by brand management or do they emerge from media or other brand spaces? What are the actions enabled, what are the ones made less likely to happen? In the following empirical chapters, I take up the theoretical underpinning set out in the introduction and literature review and the methodological approach of tracing and mapping developed in this chapter to explicate the conditions under which brands are brought into being in their relationality.

# 3

## **(Re)Composing Sociality**

In an interview about the future of social media, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg makes the claim that: "our goal is to make everything social." He continues: "If you look five years out, every industry is going to be rethought in a social way (...). You can remake whole industries. That's the big thing" (Gelles, 2010). The relationship between economic value and social relations has been the focal point of much economic frenzy in the context of social media recently. The increased economic interest in the social, as I showed in the introduction and literature review, has a longer precedence and is particularly related to immaterial and informational modes of production, the centrality of knowledge and external stakeholders in economic value production (Lazzarato, 1996; Slater & Tonkiss, 2001; Thrift, 2005). Within sociological and marketing accounts of brands, social dynamics have been moved in as a central focal point and have been recently addressed as forms of brand communities, tribes or collectives (Cova, 1997; Cova & Cova, 2002; Cova & Pace, 2006; Maffesoli, 1996; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

This chapter unfolds an alternative perspective on sociality related to brands: rather than looking for communities, it traces the different relations relevant to brands and how these relations and brands inform each other. In doing so, I strive to explore the specific forms of both relationality and social formations relevant to the case studies of Dove and American Apparel. How do relations matter to the making of the brands and which relations are they exactly? How do the brands inform these relations or how are they being picked up by relations? Are they inserted into existing relations or do they bring new relations into being? In the first section, I map out different social formations emerging in relation to my case studies, taking both relations between consumers, products, brands, their issues, and spaces into account. The notion of the assemblage is of importance (Delanda, 2006, 2011), just as questions of scale and relations between assemblages are also. Further attention is directed to the intensity of attachment as well



as relations of proximity (Sloterdijk, 2010, 2011). The second section turns attention to boundary making within these assemblages and questions of inclusion and belonging. Who is included in the multiple assemblages related to brands and what practices organise inclusion? How is the process of boundary making itself informing the assemblage? I show that social assemblages are subject to constant reconfiguration and internal boundary making, drawing on ideas of de- and recomposition (Callon & Méadel, 2002) and the excess of inclusion over belonging (Latour et al., 2012; Mackenzie, 2012).

In the third section I turn to the question of what actually holds these social assemblages together, or put differently, what are the social assemblages animated by? Following the case studies of Dove and American Apparel, I argue that social assemblages are not only defined by existing or emerging social relations, but are implicated in an engagement with specific aspects of brands, as being included in such social assemblages entails the appropriation of the brand into one's own life contexts. In this process, brands are constantly altered and transformed, whilst remaining the same. They are, so I set out to argue, defined by ongoing invariance under change or by becoming topological. Returning to questions of making and happening, I explore a series of instances in which Dove and American Apparel try to set in motion collaborative dynamics and seek to facilitate the re-appropriation of the brand into selected new use contexts and lifeworlds.

Overall, the chapter is animated by the question of how brands are part of social relations and how social relations are being incorporated in the making of brands. However, as the specific focal points of the chapter indicate, I do not only focus on relations, but on shared issues and aesthetics, as well as environments that contribute to the making of assemblages, opening up the focus of the chapter to the other areas of concern in the thesis, that is, spaces and issues. An intermediate and, at points, immanent layer of the argument is the question of how these areas of concern relate and interconnect. Here, the notion of becoming topological might be of interest again, as the capacity of brands to remain invariant under deformation might open up avenues to study how social relations, spaces and issues come together in contemporary branding.

### **Assembling Brands, Assembling Relations**

Let me begin by engaging with my case studies on Dove and American Apparel. At the beginning of my focus groups with consumers, the participants were asked to create a

mind-map of the different associations they have with either American Apparel or Dove. There was only one rule: “No writing!” A series of key figures occurred across all drawings in relation to Dove: they were dominated by the colour blue, showing doves (the birds), clouds, sky, sea, water, but also soap bars, cream pots, women in white dresses, smiling women, women in white underwear and women in different sizes and shapes. When I asked participants to narrate their drawings, they foregrounded abstract associations such as clarity, purity, healthy skin and ‘taking care’ of the body. The participants also connected the brand with the soap bar product, even though they were aware that Dove features a wider range of products. Finally, participants referred to Dove’s so-called Real Women campaign which introduced the Campaign for Real Beauty in 2005 with a global mass media advertising campaign depicting women in different sizes and shapes features in all drawings. Participants described it as an ‘iconic attempt to advertising’ and as a ‘landmark campaign introducing a new approach to bodies in advertising’, but others more generally drew differently sized female bodies.

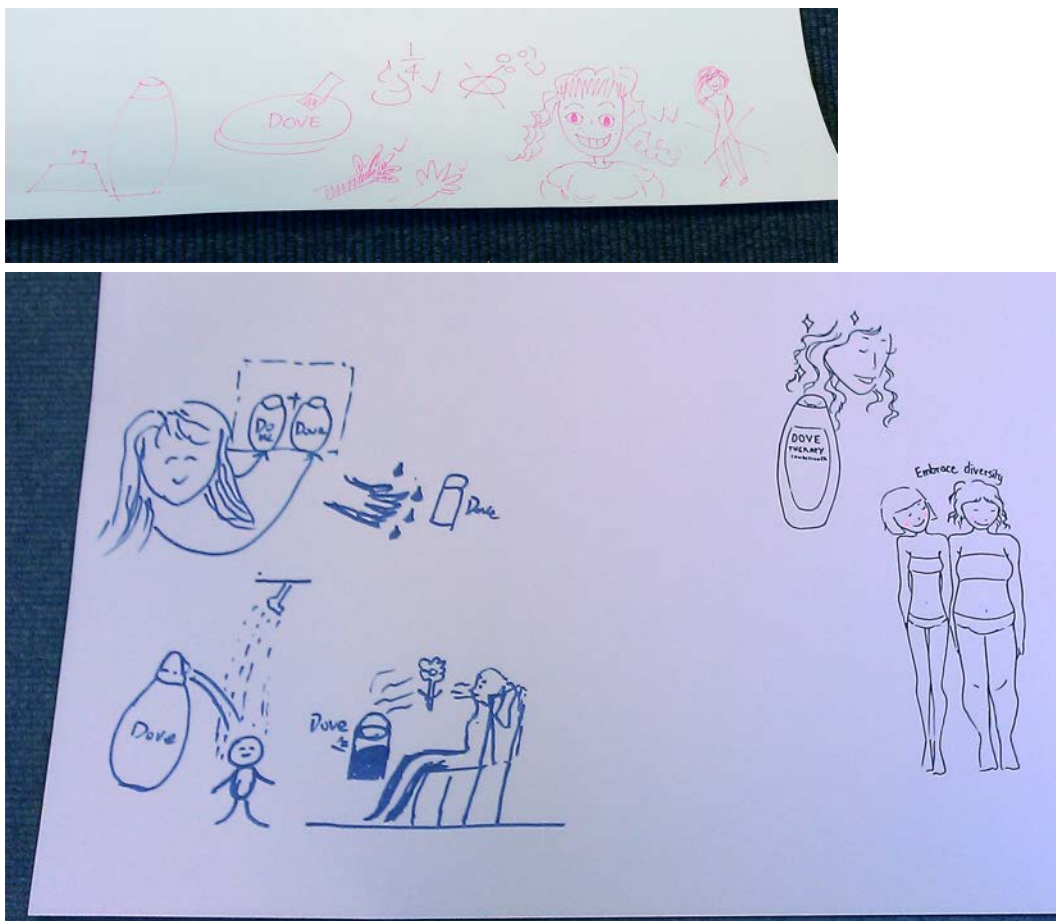


Figure 1: Associations with Dove. Drawings created during consumer focus groups.

A series of attachments and relations come to attention only from this observation, involving relations between the consumers, the brand, its products, but also most

interestingly, the values and issues relating to the brand. Let me expand on these relations by engaging with Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty in greater detail.

Founded in 1955, the cosmetics brand Dove, owned by a corporate umbrella brand, includes soap, shower products, creams, hair care and antiperspirants in the products which it manufactures (Dove UK, 2012). Dove is one of the many brands of Unilever, a British-Dutch global consumer goods company. Among Unilever's other brands are further body care products such as Lynx, Rexona, Tony and Guy, but also Slim Fast, Lipton, Knorr and Ben & Jerry's among others (Unilever, 2012). The Campaign for Real Beauty presents the framework of Dove's branding efforts since 2003 and was developed as a global effort to meet high sales targets by establishing the brand as 'iconic' and providing it with a particular attitude or linking it to a social issue, as my interview partners Staniforth (2011) and Ringwood (2010) explain who were involved in the making of the campaign. In order to meet its sales objectives, the consultant Martin Staniforth contends that the international brand management team sought to develop Dove as a brand which is perceived as so-called "iconic, akin to Nike or Apple, with which consumers associate a particular outlook on the world" (2011). Subsequently, the brand management team - a range of external consultants and agencies, such as Ogilvy and Mather - set off to investigate possible value sets, standpoints, and perspectives that Dove could be associated with. Following Sudan Ringwood, CEO of the charity Beat UK and cooperating partner of Dove, this set of values should be both positive and offer the possibility for a long-term differential position in relation to Dove's competitors. Ringwood explains:

Ringwood (2010): As an organisation they had already recognised, as they describe it, in order to become iconic as a brand they need to be associated with a cause. They have seen other iconic brands like Apple and Nike - all had found a cause above the use of the brand with which they were associated and they wanted Dove to have a similar standing. In order to do this they looked at issues and causes they thought would be appropriate - like breast cancer, but that is overrepresented. They dismissed self harm and cosmetic surgery because they did not want to be campaigning against something. So they chose self esteem and then eating disorder in order to be promoting a positive aspect of something.

After settling on this issue, Dove took a series of first steps to research, but also to establish, its relation with the issue of body norms. Staniforth points out that the first steps towards getting involved in beauty norms were designed as a participatory and distributed approach. To test consumers' affective responses and attachment to beauty norms, Dove asked 67 female photographers to show their perspective on female beauty and created the mobile photo exhibition 'Beyond Compare', which subsequently travelled internationally in 2004. Visitors were invited to comment upon and interact

with the images displayed, leading to strong affective responses and a positive sentiment, so Staniforth continues (2011). Departing from the positive feedback of the exhibition, Dove decided to follow this idea and commissioned an academic research project entitled 'The Real Truth About Beauty: A Global Report' in 2004 (Etcoff et al., 2004), carried out by members of the campaign's forthcoming advisory board such as Nancy Etcoff and Susie Orbach. Expanding into the realm of academic research on the becoming of bodies and the affective dynamics of (media) beauty norms, Dove not only gained insights into the issue it sought to address, it also performed its first commitment to the issue and set out to rework the boundary between academic and corporate research, but also between charitable, pedagogic and promotional engagement with beauty pressure.

In its initial stages, the involvement of external actors, consultants and cooperating partners was crucial for the formation of the campaign and its further development. The relations with academics involved in the making of the Real Truth About Beauty report (Etcoff et al., 2004), for instance, were productive to the brand on several levels: firstly, by allowing Dove to signpost its commitment to the issue of beauty and body norms by commissioning academic research; and secondly, by providing insights and information which can pose as a starting point for campaign development. At a later stage, the existing relation to Orbach and Etcoff led to their appointment as members of the advisory board for the Self-Esteem Fund founded in 2006. Susie Orbach, in particular, was established as a key external spokes-figure for the campaign, featuring on several videos produced by the Self-Esteem Fund<sup>22</sup> and promoting the campaign through her own organisation Any Body.<sup>23</sup>

Based on the Real Truth About Beauty report, Dove started to publicly communicate and materialise its engagement with body norms via a two stage international advertising campaign, developed together with the advertising agency Ogilvy and Mather. A multi-layered set of relations came into interplay once Dove started working together with Ogilvy London on this campaign. In the strategic planning process, the team discussed the idea of the construction of female beauty in the media and sought to expose rather than engage with the beauty standards of the industry. Although Ogilvy and Mather were convinced that such a campaign idea would consolidate Dove's commitment to the cause of body norms, the brand management was initially reluctant to cross-cut

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<sup>22</sup> For instance in the discussion of the campaign five years after its kick-off: [http://www.dove.co.uk/dsep/videos.html?v#v=http://edge.dove.com/US\\_en/10229/global/video/tv-spots/1\\_success\\_of\\_campaign\\_576x324.flv](http://www.dove.co.uk/dsep/videos.html?v#v=http://edge.dove.com/US_en/10229/global/video/tv-spots/1_success_of_campaign_576x324.flv).

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.any-body.org>

industry beauty standards. To strengthen the management's commitment to the cause, the agency produced a video featuring interviews with the managers' and consultants' young daughters about how they like and experience their bodies. Deploying an emotional and documentary style, the movie shows the girls talking about how they perceive their own and other people's bodies, how they relate to advertising and what insecurities they have about their bodies in relation to peers and the media. Put differently, the movie brought together the concerns central to Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty and used the managers' daughters to materialise them in a way that affected and committed the management to the campaign, Ringwood argued (2010). Being exposed to their daughters' own insecurities and experiences, Ogilvy and Mather convinced the management to continue with the campaign, and moreover, to develop a sense of attachment to it (Staniforth, 2011). Existing family ties were utilised to inform and affect (Massumi, 2002) brand management and therefore the becoming of the campaign itself. To ensure that Dove's frequently rotating brand management remains attached to the cause, the brand further developed an internal engagement program. Dove employees are required to conduct workshops related to the cause, and to work in local communities or schools, Ringwood explains (2010).

The first phase launched in September 2004 (see figure 2) and showed women featuring bodily characteristics that are considered as flaws, such as wrinkles, a full figure, small breasts or skin of colour, juxtaposed with a copytext asking viewers whether they considered the women as "fat or fabulous", as "wrinkled or wonderful". Audiences were invited to cast their vote on the options on the campaigns website. The campaign also featured billboards with telephone hotlines via which audiences can cast their vote on the options offered, whilst the results were displayed on a digital counter on the poster in real time.

The second stage was launched in 2005 and is considered the most widely known part of Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty. It features six women in white underwear in a white setting, all claimed to having been casted from the street, featuring sizes of average women, not models, and supposedly celebrating their bodies. The copy text stresses that the audience is looking at 'real women' and 'real curves'. The setting and styling is plain, the women feature little make-up, are only wearing plain, white cotton underwear and are shown in natural light to draw attention to their performance of happiness and confidence. Further motives show the same models in different postures, performing different moods. The initial mass media campaign, Staniforth contends (2011), was designed to address a wide and encompassing audience of women of different ages and backgrounds. Interviewed consumers report that the campaign

however did not create a feeling of communality among the entire audience, but rather turned into the subject of personal conversations with friends, peers or family. These discussions, so interviewees report, evolved around the question of whether Dove's attempt to show differently sized female bodies is attractive, interesting and persuasive and if a cosmetics brand can engage in a critique of beauty standards in advertising at all.



Figure 2. Dove Real Women Campaign, Phase 1 and 2.

When conducting consumer interviews, I repeatedly encountered how important such relations to family and close friends are for consumers' attachment to the brand. The initial contact with the brand, for instance, mainly occurred during childhood years at home, where consumers' parents or other family members used Dove products or bought them for the family. Bars of soap, shower gels, but also body lotion are often reported to be long-term cosmetic essentials of family members and their ongoing presence in family contexts enabled female consumers to develop a long-term relation with them. Once moving out of their family homes, consumers in their early twenties with limited financial resources report Dove to be both a familiar product and also a slightly luxurious treat. For everyday use they prefer to purchase cheaper products, but for occasional treats or one-off offers, Dove presents a special choice. A consumer reports:

CG: Do you remember when you first used or bought Dove?

LN: Probably when I was very young, when I was eight or nine. My grandparents used them a lot and they probably still do. So I think that is the first contact that I had with the brand Dove. But obviously I did not think about them like I do now. Now it is just a nice luxury good to use rather than the bog standard stuff I have at home.

CG: So it is like an indulgence, like a treat for you?

LN: Yeah, yeah, I think that's what it was. Probably still now it is the same thing. When I buy them on offer it is only because I cannot afford them if they are on full price. Like a luxury. (...) Yeah, I think it is. It is not like a quick sort of shower in the morning as if you are using just a washing gel. You wanna take your time and then maybe bath. For instance in the evening to unwind and relax.

CG: Do you do the same with the cheaper ones?

LN: Ahm, I think with the cheaper ones you just use them and do not think about them really. Dove products have the nice smell and nice packaging so you take your time...

The above quote illustrates yet another relation informing the brand Dove, the one between consumers and the product. The majority of interviewed consumers stress that Dove products are slightly different than the everyday use of body care products, as they transform body care into a treat for the self, enabled and organised through the product. Dove shower gels, body lotions and creams, interviewed consumers contend, allow one to unwind, to relax and so create a particular atmosphere of intimacy with the self. While the notion of intimacy is not followed further here, but taken up again in Chapters 5 and 6, what is of relevance, is that not only the advertising campaign seeks to focus consumers on their relation with their body, but that the products are embedded in this experience too.

As outlined above, the advertising campaign turned into a conversational subject among the interviewed young female consumer, their close friends and families: firstly, because it caught their attention and lead to controversial responses; and secondly, because flipping through magazines and commenting on promotional content is considered a key activity to do with peers. The following quotation shows how the campaign set in motion an attentiveness for one's own bodily becoming and experience and how this is entangled in relations with friends:

BK: Ahm, yeah, we might have spoken about it. It is kind of divided weirdly. A lot of girls were like, 'Oh, they don't look like I would wanna look!. It doesn't seem glamorous, it does not seem, ahm, it doesn't seem like, it doesn't really appeal to me.' And other friends would kind of agree, and would be like, 'Yeah, I know what you mean...' One of my friends uses Dove a lot and she is definitely not a typical girl that you'd see maybe, she has really long ginger hair, and quite freckly and quite curvy and she has amazing skin and she uses Dove a lot and I think that appealed to her a lot because she did not feel she connected with any of the other cosmetics adverts around.

(...)

BK: Me and my friends often discuss what we see when we are flipping through a magazine or watching an advert and say 'Oh, no!... Oh no, you can see her hairline, is not like that! They just edited like lots of hair out.' Yeah, we talk about stuff like that all the time.

CG: Looking at how the magazines cheat?

BK: Yeah, and we would be like 'Oh no, she definitely doesn't look like that!' Or also when they superimpose other things into the shot, which I find really bad, like other people's body parts. It just doesn't look right, it looks like somebody else's arm is there. 'Cause their hands don't look right.

Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty therefore did not necessarily open a new conversational subject among these young women, but stepped into an ongoing debate, as these young women had already been discussing the fabrication of bodies in the media before. In Arvidsson's terms (Arvidsson, 2006), the brand was inserted into existing relationships in order to take up existing conversational issues and to inform them in alignment with the brand's values.

Before I draw more general conclusions as to what these findings entail for imagining sociality in relation to brands, let me draw attention to a final example, the Dove Self-Esteem Fund,<sup>24</sup> which poses a particular instance of the strategic deployment of multiple relations. As I showed above, the fund draws on an advisory board composed of academics, journalists and charities and regularly cooperates with scholars and charities for producing web materials, reports and events. The outcomes of such collaborations enable the brand to become part of, and to descend into, a series of further relations, for instance those between mothers and daughters, or mentors and mentees. The Self-Esteem Fund website features a specific section dedicated to young girls and offers games, information and tests relating to bodily experience. A further section addresses women and their bodily experience but also their potential role as mentors, providing advice reports and guidelines on how to talk about beauty pressure to mentees.

In collaboration with the charity Beat UK,<sup>25</sup> the fund designed these conservation and workshop guides entitled 'Body Talk'. The workshops are designed for school or community contexts and seek to engage young girls in reflecting on their bodily experience, how they feel about their bodies, how their peers and the media make them feel about their bodies and how their self esteem can be improved. They contain detailed advice for workshop facilitation, exercises, media material and background information. Together with Beat, the Self-Esteem fund promoted the Body Talk guides in schools and youth institutions and following Ringwood (2010), the workshops were conducted several thousand times in classes throughout the UK since their inception.

Relations come to matter on several levels in the context of the workshop. Firstly, the commercial brand Dove could only address and inform classroom interactions directly

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<sup>24</sup> <http://www.dove.co.uk/en/Our-Mission/Our-Vision/default.aspx>

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.b-eat.co.uk>



through its relation with the charity Beat. Furthermore, the facilitation of the workshops in schools or youth institutions brought together a series of actors in relation to the issue of body norms, but also in relation to Dove. The so-called Activity Guide for mothers and mentors offers a framework in which bodily becoming can be addressed in private conversations. It draws attention to the impact the mothers'/mentors' own relation to their body has upon their daughters' ones - the details of these instructions are addressed in Chapters 5 and 6. Here, existing relations are drawn upon to set in motion a discussion, engagement and reflection about media and its body norms, which is immanently related to the brand.

To draw a preliminary conclusion, a series of social relations were identified as central to Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty, either in the process of realising the campaign or for establishing Dove as a brand connected to the issue of body norms in the media. What brings these relations together, however, is not necessarily only the brand Dove itself, but the issue of body norms and the activities of the multiple agents involved. The social relations emerging in the context of Dove can neither be subsumed into tribes or communities, nor are they limited to actual consumers. Instead, they indicate that sociality in relation to brands comes in different forms and intensities, a finding that I now discuss by turning to the notion of the assemblage.

### **Assemblages of Different Scale**

What is emerging in the context of Dove is a multiplicity of social relations, interrelating a series of actors, issues, practices and the brand, for different durations, at different intensities. While the encounters during the Body Talk workshops in schools are short and related to the issue of body norms, the relation to products is more long term and focused on the encapsulating product experience as a personal treat, while the brand at the same time can pose a recurrent topic of debate among friends and family. Sociality, this mapping exercise shows, does matter to the campaign, but as multiplicity, not as unified brand community. Furthermore, it is not always the brand or its products that hold these multiple social formations together. It is the issue of beauty and body norms as addressed by the brand that sets in motion discussions, that makes mentors use the workshop or activity guides, or fosters friends to discuss the campaign. Hence, the sociality made by, and which also makes, Dove cannot be reduced to the notion of a brand community or tribe (Cova & Pace, 2006; Maffesoli, 1996; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), but emerges as multiple, internally different social forms of different scale and intensity.

These social forms can be understood - and here I draw on the work of Manuel DeLanda (2006, 2011) - as sets of assemblages and sub-assemblages which do not form a stable social form, but are characterised by their constant de- and recomposition of relations. DeLanda develops the notion of the assemblage in reference to Deleuze and Guattari's work (1991) as an approach to address re-composable relationality and mutual affection of interconnected entities of different scale. The assemblage introduces a series of conceptual shifts in addressing social groups, as it works across what is considered micro- and macro sociality (DeLanda, 2006). Assemblage theory offers a post-social perspective on sociality, as assemblages are not limited to human actors. It draws attention away from the parts belonging to an assemblage to their altering relations: "Accounting for this tendency, in turn, demands switching scales and focusing on the interactions between the parts of the whole, interactions in which the parts exercise their capacities to affect and be affected" (DeLanda, 2011: 7). Assemblages, DeLanda contends, are not (only) characterised by their properties and current state of being, but by their tendencies and capacity to change.

The different relations mapped out in relation to Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty emerge as a 'nested', that is, interrelated set of assemblages connected to the brand, involving both human and non-human actors: products, workshop guides, websites, issues or campaign motives comprising different scales, temporalities and relations. Such social assemblages, to draw on Lury (2009), are not reducible to the level of the individual or the collective, the parts and the whole, but instead oscillate between both, just as they cut across too neat delineations between human and non-human actors, creating "shifting, continually changing mini-masses" (Lury, 2009: 74). DeLanda also draws special attention to the relations between parts and the whole, whilst understanding parts of assemblages themselves as being potentially decomposable into further assemblages (2011). He contends that the individual elements composing assemblages do not add up to a whole, but are designed to remain open, to expand and to enable new relations and assemblages. Such openness is exactly what is at stake in the social assemblages emerging in relation to Dove, as the set up of participatory elements, such as the activity guides, are designed to involve ever more mentors, mothers and young girls to enable new, non-exclusive relations. Consumers can be part of many of these sub-assemblages; however, this 'being part of' is not a property, but the outcome of encounters, interactivity and modes of attachment, or, to put it in DeLanda's terms of intensive dynamics: "the definition of 'intensive' may be expanded to include capacities, and in particular, the capacity of an individual to form assemblages with individuals very different from itself" (2006: 93). In the next section I

trace the modes of inclusion, belonging and boundary making at stake in brand assemblages by turning to the case of American Apparel.

### **Inclusion, Belonging and Boundary Making**

Not all brands seek to establish such open social assemblages as Dove does. To explore the relation between the parts and the whole further, I now ask what organises the relations between parts of these sub-assemblages, as well as the relations between the sub-assemblages themselves?

I return to the case of American Apparel and have a specific look at the social relations emerging in regard to the brand. Different to the case of Dove, American Apparel is indeed connected to one particular social community, urban hipster culture, defined by its shared notion of aesthetics, style and taste, and enacted through clothes, places, leisure activities, attitude and cultural interests. In the early 1990s, the basic apparel company lead by the current CEO Dov Charney sought to distinguish itself from its key competitors like Hanes and Fruit of the Loom. It did so by and producing more tightly fitting, 'body con'<sup>26</sup> basic apparel made of soft and stretchy garments - a product novelty as basic T-Shirts and apparel was mainly available as loose cut at that time. In an article about Dov Charney, one journalist summarises this development:

He laid the foundation for American Apparel in 1995, with his breakthrough product, the 'Classic Girl' line of T-Shirts. Targeting the silkscreened (or imprintable) T-Shirt market, the Classic Girl was as radical as Charney's ideas about benefits for garment workers. Rather than boxy and loose, it was sexy and form fitting. The fabric was a fine, ribbed knit, in contrast to the stiff, heavy cotton in favor at the time. (Ritchie, 2002)

The brand started to develop its differential position by bringing its products literally closer to the consumers' skin, allowing basic wear to get a bit more sexy and appealing to 'body con' appeal. Soon, this focus on bodies and sexuality started to inform the visual presence of the company in promotional materials, lookbooks and once further established on the market, advertising campaigns. Since 1999,<sup>27</sup> American Apparel has been pursuing a visual aesthetics that is majorly inspired by DIY photography and hipster culture, as well as presentational formats borrowed from pornographic material. The campaign features photographs which resemble private snap shots, most often taken in beds or living rooms. Many images also show body hair, sweat or slight signs of cellulite, while make-up and hair styles are kept to a minimum – all in order to create

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<sup>26</sup> Body-con is the industry abbreviation for body conscious clothes that fit very close to the body and emphasise its shapes and curves.

<sup>27</sup> An archive of American Apparels advertising campaigns can be found here: [www.americanapparel.net/presscenter/ads/index.aspx?y=1999](http://www.americanapparel.net/presscenter/ads/index.aspx?y=1999)

the impression of self-made images emerging from everyday life. But they are also designed to differentiate the brand from the digitally retouched conventions of the industry, so the management suggests. The brand states in a promotional video:

Our advertisements depict young people wearing our clothes in scenes that devoid a conventional pretence and staging. Instead of using models, we show the clothes on actual people. A refreshingly unmediated and innocent approach to advertisement. It is also a highly effective technique that drives millions of consumers into a world wide recognition. American Apparel's design vision and aesthetic are intended to appeal to young metropolitan adults. (American Apparel, 2012)



Figure 3: American Apparel Advertising Campaign

Just as Dove consumers are introduced to the brand in the context of their families, the interviewed American Apparel consumers report they were introduced to the brand through their friends and peers, seeing the brand appearing in their community:

CG: What made you buy their clothes for the first time?

GM: I don't know, I really like, I mean, I just met a lot of people who were buying it, like my friends, and I thought it was really cool although it was expensive. Yeah, because it was really entwined with the clubbing scene. So all of my friends, a lot of my friends that I knew were buying this stuff, so I had a try too...

In its attempt to address 'young urban metropolitan adults' (American Apparel, 2010), the brand not only informed individual circles of friends, but soon came to be known as connected to firstly, the clubbing scene, and later, an emergent hipster culture, a global style based and loosely attached to a community, based on their ironic remediation of past styles, tastes and artefacts (Haddow, 2008; N+1, 2010). Or to put it with Haddow:

Take a stroll down the street in any major North American or European city and you'll be sure to see a speckle of fashion-conscious twentysomethings hanging about and sporting a number of predictable stylistic trademarks: skinny jeans, cotton spandex leggings, fixed-gear bikes, vintage flannel, fake eyeglasses and a keffiyeh. (Haddow, 2008)

Different from Dove, American Apparel is, as the quotation below illustrates, connected to a specific social group, yet remains internally different:

FM: Yeah, I have never thought about it but if it is a common vibe, a spirit associated with the label that's not common to the other labels... but yes, there is a community around American Apparel. I don't think there is community around brands like Uniqlo. I think that is more mainstream kind of advertising and displaying stuff whereas American Apparel is kind of more innovative or has a scene around it, maybe.

However, this connection does not result in a homogenous brand community, but is also defined by a series of local social assemblages which themselves are assembled through more specific relations. As the following quotation by an interviewed consumer shows, within these sub-assemblages, actors relate differently to each other and not all actors involved share the same relational proximity to each other, to hipster culture and the brand:

CG: What people do you associate with American Apparel?

PK: Ahm... I gues... it is not quite easy to answer... there are ahmm... because ahm... there are so fine nuances in modern subculture or whatever it is. (...) So I think some people are definitely too cool for American Apparel...

CG: Who is too cool?

PK: Some of the people I know here in London, people that go to the cool clubs that I have mentioned before (laughs) like... maybe they are a bit extreme. They are the fashion elite in London, really. I don't think they would ever wear American Apparel. Maybe that is for them what H&M for me. It is a bit too boring and a bit too easy... Ahm, ahm and I think that it is sort of associated with the Vice magazine people which is not a clear label (laughs), but sort of people like myself who are ahm, sort of not very cool but definitely not uncool either, sort of bit cool... (laughs). We care, but we don't really care that much. Yeah, I think, I think the sort of semi cool people are... (laughs) (...) If you are not cool at all you would not even dare to go to an American Apparel store because everything is so "cool" in there and the people who work in there are so 'cool'.

What is central to this consumer's inspirational actors is an intermingling between spatial and social proximity (Sloterdijk, 2010), that is, the repeated encounter of particular people in particular places. Most interestingly, this consumer is very aware of the different intensities of relations and the affective capacities of inspiration at stake in his circle of friends, as well as who is included in the particular group and who is not. During my conversation with PK, he stressed that it is one's capacity to 'be cool' that organises these relations, while being cool means to understand and inform the shared

aesthetics, knowing how to combine the clothes, which club to go, which music to listen and thus co-creating the taste and aesthetics of the assemblage. Such coolness emerges from inside the community, posing a set of codes, styles and behaviour that are constantly subject to change:

CG: So what do you have to do for being cool?

PK: Go out a lot. If you go out a lot and if you spend a lot of time ah.. ah... (laughs) I felt that myself, when I lived in a certain way I sort of automatically became cool. It was not that I was trying to become cool, but it is just something that... ahm... I see it as a feeling... a feeling of coolness and... and I think that you can both feel it and see when someone else is cool. (...) And people often laugh about it and no one would ever call themselves 'cool'. Because that is the most uncool thing to do ever! (Laughs)

Becoming part of the social assemblage associated with American Apparel is hence organised by people's capacity to be cool, to perform a certain style, to be recognised as such and to be connected to other members. These assemblages are not oriented towards enabling consumers to become 'cool', as 'being cool' specifies a requirement and operates as a form of boundary making from the inside. To be acknowledged as part of this assemblage, so the quotations above show, one needs to reach a certain threshold of understanding and be enacting these aesthetics already.

But not everyone who is connected to hipster culture immediately also connects to the social assemblages of American Apparel. The above mentioned quotation describes certain people as 'too cool', bringing to attention the multi-layered relation between American Apparel and the hipster culture. American Apparel's social assemblages might be connected to hipster culture, but only partly, this consumer suggests. There are specific sub-assemblages in hipster communities which are less interested in American Apparel, however, they do inform its social assemblage as taste makers and inspirational figures. The brand is characterised by a partial and partible intermingling with hipster culture and this relationship is in itself constantly de- and recomposed from the inside. Multiple relations of proximity are at stake in such processes, seeking to detach actors who do not enact the shared aesthetic, whilst drawing inspiration from actors who themselves might not be interested in American Apparel. Such boundary making from the inside, I show in the next section, is not situated at the edges, but is key to the assemblages and their interplay, and hence happens in their very middle.

### **De- and Recomposition**

The discussion of the relations and assemblages relevant to Dove and American Apparel have showed that not all assemblages come with the same degree of attachment and

mutual affection between brands and actors involved. Brands on the one hand create new relations, but also seek to inform already existing ones (Arvidsson, 2006). However, even when drawing on existing relations, spaces or issues, brands do not collapse into these, but rather become a part of them, or, become partible (Foster, 2011). What Arvidsson describes as inserting brands into existing relationships (2006) thus always remain partial, as the relations enabled through the brand do not replace other relational ties, but partially and temporally adds to and informs them.

Rather than addressing the emergence of the multiple assemblages as processes of insertion into existing social relations, I turn to Callon (2002, 2005) and suggest thinking this emergence in terms of the ongoing de- and recomposition of actors, actions, issues, brands, products and, most notably, partible relations. In the cases of Dove and American Apparel, a series of social assemblages are deliberately assembled by the brands, such as the BodyTalk workshops, while other assemblages emerge through intensive dynamics between consumers, like personal conversations, the embeddedness of American Apparel in hipster culture or the media debate about brands. Particularly in the case of American Apparel and its relation to hipster culture, it is the ways in which consumers use, discuss and change the brand in relation to hipster aesthetics that recompose their social assemblages.

Thinking the sociality related to brands as de- and recomposing sets of assemblages differs widely from the notion of brand tribes and communities in marketing theory. While such brand communities are, so Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) contend, held together both by activities and affective bonds emerging from a shared consciousness, rules, rituals and a degree of 'moral responsibility' for the associated brand, the concept of assemblages draws attention to both the specificity and multiplicity of attachments that can exist in relation to brands. Coming from a marketing perspective, brand community literature is more interested in identifying key connecting qualities that can be deployed for brand management purposes, in contrast to the multi-focal and multi-layered ontology of social assemblages. These assemblages are defined by not being organised around a shared consciousness. Consumers can be part of multiple assemblages, use Dove products, talk critically about the campaign, take part in workshops, engage with news debates about the brand, but all these assemblages come with different relations of proximity, attachments and forms of engagement. What matters, in this context, is not the relation between the brand and the individual consumer, but the multiplicity of relations consumers can have to brands or to other actors related to the brands and their ongoing de- and recomposition.

Let me explicate this by turning to the question of the relation between parts and wholes in the context of assemblages. Here, the work of Adrian Mackenzie (2012) on databases, parts, inclusion and belonging becomes relevant. The value of relational databases, Mackenzie argues, neither lies in the belonging of data elements to the very database, nor in the addition of new data points to its collection. It resides in the relations that can be created between the data points and the sub-sets that can be derived from these. As a consequence, so Mackenzie argues, “no-one belongs to a database as an element, but many aspects of contemporary lives are included as parts of databases” (2012, 12). Such processes of de- and recomposition create an excess of inclusion over belonging, an excess of relationality over actors, which, therefore, always remain partible. In the case of American Apparel, the capacity to ‘be cool’ is a form of organising inclusion, yet it is not a form of belonging, as coolness is a capacity that needs to be enacted constantly and is subject to change. Being part of a social assemblage is subject to the boundary making processes of inclusion, and just as consumers can be included in a variety of assemblages, brands can also make themselves part of existing relations, as the Campaign for Real Beauty has shown.

### **Repeated Participation**

So far, I have mapped out the social relations that inform the becoming of Dove and American Apparel and suggested thinking of them as sets of assemblages, organised through internal boundary making practices which cause an excess of inclusion over belonging specific to each brand. The final section now turns to the question of what these assemblages can actually do and how they affect the actors involved. The notion of *agencement*, deriving from Deleuze and Guattari’s work (1991) on assemblages is of interest here, as processes of assembling, so Phillips (2006) suggests, cannot be reduced to creating a connection between discretised elements, actors, brands and issues. It affects both the entities involved and is more than the sum of its parts. In what follows, I give attention to questions of *agencement* and explore how the embeddedness in social relations brings both the brand, but also social relations, into being.

To be part of American Apparel’s social assemblages, so an interviewed consumer suggested, one needs to ‘be cool’ in order to understand and at the same time inform the shared aesthetics of the brand. Inclusion in this assemblage is tied up with consumers’ involvement in taking up, but also transforming, the aesthetics of both the brand and the associated assemblage:



PK: I used to really like that... ahm... sort of... I don't know what to call it, activity or... cultural or whatever... if you really care about fashion and if you really make an effort it is... ahm... then it is... ahm... like it is... it is really... for me it really changed my subjectivity or something... (...) you really have to be in a certain quite small social context where you can see small differences and nuances and developments and if you are not in this group... there is no isolated fashion, there is always a small group of people that you display yourself for. And for me it was exactly what that group of people was sort of... it was people who like me had very good taste (laughs). Who were kind of cool people (laughs). Who... and... they were people I would display myself for and I did not care at all what other people thought. (...) Because you if you are wearing something that is genuinely creative, innovative and new, something you just came up with yesterday - wouldn't it be a great idea to change this thing that I bought or combine it with this... that it will work sort of and... it is not like trying to be cool, it is about being cool actually because you actually know what you are doing.

As outlined before, being included in the social assemblage of both American Apparel and hipster culture is reliant on capacities, not properties, subject to active participation in its aesthetic becoming. The interviewed consumers stress how this participation entails a series of activities, from being present in selected urban spaces, observing and evaluating the styles of other people and brands, taking up general developments and deforming them through one's own ideas. The hipster culture American Apparel is connected to poses a global assemblage and is being enacted in a series of spaces, for instance, online. In this context, it is of interest to explore the making of assemblages and their impact on brands by looking at such activities in online spaces.

Flickr and more recent outfit upload platforms such as Chicktopia and Lookbook.nu are key environments in which web users share their incorporation of the brand's aesthetics. Let me give an example: among the 700 results for the query "American Apparel ad" on Flickr, only around 10% feature original ads or pictures of billboards, the rest are comprised of private images which are either remakes of the brand's ad (40%) or images, which look so much like American Apparel ads that other users have tagged and commented upon them as such (35%). The imagery of the campaign with its harsh lights, distinct model poses, self-made aesthetic and intimate insights into private moments became a general aesthetic reference and visual resource for these web users. When copying the style of the ads or producing imagery that looks very similar to it, web users introduce a variation to the look of the brand whilst maintaining its recognisability. In doing so, the aesthetics of the brand impacts on the activities of these web users, while their activities impact on the brand itself as well. These variations can be serious attempts to copy American Apparel's style, but also parodies mocking the brand's conventions. Out of all of the search results, only 5% are of a parodist nature. This is a relatively small amount of irony and critique among more serious remakes and

indicates that Flickr poses a space in which consumers take up but only mildly transform the brand's style. With the rise of more differentiated social media platforms dedicated to sharing outfit posts, such as Chictopia and Lookbook, both founded in 2008, this practice has proliferated further. Shortly after its launch, a series of Chictopia users actively engaged with and further developed American Apparel's aesthetics, and in response the company decided to appoint the most active and most popular users as their amateur models (Van Grove, 2009). The brand drew on the platform's internal ranking system to select the Chictopia users with the best peer recommendations engaged in their clothes. Today, Chictopia features 5522 search results tagged with

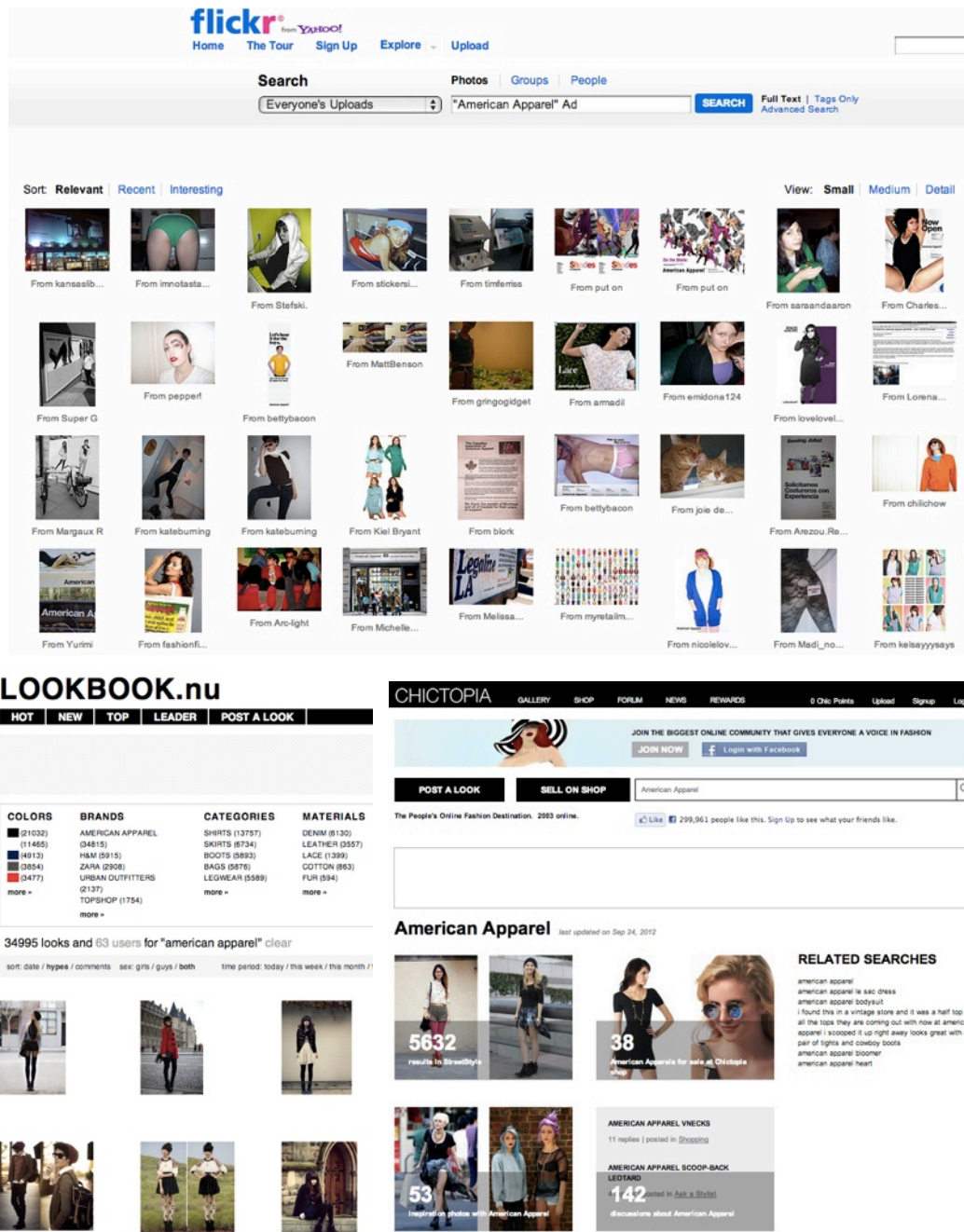


Figure 4. American Apparel on Flickr, Chictopia and Lookbook.nu

American Apparel.<sup>28</sup> On Lookbook.nu even 15576 posted outfits are tagged with or show American Apparel clothes,<sup>29</sup> while the style of the images does not necessarily resemble that of American Apparel as closely as on Flickr. As in the case of Chictopia, American Apparel sought to draw on this engagement with the brand and initiated a model contest on Lookbook to appoint yet another set of amateur models in late 2009.<sup>30</sup> A twofold process of affection is emerging, in which brands inform consumer practices and are informed by consumers themselves.

### Aesthetics under Deformation

The sharing practices of American Apparel outfits and ad remakes show that what is at stake in the making of social assemblages is not only a de- and recomposition of actors - though the platforms bring together yet a further sub-assemblage of people and digital objects - but also the ways in which actors take up aesthetics related to the brand, bringing them to new spaces, forms and contexts. Two key insights follow from this. Firstly, as argued before, it is not only the brand that brings the social assemblages together, but it can also be its specific values, aesthetics or issues. Yet secondly, brands are becoming topological, they are becoming invariant under transformation (DeLanda, 2002; Duffy, 2006; James, 1999; Lury, 2009).

Following DeLanda, topological forms or spaces are distinguished by their capacity to instigate intensive, self-differing or lively change. Topology, he contends, “concerns the properties of geometric figures which remain invariant under bending, stretching, or deforming transformations, that is, transformations which do not create new points or fuse existing ones” (DeLanda, 2002: 24). In the literature review, I drew on Lury (2009) who claims that topological spaces are surfaces that are spaces in themselves. They are not to be situated in external coordinates and but are organised in relation to their environment. In mathematics, topology is developed as a relational alternative to Euclidean or metric space, which comes with comparable dimensions and can be situated against extraneous measures (Duffy, 2009; James, 1999).

In this chapter, I am particularly interested in thinking the deformation of American Apparel’s aesthetic as the becoming topological of the brand. Yet it is not only the brand itself that is becoming invariant under deformation, in the case of American Apparel, the brand’s key aesthetics are also advancing into a topological form as they are being

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<sup>28</sup> <http://www.chictopia.com/American-Apparel-qq/search>

<sup>29</sup> <http://lookbook.nu/search?q=american+apparel>

<sup>30</sup> <http://lookbook.nu/contest/3-Win-An-American-Apparel-Modeling-Gig>

taken up and recombined by different stakeholders (Duffy, 2006). Each time an American Apparel ad poses inspiration or is remade and posted on Flickr, its style is deformed whilst remaining the same, it is bended, stretched and explored, whilst still being associated with the same brand, either through its look, the caption of the image or user generated tags.

This process of participatory deformation is distributed across a series of spaces, actors, profiles, platforms and actions. It is fragmented and potentially evolving in numerous directions. As a consequence, participative deformation cannot be encountered as such, as a whole, but can only be experienced in its multi-focal character and can only be addressed through its local rates of changes. Put more concretely, while some users post a series of parodies of American Apparel ads, a range of other users make an effort to incorporate and embrace the style of the adverts. However, all these images refer back to American Apparel and develop its aesthetics along multiple lines. In the case of American Apparel, consumer participation creates multiple focal points by partly detaching the aesthetics from the brand, altering, bending and transforming it and thus re-attaching it to the brand in different ways (Callon & Méadel, 2002; Foster, 2011). However, this does not entail the deformation of American Apparel's aesthetic into any possible form. The aesthetic does not open up to an unbounded and arbitrary deformation but, instead, a multifocal and fragmented one, organised by local deformation yet remaining invariant.

### **Reiteration and the Becoming Partible of Brands**

Such dynamics of deformation which create multiple instances of change for brands pose the central focal point of what has emerged as being co-creative or collaborative approaches to branding. Dove and American Apparel make many efforts to create environments, which at the same time assemble new social relations and incentivise consumers to deform aspects of the brand. Dove, for instance, makes particular use of the Facebook Page - featuring 7.5 million fans - to repeatedly pose questions regarding self-esteem or their bodily experience, such as "Who are your inspirational beauties?" (May 11, 2012), "To me, being self-confident means \_\_\_\_\_" (April 2, 2012), "Is your mum on Facebook yet? Tag her here to show her how beautiful you think she is!" (November 26, 2011). Each post receives around 300-400 likes and comments by fans, providing an instance of constant interaction between the brand and consumers in which consumers are prompted to tell their experiences, feelings and attachments. Dove repeats similar questions weekly, alternating the theme, yet focusing on issues around body norms and bodily confidence.

A selection of posts by the Dove Facebook Pages



Figure 5: A selection of status posts on Dove's Facebook Page.

This example draws attention to a further key point in relation to the invariance of brands: the question of duration, repetition and reiteration, the need to constantly enact and re-enact brands, social relations and issues. The repeating questions posted on Dove's Facebook wall create a recursive surface, exceeding the notion of the feedback loop put forward by Lury (2004). The productive character of this feedback loop not only lies in generating consumer insights, but also contributes to the becoming topological of brands and their issue. In this context, recursivity and feedback loops are no longer informational, but refer to processes of repeated enactment and transformation of the brand in social relations.

In the case of American Apparel, the notion of recursivity gains even further prominence. The brand developed its key aesthetics around 2001/2002 and since then has repeatedly varied their key themes. Combining an amateurish photographic look with white backgrounds and black Helvetica fonts, the brand has used the same look with slight variations for almost ten years now. In recent years, American Apparel responded to consumers' willingness to participate in this repetition and developed a series of participative avenues with which to channel their engagement with the brand's aesthetics into forms that can be utilised by the brand. Among the first instances was the still ongoing call for models and the possibility to apply to become American Apparel store staff. American Apparel also regularly caters to consumers' desire to take up, embody and transform their looks in model competitions, for instance in their Best Bottom competition in 2010<sup>31</sup> in which consumers were asked to take pictures of their backside in American Apparel underwear and upload them onto the competition website. Website visitors were invited to vote for the best entry and comment on the submissions. The best-ranked female and male contributions were promised a set of products and would feature as models for the upcoming American Apparel underwear campaign. A total of 1364 women and 183 men took part. The winning female picture received 496,870 views, 5,644 ratings and 65 comments; the winning male was viewed 126,257 times, scored 889 ratings and got 14 comments. While I return to the ways in which the context enables the enactment of bodies and sexuality in Chapters 5 and six, what is of interest here is the impact of repetition and reiteration which are not only built into, but are constitutive of, such contests.

The numerous entries pose an endless chain of imagines seeking to embody, yet transform, American Apparel's look. This reiteration is paired with the becoming partible of these entries (Foster, 2011; Strathern, 1990): While participants seek to partially attach themselves to the brand and its aesthetics, they also strive to create their individual interpretation of it. A participant writes on her blog:

But as soon as I saw my pics, all of my concerns melted away. Does that hot donk belong to me? I was so pleasantly surprised by the beauty of my own behind I decided I had to enter my bum in the AA competition. This initial positive feeling has been strengthened when being reflected in positive comments. (Anonymous, 2010)

Such co-creative branding practices thus enact and capitalise on brands' capacity to remain invariant under deformation and create climates of reiteration and recombination. What is recombined, however, is not only the brand and its aesthetics, but the relation between the contest's participants and voters, as organised through the emerging ranking.

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<sup>31</sup> <http://www.americanapparel.net/storefront/ugcstyle/bestbottom2010>

## Social Ordering

The ranking emerging in user-voted competitions introduces a particular form of social ordering in which contestants are positioned and inclined against each other based on the votes and comments they receive. The contest creates an infrastructure that incentivises visitors to vote for, and thus assign value to, the contributions. As a consequence, each contestant receives a score that determines their position on a scale, while the figure on the score is produced by the voting activities of other users. Hence, the ranking system relates participants to each other in an ordinal chain, that is, in a well-ordered sequence (Guyer, 2004, 2010), in which one participant follows another and in which movement is constrained to achieving better or lower scores than other users. As Alain Badiou puts it: “(i)n the ordinal view, number is thought as a link in a chain, it is an element of a total order” (Badiou, 2008: 31). Yet as the position of entrants on this ranking is defined by the voting activities of other users and the addition of potential new entrants, their position in this ordinal sequence is constantly subject to change as the ordering mechanism is open to new entries and new votes.

In this openness of the ranking, all participants and voters continuously relate to each other through difference. In Guyer’s terms (2010), user generated rankings based on individual scores simultaneously create relations of equality and difference between testers, connecting them to each other as proportionate competitors, whilst demarcating differences between them by locating them in relation to each other in terms of their relative position. This constant movement results from the reiterative character of the competition, allowing ever more people to cast their votes or submit their images. Until the context finishes, the relations between all participants are continuously altered and rearranged as a multi-focal form of becoming.

It is exactly this interplay between ordinality and multi-focal change that has been at stake in the second major contest initiated by American Apparel. In order to launch its newly introduced range of large sizes, American Apparel initiated ‘The Next Big Thing’ in 2011,<sup>32</sup> asking women with size 12 and above to upload pictures of themselves and to get rated by the public. American Apparel claimed: “Think you’re bigger, better and more booty-ful than the rest? Submit a recent photo of your face and physique for a chance to be our Next BIG Thing. (...) Calling curvy ladies everywhere!” (American Apparel, 2011). The winner was offered a ‘bootylicious photo shoot’ for the next advertising campaign. The contest received a total of 991 accepted submissions. While the majority of the entries embraced and repeated American Apparel’s aesthetic, it was

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<sup>32</sup> <http://www.americanapparel.net/storefront/ugcstyle/modelsearch2011/browse.asp>

the mocking entry of the Nancy Upton which gained most popularity and attention. The artist felt irritated and offended by the “puns, the insulting, giggly tones, and the over-used euphemisms for fat” (Upton, 2011a) of the brand’s communication and created a sarcastic visual response. On the one hand she imitated the amateurish aesthetics of the brand, the intimacy of private settings and the half-naked and sensual posing of the campaign - but while doing so, she pictured herself eating and playing with plenty of food featuring the line ‘I just can’t stop eating’.

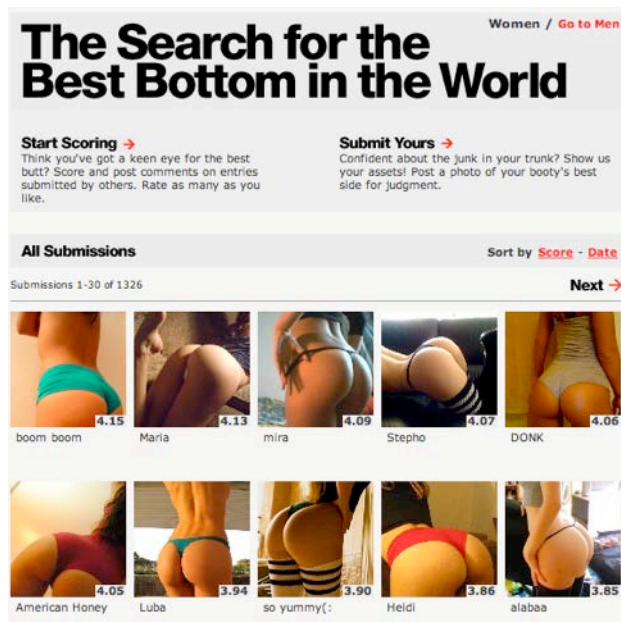
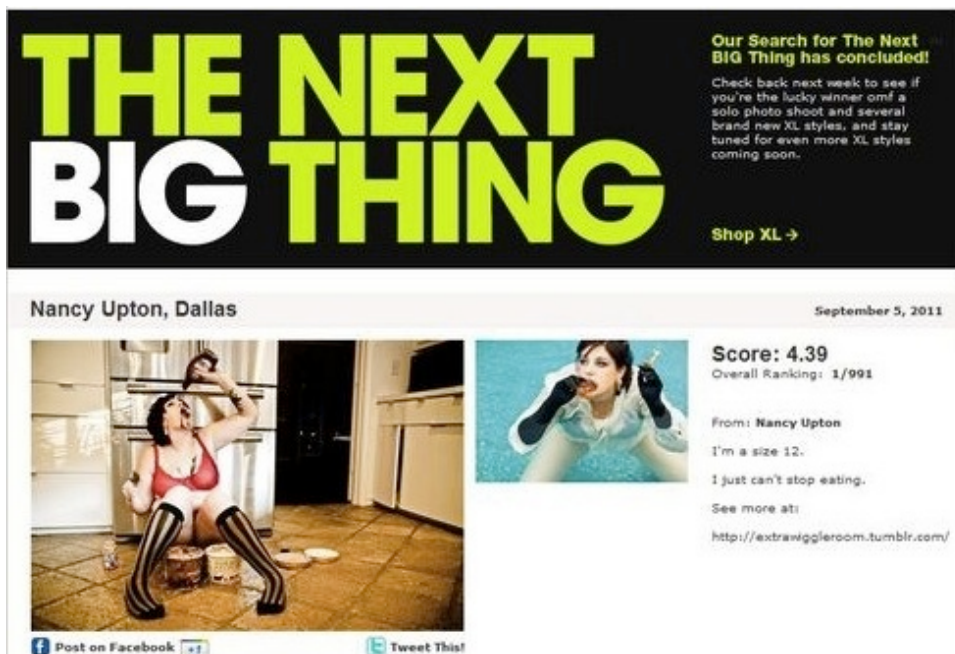


Figure 6: American Apparel Best Bottom contest and The Next Big Thing contest.



Upton argues that American Apparel’s attempt to set up an inclusive campaign which claims to celebrate diverse bodies is hypocritical and even dangerous: “American Apparel was going to try to use one fat girl as a symbol of apology and acceptance to a



demographic it had long insisted on ignoring.“ (Upton, 2011a). Shortly after her entry was submitted, Upton received a great degree of attention in both news and blogosphere and her entry was voted first place by users. American Apparel, however, did not accept her as the winner of the ‘bootylicious photo shoot’ due to the sarcastic nature of her entry. Instead, the company sent Upton, but also 20 fashion blogs, a public statement:

Firstly, we are very sorry that we offended you. Our only motive was to discover and celebrate the many beautiful XL women around the globe who enjoy our brand, and to promote the recent size additions to our collection. (...) It’s a shame that your project attempts to discredit the positive intentions of our challenge based on your personal distaste for our use of light-hearted language, and that ‘bootylicious’ was too much for you to handle. (Upton, 2011b)

Upton’s contribution is interesting as it introduces such a local deformation to the brands’ aesthetics which changes the entire climate and atmosphere of the contest, shifting attention away from the mere reiteration of the style by using the brand’s visual codes to introduce a glitch into them. The contest was no longer perceived as an inclusive campaign featuring larger size models, but mainly discussed in relation to Upton’s entry - as I show in Chapter 4 in relation to its coverage in news and blogs. Upton’s contribution therefore deformed the aesthetics of the brand in a direction that was not directly desired by the company, but also altered the public attention given to the campaign, introducing yet another focal point to its discussion.

This section has taken the idea of social assemblages and boundary making further by asking what do social relations do to brands? And what do brands do to social relations? Inserting brands into existing relations and creating new relations enables processes of invariance under deformation in which brands and their issues are deformed and appropriated in different life contexts, a process which I have addressed as the becoming topological of brands, as changing whilst remaining the same, while these changes can only be addressed locally or from the inside.

## **Conclusion – Multiple Social Assemblages**

This chapter has mapped out the role of social relations and sociality in the context of Dove and American Apparel. It has offered a perspective on the role of sociality in contemporary branding that gives attention to the multiplicity and distributedness of relations and their constant de- and recomposition. In doing so, I have diverted from the centrality of the brand tribe or brand community put forward in marketing and sociological discourse on brands (Arvidsson, 2006; Cova & Pace, 2006; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001), but have suggested instead to think brand sociality as a set of social

assemblages (DeLanda, 2006, 2011). I traced the assemblages relevant to American Apparel and Dove and the processes that animate their de- and recomposition. Here, the excess of inclusion over belonging came to matter, as actors and brands can be included into many assemblages, but the process of inclusion can be more or less open. In the case of American Apparel, consumers can become included in the specific assemblages of the brands when recombining and transforming the aesthetics of their local hipster culture.

The final section turned to the impact brands actually have on sociality and the sociality of brands. It engaged with this concern by focusing on what holds the social assemblages together: it is not necessarily the brand itself, but the shared aesthetics of American Apparel or the issue of body norms for Dove. If, in the case of American Apparel, inclusion to social assemblages is subject to one's contribution to this shared aesthetic or issue, being part of an assemblage, or participating in it, contributes to the deformation of the shared aesthetics whilst it remains recognisable. From this perspective, the brand and its aesthetics are becoming topological or invariant under deformation and can only to be addressed from the inside (DeLanda, 2002; Duffy, 2006; James, 1999).

The chapter concludes with the claim that co-creative branding approaches which seek to involve consumers and pre-structure their activities, deploy exactly this interplay between assembling social relations and setting in motion processes of recombination. What is recombined are usually aspects central to the brand, such as its values, issues or visual elements, yet, not the brand itself. Furthermore, such a recombination requires a certain degree of reiteration and duration. I drew on Dove's Facebook presence and American Apparel's online contest to show how they are set up as ambiances of deformation: making offers to consumers to engage with the key theme of the brand as a means of recombining it and partly attaching it to consumer' lifeworlds. Dove's Facebook page poses a long reiteration of questions about how their fans feel, what they think about their bodies and what gives them confidence. American Apparel's modelling contests, on the other hand, appear as a chain of images which at the same time try to achieve the look of the brand while adding one's own twist. However, what is being deformed in these modelling contests is also the organisation of the relations between the entrants. Once a picture has been uploaded, participants are voted and commented upon and the other users' response inclines them on the ordinal scale of the ranking. The particular social assemblage emerging here creates a social ordering based on difference and relationality.

To conclude, the chapter started off with Zuckerberg's claim that in the future, industries will be organised around the social. It developed a particular outlook to approach, trace and map sociality in relation to brands. To understand the relation between social and economic life in this context, sociality has to be addressed as a multi-focal and multi-layered ontology with different relations of proximity, inclusion and duration. It is the interplay between the invariance and deformation of the brand that allows for the assembling of these relations and, so I argue in the next chapters, allows them to become productive for companies. Moreover, the role of both issues and environments has constantly moved into focus, bringing to attention that sociality cannot be thought of independently from spaces and societal concerns related to the brand. In the next chapter, I therefore turn my attention to brand spaces and their embeddedness in social relations.

# 4

## Brand Spaces

Spaces and - more broadly conceived - environments and ambiances, have recently attracted growing attention in social and cultural theory (Buchanan, 2005; Crang & Thrift, 2000; Thrift & French, 2002; Warf & Arias, 2008; West-Pavlov, 2009). Rather than understanding space as a foil or mere background on which interactions take place, the performative and more than representational capacities of space have become of pivotal interest. Spaces are discussed as living processes (Ingold, 2000), as forms of organising relationships (Sloterdijk, 2009, 2010; Sloterdijk & Hoban, 2011), as enabling ongoing forms of measurement and modulation (Thrift, 2005, 2008), and as bearing both intensive and extensive capacities (DeLanda, 2002). They are considered as being capable of self-differentiation or autospacialisation (Châtelet, 2000, 2006), or understood as increasingly topological - that is, self-referential - continuous and independent from external coordinates (Duffy, 2006; Richeson, 2008; James, 1999).

This chapter departs from the observation that the making of social relations in branding processes is often entangled with the making of spaces. It seeks to think the becoming of brands together with the becoming of spaces or, put differently, to trace and map the spatialisation of the case studies on Dove and American Apparel. Following from the discussion of brands as increasingly distributed, which unfolded in the literature review, and their relational embeddedness as discussed in Chapter 3, this chapter turns to the role of physical, digital and other media spaces in contemporary branding. It asks how the relational experience of brands is tied up with a spatial one and how boundary making processes play out in space. After mapping the multiple relations brands create and are created in, I turn now to their becoming in relation to space. As a part of the overall endeavour of the thesis to investigate branding as boundary making practice and to trace its immersion into social life and vice versa, spaces pose a crucial starting point and give consideration to the understanding of

brands as operating through the creation of worlds (Lazzarato, 2004), ambiances (Arvidsson, 2006) or climates (Sloterdijk, 2009). However, this chapter is not limited to strategically created and so-called branded spaces (Cronin, 2010; Moor, 2007) which have previously dominated the discourse of brands and space, but takes a wider set of spaces into consideration, which are both made by and make brands. The focus on spatiality not only allows the exploration of the making of brands and participation, but also introduces a particularly post-social perspective to the becoming of brands, giving consideration to the performative capacities of spaces, environments and, as I show, media (Knorr-Cetina & Bruegger, 2002; Latour, 2007; Marres, 2012a).

This chapter departs from the two central case studies on Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty and American Apparel and traces the spaces that come to matter to consumers and companies. Mapping the interplay of multiple spaces connected to the case studies, it gives attention to the ways in which these spaces bring together but are also defined by brands, actors, practices, issues and aesthetics. I explore how consumers and other actors engage with brands in different spaces, most notably online, asking if there is space-specific engagement with brands. From here, I move on to address the productive capacities of brand spaces, their potential to produce certain affects, activities and interaction rather than others by focusing on the American Apparel store. The last section returns to the relation between the economic and the social and asks how brand spaces might be entangled in the boundary making between them, focusing particularly on online spaces. Taking this specific pathway through the empirical material allows me to draw a more general conclusion on encountering brands, the centrality of the logo and the idea of the brand as interface (Lury, 2004). Brands, I conclude, cannot be encountered and engaged with as such, but rather function as forces or virtual capacities that enable spatialisation and materialisation (DeLanda, 2002).

### **Brand/ed Spaces**

My interest in spaces as key elements of contemporary branding emerged during my interviews with American Apparel consumers. When asked to describe other American Apparel consumers or when invited to share their associations about the brand, interviewed consumers repeatedly referred to specific spatialisations of the brand, relating it to physical places, areas, locations but also media formats, while connecting these spaces to particular social groups:

CG: Who are the people who would buy American Apparel?

RS: East London kids. (Laughs). I guess that there are also some younger kids as well but then again, it is not that cheap. I think, if you wanted to look like that you could probably do it, I mean, I don't know. I definitely think it is an east London trendy thing to wear. Like, because I live in East London. You definitely see a lot of American Apparel, particularly on young guys around Hoxton in pubs and stuff.

Another consumer outlines this folding of the brand, its style, spaces and a particular style-based community further, situating it in relation to very specific locations in London:

CG: So American Apparel got too broad to be still attractive to you, so too many people wear it?

GM: Yeah.

CG: Its edgy position you mentioned earlier is kind of gone?

GM: Yeah. It was very associated with the party scene in Shoreditch. A lot of gay friends of my age were wearing a lot of American Apparel.

CG: How would you describe the style of that party scene?

GM: That style was a bit declining, like East London. Two years ago it was a big electro scene, gay mainly, for instance in Shoreditch and Hackney. There are still many related electro clubs and gay clubs. Like the Joiners, or the Catch in Shoreditch or the Image in Hackney. Moustache bar in Dalston. Now there is Dalston Superstore, which is now the favourite club which is very famous for this style.

A three-way relation between brand, spaces and social assemblages emerges here, as American Apparel appears in spaces associated with the hipster community in London (Haddow, 2008; N+1, 2010). The presence of the brand in these particular urban spaces is hence tied up with its embeddedness in social relations and vice versa.

Such an intermingling between social and spatial relations also surfaced when I asked interviewees to share their associations about American Apparel. The key emerging terms are: 'hipster culture', Vice magazine, Dazed and Confused or ID. Besides physical locations, media spaces such as the above listed magazines are considered key as, so interviewees stress, they are part of hipster culture; they function as key touch points with both the brand and the associated social assemblage through advertisements and related aesthetics. Interviewed consumers also outline how they regularly encounter American Apparel clothes and styles in bars, street markets or electronic clubs that are considered 'hipsterish', as well as in art schools.

Two key considerations follow from this. Firstly, spaces appear as crucial to the engagement with the brand, yet not only spaces designed by the brand itself, but also spaces in which the brand appears, is used or discussed, such as in clubs, bars, urban areas or media spaces. Secondly, sociality and space appear to be entangled in a specific

way in the case of American Apparel. They evolve around particular notions of urban hipster culture (N+1, 2010), a style-based collective which came to be renowned for its ironic remediation of past styles, tastes and cultural artefacts. Although perceived as a global formation based on shared aesthetics (N+1, 2010), the interviewed consumers experience their encounters with hipster culture as highly localised and tied up with urban spaces and media formats. Most interestingly, it is not necessarily the brand itself that is connected to the spaces listed above, but it is the brand's association with hipster culture which is then connected to the actual spaces.

So far, the discussion of spaces and brands has mainly evolved around the branding of space as location in sociology and marketing theory, that is in cities, regions and countries (Anholt, 2007, 2009), or the strategic creation of branded environments, such as flagship stores (Cronin, 2010; Moor, 2003, 2007). What emerges in the context of American Apparel, however, is a set of spaces that are not deliberately created by the brand, yet associated with it. These spaces function as touch points, yet not only between brands and consumers, as suggested by Lury (2004), but also between consumers and other stakeholders brought together through the brand. They bring to attention a wider idea of thinking about the spatiality of brands, one which is not limited to so-called strategically designed branded spaces, but takes all spaces in which consumers and other stakeholders encounter the brand or encounter each other in relation to the brand into account. Following from here, I introduce a wider notion of brand spaces, as opposed to *branded* spaces, taking the making and happening of spatiality into account.

Connected through the hipster community and the brand, the above listed clubs, bars and media outlets are both more than and less than brand spaces, they are touchpoints informed by and informing the brand and provide environments for its negotiation. The notion of the touchpoint is a term often deployed in marketing theory (Barrow & Mosley, 2005; Schmitt & Rogers, 2008) to refer to points of contact, either physically or digitally, between corporations and consumers. In the context of this thesis, it is deployed as points of contact with brands but also in relation to brands, a perspective that does not privilege the encounter between consumers and brands only, but also directs attention to how brands enable consumers to meet each other. What users recognise, what they encounter in such spaces, is not only the brand American Apparel, but the particular use of the branded product, embodied in the style of the hipster community, such as the brand's basic T-Shirts, scarves, shiny leggings or bags, all styled in a way so that the specific look of the brand remains recognisable. Of course, a key element of the American Apparel brand is the absence of a branded logo (Moor & Littler,

2008), so what consumers encounter in these brand spaces is a shared visual aesthetic and a common style, encompassing fashion, music, urban spaces and club culture. In the case of American Apparel, it is neither strategic branding efforts nor the circulation of the logo that hold brands, spaces and consumers together, it is the descending of the brand into social assemblages and its recombination and negotiation in different spaces. The key spaces - clubs, urban districts and magazines - function as brand spaces, but also as cultural or social spaces; they are not collapsed into so-called branded spaces, yet they are spaces related to the brand. Or to put it in Foster's terms, they are partible, partly attached to the brand and to hipster culture (Foster, 2011).

### **Relations of Spatiality**

Besides drawing attention to the idea of brand spaces, the case of American Apparel also brings to attention the multiplicity of these spaces and opens up the question of how the different spaces are related to, but also delineated from, each other? To address this concern, let me direct attention to the spaces in the case of Dove. As outlined in Chapter 3, Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty has been mainly animated by attaching the brand to the social issue of body and beauty norms. To achieve this, the brand has deployed a series of social relations which, so I argue in this chapter, come with particular forms of spatialisations. After the initial engagement with the issue through the Real Truth About Beauty report and the Real Women advertising campaign, Dove sought to enact a more long-term engagement with the cause and move beyond the discretised spaces of mass media. As a part of this endeavour, the external consultant Staniforth explains (2011), Dove set up the so-called Self Esteem Fund<sup>33</sup> in 2006, an organisation independent yet connected to Dove, equipped with an advisory board of academics, former models and charity spokespeople. Under the framework of the fund, the company developed a series of approaches to address people who are not part of their actual audience, most notably young girls. Even though they are unlikely to purchase the brand, young girls are considered to be affected by the issue of body norms, so Staniforth continues, and Dove sees them as being exposed to beauty pressure emerging from mass media, peers and family. The fund attempts to involve these girls through its educational section, quizzes, games and a series of viral videos. Among these videos is the viral clip 'Evolution'<sup>34</sup> which shows the fabrication of media beauty through the use of lighting, make-up and Photoshop. The clip gained particular attention online, featuring more than 14 million Youtube views, airing as a TV ad

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<sup>33</sup> <http://www.dove.co.uk/en/Our-Mission/default.aspx>

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYhCn0jf46U>



internationally and, together with the entire campaign, won several advertising and strategy prizes.<sup>35</sup> The fund also suggests this clip as video material for the Body Talk workshops in schools, which were introduced in Chapter 3.

However, it was only through the initial steps, the Real Truth About Beauty report and the ongoing Real Women campaign, that Dove's ambition to connect to the cause allowed the brand to establish relations and address the issue with wider sets of actors beyond its actual consumers. Susan Ringwood, CEO at the charity Beat UK reports, for instance, that the cooperation between her charity and the fund was mainly made possible through the brand's previous involvement in the cause and their long-term ambitions to ensure a degree of commitment to the issue. An interrelated nesting of relations and spaces emerges from here, as Dove as a corporate brand could not address young girls in a school environment directly, but was in need of a cooperating partner like Beat to get access to schools and mentor conversations. In order to get access to Beat, on the other hand, Dove needed to have launched its previous campaigns and events to show its involvement with the cause.

Just as with American Apparel, the engagement with Dove is organised alongside a series of touchpoints. The initial encounter, as I outlined in Chapter 3, often happens in the context of the family, as interviewed consumers reported they were introduced to the products by parents or other relatives. A further key space of encounter is the context of the product use, which often takes place in private homes in the morning or after a workday and which has been described as a moment of calm and withdrawal by interviewees. The encounter with the brand campaign in various media formats forms a further space, just as outdoor adverts or conversations with peers or family. Encountering Dove is hence not limited to spaces designed and defined by the brand, but rather entangled with its social assemblages which create a set of interconnected spaces. Brand spaces, in this sense, are not comprised of discrete entities, but emerge in relation to each other (DeLanda, 2002).

It is only through creating relations and being enacted in selected spaces that Dove actually succeeds in associating its brand with the cause. Both Moor (2007) and managerial accounts of brand management imagine the making of brand values as a process of translation, that is as "giv[ing] concrete physical form to abstract values and concepts" (Moor, 2007: 143). Departing from this notion, my spatial perspective on branding suggests that the making and the materialisation of brand values are also

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<sup>35</sup> An overview of the marketing and advertising awards won together with the agency Ogilvy & Mather can be found here: <http://uk.adforum.com/agency/5066/awards>.

entangled with the immersion of brands into social relations and spaces. However, while some of these connections can be instantiated by the brand itself, some are happening based on consumer activities. Rather than imagining brand management as a process of translation from the abstract to the concrete, this particular perspective recalibrates the cycle of branding and draws attention to the continuation of brands into relations and space.

### Intensive Relations

The multiple spaces related to Dove are connected not only by the brand itself, or the logo as suggested by Lury (2004), but by the interplay between Dove and the issue of beauty and body norms, as well as the relations between various actors involved. Let me follow the question of what connects the different brand spaces further by returning to the case of American Apparel. As shown in Chapter 3, the brand strives for recognition through its shared aesthetics, embodied by the ways in which consumers wear the brand, in the brand's visual communication, brand events and flagship stores (Moor & Littler, 2008). In order to establish the brand's aesthetics as its key recognisable element, American Apparel was reliant on processes of happening in which consumers take up, transform and bring the brand into new use contexts, how they make it part of hipster culture, part of personal conversations or styling practices. Subsequently, if the connection between the brand and specific spaces is brought into being by consumer activities, changes in these activities might result in changes in the spatialisation of American Apparel. Various interviewed consumers stated that the brand is losing its central stance in the hipster community as it is being bought by the 'wrong' people and appears in the 'wrong' spaces, whilst gradually disappearing from the 'right' ones:

GM: Yeah, I used to buy them (American Apparel) like always. Now I don't really wear them anymore.

CG: Why?

GM: I don't know, they have changed. When I started it was like a new brand and a lot of people used to buy them and now it is not. It is not as cool as it used to be. They really got commercial, yeah. I used to see a difference between the Shoreditch branch and the High Street branch. Like the people Shoreditch were much ah... had a different style compared to the High Street branch....

American Apparel, this consumer quotation illustrates, is being experienced as becoming less 'cool', as its clothes appear in the wrong spatial contexts - more mainstream high-street environments - and are worn by people who are not considered to be included in the hipster related social assemblage of the brand.

Following this perspective further, the question of boundary making becomes of relevance. The increased appearance of American Apparel in high street environments might appear as a mere expansion of brand spaces into new spatial formations. However, the impact this appearance has on the brand's stance in hipster culture suggests otherwise, pointing to the fact that the reworking of the edges of brand spaces affects the brand in its very middle, in its constituting relations. It is experienced as fundamentally altering the consumer's experience of and attachment to the brand and brings to attention the making of boundaries in brand spaces as an intensive process, enacted as an interplay between consumers, space and brands.

The relations and boundaries between brand spaces are hence subject to constant, immanent change. They are not held together by external coordinates defined by the brand management. Instead, they are enacted from the inside, through continuous or discontinuous relations between consumers and the immersion of American Apparel's aesthetic into new consumer assemblages, practices and spaces. Brand spaces are thus not discrete entities, as what happens in one space - on the highstreet - bears the potential to affect other spaces - spaces connected to hipster culture. The multiplicity of brand spaces related to the case studies enact a nested set of spaces (DeLanda, 2002), in which each brand space relates to the others, as well as to the brands themselves, their issues and the actors involved.

### **Specificity of Spaces**

From focusing on the relations between spaces and their continuation into each other, I now direct attention to their specificity and their interplay, or more precisely, the interplay between specific spaces, brands and actors involved. In this section, I turn my attention to digital spaces to exemplify such an interplay. Departing from previous considerations of spaces as having performative capacities (Thrift, 2008), I trace the negotiation of brands in digital spaces, spheres and platforms by looking at how the brands are being taken up, acted upon or put into relation online. To give consideration to the specificity of digital spaces as potentially performative, the methodological approach deployed follows a medium-specific perspective (Rogers, 2009; 2012; Galloway, 2004; Hayles, 2004), that is, taking serious the ontological distinctiveness of digital spaces as well as repurposing them methodologically, as introduced in Chapter 2. A medium-specific approach allows for a focus on devices, actions and data 'native to the digital' to trace the specificity of brand spaces (Rogers, 2009), as well as their contribution to the happening of the brand.

## Web sphere

As a first step, I was interested in which contexts and relations both brands have appeared on the web and how these relations have transformed over time. Put differently, if people Google the respective brands, what kind of articles, websites, posts and content related to the brands do they encounter and what aspects of the brands are focused upon? Are there specific actors - websites, news sites, magazines or blogs - that repeatedly discuss the brands? How have the focal points of the results changed over time? For this purpose, I drew on the Lippmanian Device, also-called Google Scraper,<sup>36</sup> to retrieve the top Google results for the query “Campaign for Real Beauty” and for “American Apparel” ad\* for the period between 2004-2012.<sup>37</sup> The Google Scraper is a tool developed by the Digital Methods Initiative<sup>38</sup>, built on top of the search engine Google and repurposes the analytical capacities of Google by systematically extracting its search results. The idea behind this approach was to identify both key online sources referring to the brands and the topics these results bring into relation with the brands in order to trace recurring, dominant and emerging key themes or, more precisely, key words across the years. In a second step, I extracted the titles or headlines of the search results and determined the most frequent words, clustering the top 50 keywords with tagclouds. I deployed a frequency measure to see which themes, events, issues, activities or aspects related to the brand have been mentioned most often among the top Google results. The approach is based on the idea that Google, posing a key entry point to the web, in itself creates a specific brand space, defined by its search algorithm PageRank and the ways in which PageRank de- and reassembles web content in relation to a query.

Let me take a look at the results of this exercise. Figure 7 shows key words and actors for the query “Campaign for Real Beauty”<sup>39</sup>. As a first observation, the central key words remain fairly stable over the course of the years and within the most prominent ones, four key clusters emerge. The first cluster concerns the issue of body and beauty norms, entailing key words such as ‘body’, ‘women’, ‘girls’, ‘self’ and ‘esteem’, ‘image’, ‘model’, but also ‘media’. To identify the specific context in which the Campaign for Real

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<sup>36</sup> <http://tools.digitalmethods.net/beta/scrapeGoogle>

<sup>37</sup> For this purpose, I queried the Google Scraper for quarterly intervals for each year from 2004 to 2012 and combined the results for each quarter to gain an overview of the associated year. Each year, up to 2000 articles are being taken into account. In the case of Dove, only the years 2005-2011 could be taken into account.

<sup>38</sup> [www.digitalmethods.net](http://www.digitalmethods.net)

<sup>39</sup> In order to draw attention to related terms, the query terms, as well as navigational words (online, website, etc) and the brand’s name were removed from the dataset.

Tagclouds of Google result titles for “Campaign for Real Beauty” and their top 50 actors

2005



2006



2007



2008



2009



2010



2011



Figure 7: Tagclouds of Google result titles for “Campaign for Real Beauty” and their top 50 actors.

Beauty has been discussed in relation to women and girls, I did a subsequent exercise tracing the key words emerging in relation to the combination “Campaign for Real

Beauty” + women or girls, (see figure 8). The specific cluster for women is concerned with marketing and branding efforts, but also with bodily concepts. The key words occurring in relation to ‘girls’, however, focus on the Dove Self Esteem fund, the workshops, the various Youtube videos and viral clips addressing girls. This co-occurrence of key words indicates that the combined queries refer to web content which discussed the ways in which Dove’s campaign seeks to address women as part of their potential audience and girls as addressees for the activities of the Self Esteem Fund.

To return to the overall keyword tagclouds, the second cluster emerging over the years is concerned with framing Dove in a marketing debate, addressing key words such as ‘marketing’, ‘brand’, but also ‘case’ and ‘essay’. This cluster becomes especially apparent when looking into the key actors posting about the Campaign for Real Beauty. Here, slideshare.com, a presentation sharing website becomes increasingly prominent since 2008, later followed by scribd.com, adage.com and oppapers.com, indicating a marketing-related - but also student assignment- related - debate about the campaign. The third cluster addresses actual campaign elements. Among the actors, youtube features very prominently since 2006. The same year, ‘Evolution’ appears in the keywords and in 2007, it is ‘Onslaught’, the second most popular Dove viral clip. In the subsequent years, Evolution and/or Youtube remain present in the keywords, although decrease in frequency of mentions. The term ‘Age’, appearing in 2007 refers to the associated ProAge campaign, a spinoff of the Campaign for Real Beauty to advertising products against aging as embracing of that.

The fourth interesting cluster appears in 2008 and refers to terms such as ‘retouched’ and ‘digitally’. In May 2008, the professional retoucher Pascal Dangin talked about his retouching work for the Dove campaign during an interview with the New Yorker magazine (Collins, 2008). He explained that contrary to popular belief and against Dove’s promotional claims, the images of the Real Women campaign have indeed been digitally altered and retouched, following industry standards. His statement led to controversy and numerous allegations of hypocrisy against Dove, as the brand has not only criticised digital retouching but has also claimed to abstain from it. Responding to Dangin’s claims, Dove countered that the retouching work was kept at a minimum to adjust colours and the tone of the images, whilst bodies, shapes, skin and hair was not altered (Nolan, 2008). Besides, it is relevant to note that hardly any key words relate to Dove’s products or to Unilever, the corporate brand, but tend to focus on the impact of the campaign on marketing discourses and as an intervention in body and beauty norms. Returning to the key actors again, in recent years the focus has shifted towards an increasing presence of participatory and social media platforms, such as Youtube and

Facebook, followed by marketing and presentation- related webpages, whilst blogs or social organisations appear only infrequently.



Figure 8: Tagclouds of Google result titles for “Campaign for Real Beauty”+”girls” (top), “Campaign for Real Beauty”+”women” (bottom).

In the case of American Apparel, the identification of top key words referring to the brand itself - that is querying for “American Apparel” - only resulted in key words relating to products recently launched, on sale or advertised. To identify the more specific key words relating to its branding and campaign efforts, I decided to instead focus on the query “American Apparel” + ad\*,<sup>40</sup> tracing the discussion around the brand’s communication campaign, but also its aesthetics which, in the course of the thesis, have been identified as a key connecting element. The graphic below shows the top keywords - again, query terms, as well as generic and navigational terms as ‘News’, ‘Online’ and ‘Shop’ have been omitted - and the top actors. In contrast to the rather stable sets of key words over time in the case of Dove, Google results referring to American Apparel ads feature a higher degree of variation. Interestingly, until 2006, the

<sup>40</sup> The phrasing “ad\*” allows to query for all words starting with ‘ad’ including adverts, advertising, ads and others.







product and its further use contexts are focused upon, featuring key words relating to product materials such as ‘cotton’ and ‘jersey’, but also ‘shirt’, ‘tee’ and ‘printing’, which refer to the fact that American Apparel clothes have been used for personalised prints and further processing at the beginning of the 2000s. However, the product range is increasingly diversifying within the key words over the years. In 2008, the key word space alters significantly and draws attention to ‘Dov Charney’, ‘Woody Allen’, but also terms such as ‘model’, ‘sues’, ‘porn’, ‘marketing’ and ‘photo’, shifting attention from products to promotional efforts and controversies. It was in 2008 that American Apparel used a picture of director Woody Allen for a billboard ad, implying his endorsement of the brand without his formal consent, an instance which resulted in an ongoing dispute between the company CEO Charney and the director, followed by a lawsuit. In 2009, Woody Allen still dominates, however a new set of key words moved in: ‘banned’, referring to initial instances at which specific adverts were banned in selected countries, as well as the first appearance of former porn actresses in American Apparel ads, such as ‘Sasha Grey’. The key word ‘sluttiest’ refers to a list of “The 50 Sluttiest American Apparel Ads of All Time” published in March 2009.<sup>41</sup> The term ‘model’ remains prominent in every year since 2008, and so does the term ‘Women’. The latter mainly refers to the introduction of new products for women. The key words from 2010 are related to different events, first and foremost the ‘Best Bottom Contest’. At the same time, the keyword ‘nail’, referring to the introduction of a nail polish line, and first speculations about a possible bankruptcy and financial problems in the company occur. The year 2011 is dominated by the second major model contest, ‘The Next Big Thing’, a call for plus size models which was won by ‘Nancy Upton’. The artist submitted a mocking and critical entry, as discussed in Chapter 3, and gained much support and attention from media, blogs, but also users voting in this competition. Furthermore, ‘Dov Charney’ features prominently, as new allegations against him became known and long-term lawsuits about potential sexual harassment of employees became part of the debate.

In a second step, see figure 10, I explored further a set of more specific key word spaces relating to the most central terms emerging from this initial analysis. The findings for the query “American Apparel” and “best bottom” contest, for instance, outline two key sets of related articles: the ones focusing on informing readers about the competition, the finalists and the winner and articles featuring critical commentary or referring to critical responses.

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<sup>41</sup><http://stylecrave.com/2009-09-03/american-apparel-ads-the-50-hottest-in-company-history>

The findings for the query “American Apparel” and “The Next Big Thing” are mainly dominated by the winner Upton and her spoof rather than the contest itself. Here, the Google results reflect both the initial event and its effects and the affective capacities of Upton’s parody. Of further interest is the set of key words emerging in relation to the numerous “lawsuits” American Apparel faced over the last years. The findings most prominently feature the Woody Allen case again and the accusations against the CEO



Figure 10: Tagclouds of Google result titles for “American Apparel” + “Best Bottom Contest”



“American Apparel” + “The Next Big Thing”



“American Apparel” + “lawsuit”



“American Apparel” + “employee”

Charney, most notably the claim of sexual harassment of employees and journalists, but also the instance of him keeping one of his employees as a “sex slave”.<sup>42</sup> Further terms address questions of discrimination, disability, morals and workers. To explore the discussion of American Apparel employees and workers further, I queried for the terms “American Apparel” and “employee\*”. Here, we find a particularly biased set of terms, focusing again on the CEO and drawing attention to issues of (sexual) harassment, accusation, forcing, but also hiring procedures involving looks, photos and questions of immigration.

Mapping the emergence and variation of key words relating to American Apparel and Dove over time has enabled me to see the happening of the brand online, that is, its appearance in relation to a series of key focal points, issues and campaign instances. What the exercise addresses is invariance of the brand under deformation (Duffy, 2006). While referring to the same Google query, the associated and co-occurring terms change and are recombined over time, while they are all associated with or discussed in relation to the brand.

Repurposing Google (Marres & Weltevrede, 2012) in this context allows for the tracing of the making of space via the space itself, that is, deploying the analytical capacities of Google to study the ways in which Google creates specific brand spaces. The key word visualisations show how Google search results create a particular selection of search results in relation to the brands, in which specific actors discuss the brands in relation to changing themes and events. Most notably, however, such a tracing of key words brings to attention how the negotiation, discussion and content produced in relation to the brands happens alongside a series of perspectives and focal points. Google, in this sense, functions as a demarcation machine for engaging with brands online, as its PageRank algorithm provides access to a particular selection of web content referring to American Apparel or Dove. A particular notion of brand space emerges from this, a form of happening or animated space (Ingold, 2000), which is created not by, but in response to brands, and demarcated by the search engine. In a next step, I draw attention to the activities of web users as defining the specificity of brand spaces online.

## Youtube

The initial mapping exercise has shown that Youtube provides a central space in relation to Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty, and so do the viral clips produced in the context of

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<sup>42</sup> More on the legal accusations against Dov Charney can be found here: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/22/irene-morales-dov-charney\\_n\\_1373424.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/22/irene-morales-dov-charney_n_1373424.html)

the Self Esteem Fund. The most prominent clip is Dove Evolution, featuring 14 million views, almost 8,000 Youtube comments, 85,674 Facebook shares a 44,872 Facebook Likes. The video has been tagged over 500 times on Delicious. As the tag cloud below depicts, it has been perceived in the overall campaign setting, as well as in regard to the media with which it deals. The predominance of the tag 'photoshop' is interesting, as the way the movie presents the impact of digital airbrushing is considered most crucial.

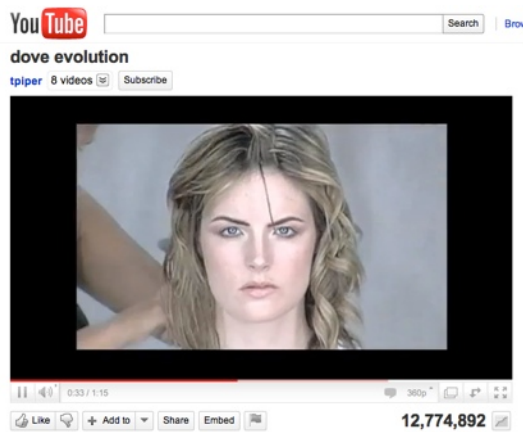
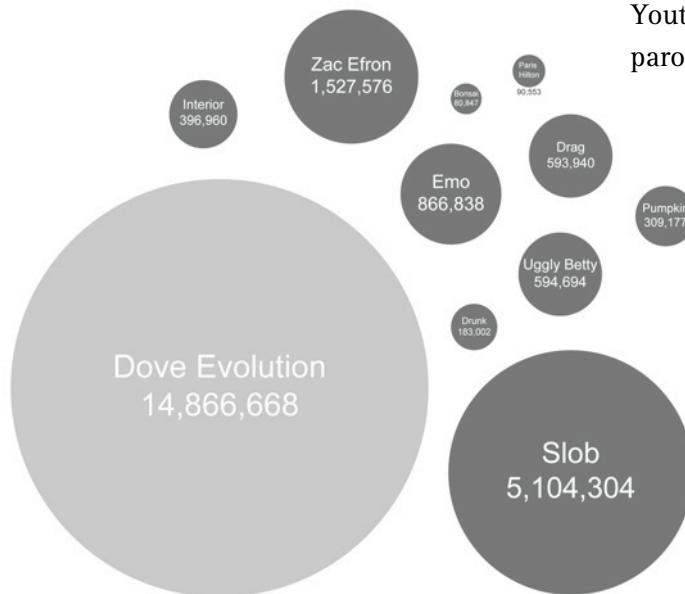


Figure 11: Screenshot from Dove 'Evolution', Delicious tag cloud for 'Evolution' and Youtube viewcounts for related parodies, spoofs and remakes.



The study of Delicious tags provides a metricised indication of how the video has affected both the population and other spaces. To give consideration to the affective implications of the video, the intensive transformation it went through becomes of interest. The Evolution clip has led to a range of parodies, spoofs and ironic remakes, each of which draws on the original's particular aesthetics, music and montage and brings them into a different, and often mocking, context. Among the most viewed

parodies is 'Slob Evolution',<sup>43</sup> a video that shows the transformation of a good-looking young male into an unhealthy, big and older version. Other parodies depict the transformation of a man into a women<sup>44</sup>, or vice versa, as well as transformations of actors, media figures or everyday objects. By reworking the original clip, the parodies - but also the numerous more serious and endorsing remakes - contribute to the aesthetic impact of the original evolution clip and turn it into a meme, a morphing viral topic, designed to change, yet referring to its original form (Parikka, 2007; Sampson, 2012).<sup>45</sup> Most interestingly, the parody spots feature comparatively large view counts compared to the original (see figure 11), suggesting that they receive attention and are being shared among users as well. Here, the notion of invariance under deformation or becoming topological (Duffy, 2006; Lury, 2009) are of relevance: it is not only the brand itself or its aesthetics and issues which are being taken up by a series of actors to be recombined and transformed into new contexts, but also specific instances and elements of the campaign, such as viral videos in the case of Dove.

The set of digital spaces mapped out in this section all allow for multiple perspectives on brands, multiple ways of making sense of and acting on brands, and multiple ways of deforming both brands and their issues or aesthetics. The movement engendered here is not only a movement of information, but a movement of form, association and action, or put differently, a movement of distributed deformation of the brands' issues, aesthetics and campaign elements. As it has been shown, this movement is not entirely free floating but specific to digital spaces, allowing the extension of the notion of medium-specificity into a more general space-specificity of brand spaces.

Such digital spaces not only feature generative and performative capacities, they also animate just as they are being animated themselves (Lash & Lury, 2007). The interplay between brands, spaces, actors and issues deploys a relational mode of becoming, operating intensively from the inside. In his discussion of landscapes, Ingold addresses such animacy as follows:

That generative field is constituted by the totality of organism-environment relations, and the activities of organisms are moments of its unfolding. Indeed once we think of the world on this way, as a total movement of becoming which builds itself into the forms we see, and in which each form takes shape in continuous relation to those around it, then the distinction between the animate and the inanimate seems to dissolve. (Ingold, 2000: 200).

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<sup>43</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-kSZsvBY-A>.

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZBtZiR7X-QI>.

<sup>45</sup> A more detailed discussion of the role of memes can be found in Chapter 5.

Whilst each of these spatial dynamics reflects back on the brands involved, they materialise, become and morph alongside different vectors, remaining invariant under multi-focal deformation. Yet, such multi-focal deformations also apply to the spaces themselves, as social media platforms in particular are designed to differ and change based on the specific activities they allow the actors involved to perform, the real-time participation that they enable and algorithmic orderings that they deploy (Gehl, 2011; Marres & Weltevrede, 2012; Berry, 2011; Gillespie, 2010;). In a next step, I take the idea of space-specificity further by focusing on a specific space, the American Apparel flagship store, and ask: what is it that this brand space can actually do?

### **Affective Surfaces**

Let me now explore the proclaimed specific and performative capacities of spaces in relation to the making and experiencing of American Apparel's flagship store. These flagship stores are American Apparel's most important retail space beside its online store and recurrent pop-up sales. The company has 300 stores which can be found in the urban areas of 19 countries worldwide, predominantly in the USA and Europe. Due to their target market of "young metropolitan adults (20-32 years) in major urban markets with disposable income" (American Apparel, 2012) the stores are mainly opened in so-called young and well-frequented areas, but increasingly appear in High Street shopping environments. They can be recognised by recurring design features such as harsh neon lighting, industrial elements, metal frames, large adverts on the walls or warehouse inspired details, such as brick walls painted in white, black or grey. The actual shop floors are designed to appear as small boutiques, are rather narrow and feature a large amount of products. Male and female sections frequently blur into each other, accompanied by large unisex areas, both of which have been widely appreciated by consumers, as my interviews have showed. Besides their own products, selected stores offer vintage apparel, jewellery or sunglasses, and exhibit art and lifestyle related magazines and books, such as Vice<sup>46</sup> or Butt,<sup>47</sup> among others.<sup>48</sup>

Interviewed consumers voiced mixed responses regarding the store design:

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<sup>46</sup> <http://www.vice.com>

<sup>47</sup> [www.buttmagazine.com](http://www.buttmagazine.com). There has been a controversy about the display of Butt magazine as it features nude photography of men: <http://www.edgenewengland.com/index.php?ch=style&tsc=fashion&tsc3=&tid=87977>.

<sup>48</sup> On a regular basis American Apparel co-operates with electric music artists, for instance Sebastian Tellier or Simian Mobile Disco, to sell the artists' latest releases, as well as special fan T-Shirts. The stores mainly play electronic music that consumers have described as "not too experimental and not too popular either".

PK: Generally I hate bright lights above everything. (Laughs) But actually, ahm... in those shops I am quite fine with it. Because I really love, I really love the design of the shops. It looks so good, they have really succeeded in... in... because everything fits. It is like a small... it is like a small universe in itself. Everything is really perfect, it is really... (...) I think it is just that, it is just beautiful. Yeah.

The phrase ‘everything is really perfect’ is of particular interest, indicating that the space is perceived as fully embodying the values and aesthetics of the brand, but is also evaluated upon this capacity. More critical perspectives, however, consider this perfection as too keen and too conscious an attempt to fabricate aesthetic ambiances and experiences, as it is actually revealing the strategic efforts put into this emulation of a workshop space and therefore collapses into its own simulation:

FD: It is sort of faux industrial in a way, the way they use sort of caging and the way they use harsh, strip lights. Everything is white and black and very sort of... I mean it is sort of in a way, I don't know if it's meant to sort of emulate being in a workshop. I am not particularly a fan of that.



Figure 12: American Apparel Flagship Store London



While the reactions to the store design divert widely, the responses to its staff are even more controversial. Interviewed consumers reported that they generally do not consider American Apparel store staff as helpful or assisting, but rather as an embodiment of the brand, as being both a model and an archetype consumer of the brand's products. The following quotation shows that because of this perspective, their encounter with the staff fosters consumers' self-awareness and self-monitoring, comparing themselves to the idealised version of the brand's consumer:

PK: One of my friends in Stockholm works in American Apparel... but she is actually... too cool for American Apparel. I have never seen her wearing American Apparel. I don't think she does because she is actually a bit above that, because she is very, very fashionable... but... they sort of use cool people to... ahm... ahm, I don't know... to make, to make the brand cooler. (...)

CG: So you like going to the store?

PK: Yes. But I would be a bit intimidated if I would be a bit less cool than I am. (laughs)

CG: Do you think some people get intimidated?

PK: I think so yeah. I think everyone could go to H&M. But I don't... ahm... I don't think... everyone would go to American Apparel.

Although the majority of interviewed consumers take joy in the style-preoccupied staff and the subtle exclusivity or gate keeping function they perform, several interviewees complained that the looks, attitude and behaviour of the staff create an experience of being evaluated and evaluating oneself, checking if one's look indeed lives up to the shared aesthetics:

AK: Usually I don't really care if I don't look good, I go to the supermarket wearing my tracksuit if I feel like that. But I would never go to an American Apparel store like that. I would not go there wearing things like I am wearing today. When I go there I am very aware how I look and I think all the time what they would think of me. Because they always seem to belong to a club that I cannot be part of. I don't know, I never feel like that usually, just when I go to their store.

What emerges from this experience is an intensive process of boundary making that is both spatial and social. The boundaries of the store - and thus to the social assemblage - are not negotiated by denying people access, but by instantiating a climate of mutual evaluation. While some consumers enjoy the inspiration they gain from staff, others feel intimidated and the personnel themselves experience different levels of pressure or enjoyment from working in such a style-concerned framework. As I show in Chapters 5 and 6, store personnel themselves have to go through a series of boundary making events as their look, style, attitude and grooming are evaluated in the application

processes and carefully managed while working for American Apparel. One main responsibility of store assistants is to embody the brand's style akin to a live mannequin, an ideal customer or role model, performing their capacity to be 'cool', as discussed in Chapter 3. In doing so, store staff hold a topological boundary making function, creating ambiances in which only consumers who are either self-confident or enact the desired aesthetics feel welcome, while others do not, regulating the participation of actors from the inside.

Becoming, in these encounters, is a becoming both in space and in relation (Sloterdijk, 2011; Thrift, 2008), in which the store emerges as an affective surface or intensive movement space, creating climates of monitoring and responsivity, which are experienced in different ways. Although there has been considerable interest in the affective capacities of spaces (Julier, 2008; Moor, 2007; Pine et al., 1999), these authors have mainly focused on the deliberate creation of sensation, experience and affect through strategic means of design and brand engagement. Undeniably, these dynamics are at stake in the American Apparel store, but they are responded to in heterogeneous ways by consumers and are furthermore connected to the multiple other encounters with, or in relation to, the brand. In this sense, the affective capacities of the American Apparel store emerge as both distributed across staff, consumers, management, design and other spaces.

Creating a climate of immanent evaluation and boundary making, the flagship store functions as a frame, seeking to engender certain sensations, experiences and actions rather than others. Such affective spatial capacities have been widely discussed regarding notions of framing in branding theory (Lury, 2004; Moor, 2004, 2007; Arvidsson, 2006), or experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). However, they can also be addressed as producing a particular temporal continuity or climates of anticipation (Thrift, 2008; Sloterdijk, 2009) in which a desired future is shaping the present (Grusin, 2010). The American Apparel store operates as a style-preoccupied climate in which consumers and staff either feel inspired or observed, but are immediately aware of what is at stake when entering the store: one's look and one's style, as well as the alignment of its becoming with the becoming of the brand. Through design, the intensive dynamics of monitoring and evaluation and the activities of other consumers, as well as processes of recruitment and brand engagement, the store enacts the 'preemptive remediation of the yet to come', to speak with Richard Grusin (2010), directing consumers and staff to engage with the brand's aesthetics in ways aligned with American Apparel's brand values. Grusin addresses such processes as premediation, akin to Arvidsson's notion of pre-structuring consumer activities and affective investments

(2006). Contemporary media culture, Grusin claims, is increasingly rendered into a video game in which the programme code might not fully determine the players' actions, but does encourage particular moves over others. He contends that "medial formations also contribute to the production of a collective affective orientation towards a particular future" (Grusin, 2010: 48), making particular futures and activities not only more likely to happen, but as already impacting on the present. The encounter of brands in such spatial formations thus has at its core the boundary of the future, seeking to create ongoing relations between brands, consumers and space, but also trying to premeditate consumer affect, activities and relations. It is a fragile and intensive boundary, as it needs to be realised through different actors in different spaces continuously.

### **Boundary Making and the Social Web**

So far, this chapter has introduced the notion of brand spaces as addressing a series of touchpoints with brands, which can be either strategically created by brand management or created through the activities of consumers. These spaces enable specific encounters with the brand, in relation to different contexts, themes and relations, however, they also impact on each other and attempt to impact on potential future encounters and affects. This final section seeks to take these considerations further, as well as back to the more general question of how brand spaces organise and are entangled in processes of boundary making between social and economic life. For this purpose, I turn to the social media platform Facebook and explore how the introduction of Facebook's Social Plugins, such as the Like or Share Button for the entire web, enables web users to potentially connect any web content to the platform therefore not only creating a nested set of brand spaces online, but also setting in motion a transformation of social interaction into specific data points and thus, potentially, economic value.

Since the launch of the social media platform<sup>49</sup> in 2004, Facebook has increasingly expanded beyond the limits of its core platform to connect to and incorporate ever more social activities online. A key instance in its endeavour to connect to the entire web was the introduction of the possibility of implementing Facebook's key activity features - the Like, share and commenting function for external webmasters - as so-called Social Plugins (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2011). Part of these plugins are so-called social buttons which allow web users to perform platform based actions on web content, such as liking or sharing, hence enabling data flows between platforms and the web. Facebook

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<sup>49</sup> For an introduction to the term platform, see Gillespie, 2010.

introduced social buttons in 2006, first as a share icon, then as share and finally as an external Like button in 2010. The Like button was launched as an integral feature of the platform in 2009 as a shortcut to commenting in order to replace short affective statements like 'Awesome' and 'Congrats!' (Pearlman, 2009). A year later Facebook introduced an external Like button, a plugin that can be implemented by any web master, potentially rendering all web content likeable. According to Facebook, more than 7 million apps and websites are integrated with the platform and more than 2 billion posts are liked or commented on per day (Facebook Statistics, 2011).

Facebook's Like button is part of platform's so-called Social Plugins which allow webmasters to exchange data with the platform and to leverage their content to Facebook.<sup>50</sup> Once Facebook users click a Like or Share button on an external website, this activity is documented on their Facebook wall and appears in their contacts' News Feeds and/or tickers, while incrementing the Like button counter. The external web content now becomes available for further liking and commenting within the Facebook platform, generating additional data flows back to external counters, once acted upon. More data is flowing from Facebook to webmasters in the form of Facebook Insights providing them with button impressions which, similar to hits, indicate how many times a 'Like' button has been loaded on a page both inside and outside the platform.<sup>51</sup>

A click on the Like button transforms users' affective, spontaneous responses to web content into connections between their profile, the web objects and quanta of numbers on the Like counter. The button provides a one-click shortcut to express a variety of affective responses such as excitement, agreement, compassion, understanding, but also ironic and parodist liking. The affective dynamics informing such an engagement (Massumi, 2002) are not measurable, countable and comparable as such, but are rather intensive (DeLanda, 2006), referring to transforming states of being. By asking users to express various affective reactions to web content in the form of a click on a Like button, these intensities can be transformed into a number on the Like counter and made comparable.

Yet, the quanta of data produced in such processes are not just metrifications of intensities, but also have intensive capacities themselves, entering various processes of multiplication, or what Thrift calls 'qualculation' (2008). Firstly, Facebook advertises the external Like button as a generator of traffic and engagement (Facebook + Media, 2010).

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<sup>50</sup> <https://developers.facebook.com/docs/plugins>

<sup>51</sup> The Insights tool further features button clicks and anonymised, basic demographic data of Likers such as age, gender and location.

Likers, the platform argues, are more connected and active than average Facebook users. Each click on a Like button is supposed to lead to more traffic for, and more engagement with, web content as friends of Likers are likely to follow their contacts' recommendations or might be influenced by what their friends like. Engaging with social media, to draw on Grusin (2010), is embedded in the anticipation of ongoing interactivity, facilitated through notification systems highlighting any responses a user receives:

Social networks exist for the purpose of premediating connectivity, by promoting an anticipation that a connection will be made – that somebody will comment on your blog or your Facebook profile or respond to your Tweet. (Grusin, 2010: 128).

In this context, a Like is not a means in itself, but designed as an ongoing and potentially scalable process. A Like is always more than one or more than representational (Thrift, 2008). Its value lies both in the present and in the future, in the +1 it adds to the Like counter and the number of x potential more Likes, comments, shares or other responses it might generate within the platform.

Let me return to Dove and American Apparel to exemplify this. In the case of Dove, although the brand has more than 8 million fans on their Facebook page, external web content related to Dove – such as the company websites [dove.co.uk](http://dove.co.uk) or [dove.us](http://dove.us) – have only received minimal amounts of Likes, shares or comments.<sup>52</sup> Engagement with Dove as organised through Facebook rather occurs in relation to the brands' Facebook fan page. This changes in relation to Dove's viral videos *Evolution* and *Onslaught* posted on Youtube. Although released in 2006 and 2007, almost four years before the launch of Facebook's external social buttons, the viral videos produced by the Dove Self Esteem fund enacted a considerable degree of Facebook activity. The official posting of the Dove evolution clip<sup>53</sup> features 85974 Shares, 45383 Likes and 51866 comments, the Beauty Pressure/Onslaught clip<sup>54</sup> comes with 31958 shares, 29091 Likes and 20452 comments. The number of Likes refers to both Likes performed inside the platform, for instance if users have shared the videos with their contacts and they clicked on the internal Like button, but also Likes directly performed on Youtube after the introduction of the external Like button in 2010. The ratio between comments to shares/Likes is very high, indicating that Facebook users not only disseminate the clip, but that each share

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<sup>52</sup> Dove's UK domain only features 230 Facebook shares, 38 likes and 118 comments, the US domain comes with 5813 shares, 886 likes and 1524 comments.

<sup>53</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYhCn0jf46U>

<sup>54</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ei6JvKOW60I>

or Like results in further commenting activity within the platform, leading to the multiplication of user activities.

This process of multiplication, however, is not only based in the affordances created by the buttons, but also on the creation of differently scaled social formations to which acts of Liking, sharing and commenting are being exposed. Depending on their Facebook privacy settings, a user's click on the Like button may be visible to everyone, to all friends or a selected group of friends and is further distributed across the user's Timeline, their contact's News Feeds and tickers. If a friend responds to a Like with another Like or a comment, this activity is exposed to yet another set of users. Each action is creating differently scaled social assemblages (DeLanda, 2006), formations of users that are not stable but constantly reconfigured through the platform and individual privacy settings. The data flows between profiles, the exposure on 'walls' or 'News Feeds' and the privacy settings allow the scaling of these formations up to almost every web user or the scaling down to a few selected Facebook friends, making the platform a key entity in the making of social assemblages related to brands.

Similar to Dove, American Apparel features more Facebook Page fans (913,513 in June 2012) than receiving Facebook activities related to their official web presence.<sup>55</sup> Most interesting, sub-pages featuring information about the company, advertising, photo archives or updates receive almost no Facebook actions, while the employment pages are shared, Liked and commented upon widely. The general employment page<sup>56</sup> received 451 shares, 33 Likes and 132 comments, and, most interestingly, the model application page<sup>57</sup> shows 897 shares, 75 Likes and 330 comments. Hence, while content related to company, products, adverts and updates are engaged with through posts on the official Facebook page, information about employment possibilities, and especially the ongoing call for models or the specific call for store assistants is shared from external web content via social buttons.

A further interesting example can be found in relation to American Apparel's The Next Big Thing Contest, where the number of Facebook activities is indicative of the impact of Nancy Upton's spoof entry. The official contest page received only 392 shares, 555 Likes and 654 comments - the high proportional comment count indicates the intensity at which each sharing act creates further responses within the platform. Nancy Upton's

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<sup>55</sup> The American Apparel home page [www.americanapparel.net](http://www.americanapparel.net) has been shared 4086 times, liked 549 times and commented upon 1498 times, while the main page of the online store receives 2203 shares, 522 likes and 1440 comments.

<sup>56</sup> <http://employment.americanapparel.net/employment>

<sup>57</sup> <http://www.americanapparel.net/careers/modeling>

tumblr, which documents her engagement with the contest, however, received 920 shares, 590 Likes and 956 comments on Facebook, exceeding the official page of the contest by far. This tendency continues when looking at the average Facebook activities for the top Google results for the query “American Apparel”+”The Next Big Thing” as opposed to “American Apparel”+”Nancy Upton”. The top 50 results for the first on average show only 78 shares, 79 Likes and 92 comments, while results for “American Apparel”+”Nancy Upton” feature 203 shares, 258 Likes and 226 comments on average. Not only did the actual URLs related to the contest or to Nancy Upton generate different degrees of Facebook activity, but news articles, blog posts and web content related to Nancy Upton rather than the contest itself fostered more Facebook engagement. These figures show that Upton’s parody not only attracted more attention and engagement than the contest itself, but also produced different social assemblages, as each Like, share and comment is exposed to a different assemblage of Facebook users.

The transformation of affective responses and social interaction into counts on Like and share counters allows for the creation of a particular relationship between social and economic value in the case of Facebook, one that is organised through the medium-specific object of the social button. User activities are of economic value because they produce data that can enter multiple relations of exchange and are set up to multiply themselves, as each Like or share will result in further interactions (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2010). Turning intensive affects into numeric entities allows the platform to create a form of continuation between the social and the economic. Put differently, user affect and interaction are brought into new forms which themselves have affective capacities. To achieve this, the metrifying capacities of Facebook’s social buttons are inextricable from their intensifying and premediating capacities.

### **Conclusion – The Spatialisation of Brands**

Departing from consumers’ spatial experience and associations with brands, I have explored the spatiality of brands and put forward a particular notion of brand spaces, one that entails strategically created branded spaces (Cronin, 2010; Julier, 2008; Moor, 2007), but also spaces in which brands happen, are mentioned, discussed, used or seen, whilst at the same time complicating a too neat delineation between both. In a series of steps, I mapped out the relations and interplay between such spaces, their specificity, their affective capacities and how digital spaces in particular produce medium-specific relations between social and economic life.

## Topological Brand Spaces?

The expansion of Dove and American Apparel into new spaces and the engagement of new actors, can be addressed as the becoming topological of both the brands and brand spaces. The multiplicity of brand spaces relates to the case studies' enactment of a nested set of spaces (DeLanda, 2002), in which each brand space relates to the others, as well as to the brands, their issues and the actors involved. Each of these touchpoints connects to and impacts upon the brand, yet each encounter poses a different experience both with or in relation to the brand. In this context, brands - but also brand space - are becoming increasingly topological, that is, invariant under deformation and can only be accounted for in their relations, as any encounter with the brand is immanently linked and connected to other encounters in other spaces, which add, transform or subtract from their value.

According to DeLanda (2002, but also in Duffy, 2006), a mathematical space consists of a set of points. The way these points relate to each other defines to what extent the space has to be regarded as metric or non-metric. To put it in DeLanda's words:

The distinction between metric and non-metric spaces boils down to the way in which neighbourhoods (or the linkages between the points that form a space) are defined, either through exact lengths or through non-exact topological relations of proximity. (DeLanda 2002, 62)

In Euclidean, metric space the distances between the points and their position in space can be measured exactly and defined in standardised metrics. Within topological spaces, the relation between points cannot be measured exactly but has to be approached in qualitative terms as they are in constant processes of transformation.

As shown throughout the chapter, each brand space is characterised by the enactment of a specific experience with the brand, impacting on the brand, its aesthetics and issues, but also consumers involved along multiple lines, whilst all these diverse experiences are being associated with the same brand. Brands emerge as invariant under deformation, organised by their capacity for intensive and relational change: "concerns the properties of geometric figures which remain invariant under bending, stretching, or deforming transformations, that is, transformations which do not create new points or fuse existing ones" (DeLanda, 2002: 24). Such deformation comes with and enacts a particular spatialisation of brands, in which distances and temporalities are continuously redrawn or folded into each other, complicating notions of inside and outside, here and there, subject and object, or brands, actors and spaces. In the case of Dove and American Apparel, both brand management and consumer activities



contribute to the decreasing, increasing and folding of spatial distances, connecting the brand to ever new spaces, such as workshops in schools, urban clubs or private conversations. What emerges are intensive and non-metric relations between the different touchpoints of the brands, defined through internal dynamics rather than external coordinates:

If you take a handkerchief and spread it out in order to iron it, you can see in it certain fixed distances and proximities. If you sketch a circle in one area, you can mark out nearby points and measure far-off distances. Then take the same handkerchief and crumble it, by putting it in you pocket. Two distant points suddenly are closed, even superimposed. This science of nearness and rifts is called topology, while the science of stable and well-defined distances is called metrical geometry. (Serres & Latour, 1995: 60)

The interlinked encounters characteristic to both Dove and American Apparel as shown above function akin to Serres' crumbled handkerchief, impacting each other and, hence, decreasing the distance between each other, superimposing previously disconnected spaces by connecting them to the brand.

The question of continuity becomes of relevance, especially in relation to the last section on the transformation of social activities into quanta on Like counters, bringing together different web spaces but also assembling social relations. As addressed in the Introduction in reference to Bell (2009), continuity refers to the capacity of elements to hang together without dissolving into each other. Following Bell further, a key element of continuous entities is their capacity to be endlessly divisible without changing themselves, akin to the invariance under deformation of topological spaces. In contrast, discrete elements "cannot be divided without effecting a change in their nature: half a wheel is plainly no longer a wheel" (Bell, 2009: 1). Once brands are being acted upon and recombined into new contexts by consumers - for instance, by sharing and discussing brand activities through a Facebook social button, by responding to the affective surface of the American Apparel store, or by making parodies of Dove's Evolution spot - brands, their aesthetics and their issues are being brought into new contexts, forms and spaces; they become partly divisible and deform without dissolving into the new space (Foster, 2011; Strathern, 1990).

### **Brands as Virtual Capacities**

Let me now draw these arguments back to Lury's (2004) initial consideration of the brand as both frame for action and interface between the company (the face) and the consumer or market (the profile). Lury contends that brands are capable of negotiating relations between buyers and sellers, as well as between products, while the logo

functions as the most crucial facialisation of the organisation. The main argument of this chapter arrives at a partially different perspective, directing attention to the fact that each encounter might enact different affects, relations and associations whilst referring to the same brand. As shown in the cases of American Apparel and Dove, it is not always the brand with which consumers connect particular spaces, it is the intensive dynamics related to the brand, its aesthetic, its stance towards an issue and its perspective on societal topics.

To take this argument even further, the brand is both present in such encounters and is not, it is both informing them whilst being informed itself, and is turning topological by being both inside and outside. What actors encounter is not the brand itself, but aspects of it, for instance issues, aesthetics or products which are being taken up and recombined, informing different spaces, affects, activities or conversations. In this framework, the brand turns into a virtual capacity rather than an actual frame for action. It is not the brand itself that consumers encounter, but its partial actualisation and deformation in space. The brand functions as a sort of virtual capacity or multiplicity in DeLanda's sense (2002), that cannot be experienced as such, but that nevertheless has a concrete impact on what is considered as consumer-brand interaction. It shapes the activities of brand management, the design of branded spaces, the behaviour of staff, the development of mass media, the co-creation of campaigns, or the response to consumer feedback loops. The brand also impacts on consumers' experience of campaigns, flagship stores or viral videos, yet consumers do not interact with the brand but with its spatial actualisation.

Understanding the brand as both virtual and invariant under deformation, this chapter contends further that consumers experience brands differently throughout their brand spaces and, moreover, they do not necessarily engage with all of these spaces but only a few of them. Such a non-unified, internally different experience of brands finally leads to the question of whether such an experience of the brand adds up to an intensive, connected continuum or if it remains fragmented and heterogenous. Or put differently, how do consumers make sense of both their own and the brand's multi-focal becoming? This question remains central to the next chapters and is most explicitly addressed in the conclusion. In a next step, however, I turn attention to the role of issues by using the particular perspective developed in this thesis to revisit previous scholarship on the relations between brands, bodies and sexuality in Chapter 5, before then posing the question of where bodies start and brands end in Chapter 6.

# 5

## **Brands and Bodies**

Bodies, bodily experience, sexuality and beauty ideals have been returning as key issues in the case studies throughout this thesis. These last two empirical chapters turn attention to the relation between brands, bodies, sexuality and their entanglement. In relation to the two central case studies, bodies and sexuality matter on multiple levels: both brands deploy a particular idea of bodies as part of their differential position; offer products designed for body care or to dress bodies; feature particular bodies in their brand communication; involve consumer bodies in various ways; and bring staff and consumer bodies into relation with each other. Just as the previous chapters have approached the relation between brands and spaces or social formations as one of mutual productivity - thinking brands as making and happening in space and social assemblages - a similar twofold movement will happen in relations to bodies and brands. In doing so, I seek to inquire about the boundary making practices emerging at the point of interrelation between brands and bodies, taking departure from feminist media theory.

The engagement with this interrelation is organised in two steps. Chapter 5 explores the role of bodies, beauty and sexuality in relation to the two case studies and in dialogue with feminist media theory, offering a specific perspective which takes the previous interest in becoming topological into account. There has been a long tradition of inquiry into the relation between bodies, sexuality, gender and promotional culture, which has thought of brand communication as being entangled with the production of gender ideologies. The majority of feminist media critiques have approached promotional culture through its rather discrete forms, such as advertising and mass media communication, focusing on the representation of bodies and sexualities (Cronin, 2000; Gill, 2007; Gill & Scharff, 2011). Tracing how feminist media studies broadened this focus on discrete media formats towards a more embedded and immanent

understanding of media and promotional culture, this chapter explores how bodies and sexualities matter within contemporary brand management beyond mere representations. More precisely, it explores how bodies and sexuality are made part of the strategic positioning of brands, how they inform multiple branding activities from the production of goods, to touchpoints, consumer involvement, and cooperation with other organisations. Drawing on affect theory (Clough, 2008; Massumi, 2009, 2002), this chapter offers a more-than-representational perspective on brands and bodies, taking special interest in questions of atmospheres, environments, forces and becoming (DeLanda, 2002; Manning, 2009; Sloterdijk, 2009).

Chapter 6 takes these inquiries further, asking how intimate brands and bodies get and what happens if they start continuing into each other? While the mapping exercise of Chapter 5 explores the wider ecology in which brands and bodies operate in interrelation, Chapter 6 addresses the emerging relations of proximity between brands and bodies, situating the discussion in relation to previous considerations of spatio-sociality and becoming topological. It shows how branding enables corporations to get closer to, and even under, consumers' skins, on the one hand through the creation of climates of intimacy operating across the realm of the public and the private (Berlant & Warner, 2008; Warner, 2005), and on the other hand, through biomediation and affective modulation (Clough, 2008; Parisi, 2004).

## **Bodies and Sexuality in Promotional Media Culture**

The interrelation between brands, bodies and sexualities has been subject to much feminist critique and reflection since the proliferation of corporate communication in the 1950s. In what follows I outline three key strands in feminist media theory and map out which lineages I seek to take further. Firstly, I address early approaches towards corporate communication and their focus on representation, advertising and textual analysis. From there I move on to more Deleuzian influenced reflections on the becoming of bodies in relation to media imagery and, finally, I address feminist engagement with new media theory and bio-informatics. In this line of movement, I show how the different strands gradually extend their account of promotional media and complicate the interrelation between brands and bodies.

### **Feminist Advertising Critique**

Since the early days of feminist media theory in the 1950s, there has been a particular interest in the critical examination of promotional culture – mainly mass media

advertising – in relation to its representation of gender, sexuality and the body. The increasing pervasiveness of advertising at that time (Moor, 2007) attracted the attention of early feminist media scholars and led to numerous studies exploring the depiction of gender, bodies and sexuality, but also often race, in order to unravel how advertising contributes to the construction of gender roles (Gill, 2007). Drawing on content and semiotic analysis on a methodological level, early studies such as the work of Hennessee and Nicholson (1972) or Goffman (1987) were based on the analysis of a large quantity of advertisements, such as TV commercials, print or billboard ads. Most of these early studies focused on the different ways in which women and men were portrayed in promotional culture, arriving at the conclusion that women were mainly given the role of the dependent and decorative housewife, while men were portrayed as active and authoritative (Hennessee, 1972). As a consequence, advertisers were accused of promoting highly normative gender roles, depicting women as passive and unintelligent in contrast to the agentive roles of men. Up until the mid 1980s, such stereotypical gender roles were among the key findings of feminist scholarship on advertising, so Gill reports (2007).

Further key studies have been conducted in regard to the representation of specific groups of women, such as older women, women of colour, or disabled women (Williamson, 1978). Later studies also shifted attention to the specific style features of advertising, such as the work of Dyer (1982) and Coward (1984) who interrogated the increasing use of the cropping of female bodies in advertising. Cropping refers to the fragmented presentation of female bodies in which only the lips, the breasts or the eyes appear in the image. Coward suggests that cropping poses an aggressive gesture towards the integrity of female bodies, rendering them into fetishised, isolated parts. Kilbourne (1999) goes further, suggesting that this mode of sexual fragmentation should be considered as an act of violence. These early studies have a strong focus on the visual aspects of promotional culture and the modes of (post-structuralist) subjectivation they can produce, informed by a discrete account of brand communication.

Such narratives changed notably during the 1980s and '90s when gender roles in advertising are considered to have transformed significantly. Advertisers, so feminist media scholars claim, were perceived as having taken ongoing feminist critique and changing realities of gender roles into account and introduced new female and male role models (Goldman, 1992; MacDonald, 1995). The previously predominant housewife was substituted by another abstract and ideal figure: the new superwoman who is at the same time independent, physically attractive, intelligent and sexually self-determined. This emerging subjectivity was critically perceived as embodying a 'commodity

feminism', in which advertisers incorporated certain aspects of feminist womanhood such as sexual self-determination, emancipation from men and financial independence. However, they connected these issues with consumer culture (McRobbie, 2004, 2009), offering products which are supposed to support female emancipation. Subsequently, Goldman (1992) addressed this strategic embrace of selected feminist values as 'commodity feminism', which fitted into and supported branding strategies, whilst incorporating key feminist media critiques (Gill, 2007).

The entanglement between consumer culture and gender ideologies as expressed in Goldman's 'commodity feminism' in the early 1990s, was broadened in debates evolving around the idea of post-feminism (Attwood, 2006; Gill, 2007; Gill & Scharff, 2011; McRobbie, 2009). Connecting representation critique to a discussion of neoliberal consumerism, it was the work of Angela McRobbie in particular which claims that feminism has been facing a double entanglement in media culture since 1990 (McRobbie, 2004). On the one hand, particular feminist values are embraced and taken for granted, such as female financial independence, sexual self-determination and freedom of choice. Other values, such as the critique of sexism, the awareness of gender as being culturally constructed and the self-identification with the term 'feminist', on the contrary, are presented as outdated and even repudiated (Hanspal & McRobbie, 2000). Deeply entangled with neoliberal ideas of a productive, autonomous and disembodied self, McRobbie suggests that being a woman seems to be defined by choice rather than social norms nowadays, or as a quote from *The Onion* notes: "Women Now Empowered by Everything a Women Does" (McRobbie, 2004: 34).

Recent post-feminist media scholarship gives pivotal interest to the entanglements of feminism, neo-liberalism and consumerism, the incorporation of feminist arguments into brand communication and the emergence of neoliberal subject positions. While mainly based on empirical research and engaging with a considerable scope of material, the relationship between the media, especially visual images, and bodies, gender and sexuality remains somewhat under-discussed, as well as the specific affordances of particular media formats. Although this is acknowledged in a number of works - Gill (2007), for instance, argues that she focuses only on content analysis - the separation between production, consumption and analysis of media format deployed in such work as Gill and Scharff (2007, 2011) might be problematic. Feminist advertising critique has made a significant contribution to the understanding of the use of rather limiting ideas of gender and bodies in visual brand communication and has drawn attention to the complex role of sexuality therein. But the sole attention to mass media formats, and the

use of content or textual analysis, focuses such work on the study of representation and the activities of brands only.

Although recent postfeminist media critiques aim to work across this distinction and make attempts to move closer to Deleuzian inspired positions (Gill & Scharff, 2011) focusing on experience and becoming rather than production and reception, many publications still very much focus on issues of representation rather than cutting across discrete boundaries between the production, analysis and interactivity of media formats. In the context of contemporary participatory approaches to branding, the question emerges of what happens if brands deploy notions of gender, sexuality and the body in less discrete spaces, sinking into the everyday environments of consumers (Moor, 2007; Arvidsson, 2006)? Do brands indeed produce such coherent subjectivities as suggested and where do they materialise? And what happens when the encounter with brands is enmeshed with how consumers interact with brands?

### **Images, Bodies and Becoming**

While feminist advertising critiques focus on the production of gendered subjectivities in visual brand communication, other areas of (feminist) media studies have interrogated how bodies and images actually relate to each other and have complicated subject-object distinctions, cutting across a differentiation between the real and its representation. First of all, theories of spectatorship and seeing put to question ideas of subject/object divisions. The work of Griselda Pollock (1987), for instance, suggests that overly discrete ideas of images and bodies are problematic, just as with the differentiation between good and bad images. The relation between subjects and objects, between active (male) spectatorship and passive (female) being-looked-at on the other hand have been addressed in relation to psychoanalysis (Doane, 1987; Mulvey, 2009).

In her work on prosthetic culture, Celia Lury (1998) seeks to address the relation between bodies and images by thinking subjectivation as a process of becoming in which images are entangled as a “mediated extension of capability” (1998: 3). Drawing on Walter Benjamin’s notion of mimesis and the concept of imitation, Lury does not approach images in terms of being good or bad representations, but regards their capacities as enabling becoming and the movement of bodies. Images, she suggests, function as ‘experimental prosthesis’ and enable forms of becoming (1998). This becoming, however, is not limited to the imitation of the image or the desire to become similar to the image, but is relational and cuts across subject/object distinctions. Drawing on the concept of the frame (Goffman, 1986), Lury points out that there is no

singular mode of seeing, rather multiple ways of relating to images. She understands this relation as mimesis, as a becoming towards images which can unfold in two directions: as “perfection-seeking homeostasis” (1998: 5), in which congruence with an image is sought, or as “blind imitation”, which is experimental and refers to a more relational becoming in interaction with images and objects. The idea of mimesis brings to attention the way in which consumers might be affected in multiple ways by brand communication. Images, so Lury says, do not determine, but extend and inform, the becoming of individuals and bodies - they are prosthetic.

Lury draws on a long tradition of scholarship which understands bodies as not being determined by their properties and form, but as being determined in regard to what they can do, or their longitude - motion and rest, and latitude - their capacity to affect (Coleman, 2008: 20). It has been the work of process philosophy in particular (Bergson, 2007; Deleuze & Guattari, 1991; Whitehead, 1926), but also affect theory (Clough, 2008; Clough et al. 2007; Damasio, 2000; Gregg & Seigworth, 2006; Massumi, 2002; Tomkins, 1992) that has drawn attention to a notion of the body which focuses on its capacities to change, to affect and to be affected by its environment. In this context, the work of Rebecca Coleman (2008) becomes of interest. Departing from a processual idea of bodies and gender informed by a multiplicity of relations - one of which being the media - Coleman unfolds an empirical study on how imagery can enable or complicate the becoming of bodies in particular directions. A key element of her approach is a Deleuzian- inspired focus on movement, combined with a theory of mutual affection and a methodological focus on experience.

Coleman’s work aims to cut across too clear distinctions between subject and object, and images and experiences, by suggesting to think of them as intricate and becoming in relation to each other. Bodies, she claims, are experienced through a variety of images, from media/advertising to mirror images and photographs. Each of these images is part of an assemblage that enables the becoming of bodies, which are simultaneously connected to other bodies and objects. In contrast to studying the content or text of images detached from viewer, context and processes of affection, Coleman’s methodology explores the affective capacities of these images from the inside, through the specific experiences that images enable for her participants - whether the experience is limiting, enabling, or restraining. Tracing multiple affective encounters with images, she develops the claim that bodies and images do not form discrete entities, but impact upon and fold into each other. In this process of folding, “bodies and images exist not as distinct units but rather as intricate and sticky process of becoming: bodies become unknown, understood and lived through images” (Coleman, 2008: 195). While



Coleman's experience-based methodology privileges what images can do to bodies, it also opens up the question of what bodies can do to images. In her work, images and media culture are set up as an extension or prosthesis of bodily becoming rather than being discussed as a process of mutual affection, a perspective which is put forward in this chapter.

### Affect and New Media

The turn towards affect in feminist scholarship and its increasing intermingling with new media theory has created another pathway to explore the relation between bodies and media. As argued in key accounts of affect theory (Clough, 2008, 2010; Gregg & Seigworth, 2006; Massumi, 2002), bodies are not only understood as constantly becoming, but also as enmeshed in dynamics of mutual affection, of being informed by their environment in a pre-cognitive, pre-individual, physical and mental way:

Bodies are not stable pre-formed entities, they are always extending beyond themselves and bodies can be seen as 'centres of indetermination' (Bergson, 2004). The need to address bodies as sites of expression and not just as anchor points for linguistic signification points to the difficulty people have in controlling the affective body, which threatens to disrupt the calculations of the positive effects on self-image through body maintenance and repair techniques. (Featherstone, 2010: 205)

Patricia Clough understands the capacities of bodies to affect and be affected as informational (Clough, 2008), deploying Gilbert Simondon's notion of information as 'in-formation', as shaping and modulating affective becoming (Manning, 2010). This informational view of the body was taken up by a series of new media theorists, most notably the work of Mark Hansen (2004) and Eugene Thacker (2004) on biomediation. Drawing on Henri Bergson and Bernhard Stiegler, Hansen claims that it is bodily affect that connects both bodies and media - especially in the context of new media. Affective responses to new media render both bodies and media formats less discrete while extending their capacities into each other, opening up a cross-section between bodies and technology. Hence, Hansen's account is based on an immaterial and formless account of new media, which only materialises through its affective relations with bodies. Following from that, Clough (2008) contends that his notion of the body is retained as 'body-as-organism', as a still too closed entity.

In contrast, Clough herself puts forward the idea of a bio-mediated body, characterised by a distinct level of intermingling between media, technology and bodies. Different from the body-as-organism, the biomediated body is entwined in organic and non-organic relations, in which biology mutates in multiple ways. Such bio-mediated bodies,

Clough continues, are often tangled up in loops of information, in which bodily activities are monitored and turned into data-points, which then feed back to the body through technology, such as experiments with DNA, proteins, cells or bodily functions. In this development, biology “both ‘drives production’ and is ‘the source material” (Thacker, 2004; Clough, 2008: 10). The biomediated body, thus, is both an informational body, constantly producing data, and a productive body, as the data and mutations produced can potentially enter circuits of economic exchange. Different from discrete notions of media, capitalism and bodies, biomediation stresses the continuation of each realm into another and the intermingling of different layers of becoming, a perspective to which I return in Chapter 6.

These three stands of feminist engagement with media propose different viewpoints on the relation between bodies and media, but also on their degree of intermingling or discreteness. Taking such theoretical lineages into consideration, this chapter now moves back to the case studies on American Apparel and Dove and traces the role of bodies, sexuality and gender in relation to the becoming of brands. In particular, this chapter traces how brands both inform and are informed by bodies and sexualities and how bodies matter in experiencing and managing brands. Particular attention is paid to questions of boundary making, discreteness, continuation and in-formation, exploring the intermingling and delineations between bodies and brands.

### **Brands, Issues and Naturing Bodies**

In the case of Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty, bodily experience and relations have been at the core of the brand’s strategic approach since 2003, when the company decided to associate its brand with the cause of body norms and the promotion of diverse ideas of beauty. As outlined in previous chapters, it was at that time when the brand needed to match high sales figures and so came to the conclusion that this could only be accomplished by developing a long-term, differential brand positioning, so the external consultant Martin Staniforth explains (2011). An interesting chain of argumentation unfolds, in which achieving sales objectives is connected to having a standpoint or being committed to a cause, which in the specific case of Dove entails the alignment of the becoming of brands with the becoming of bodies. In this framework, Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty sets out to affect and shape the becoming of female bodies.

## **Bodies as a Social Cause**

As one of the first activities in relation to the cause, Dove commissioned a research project on female bodily self-esteem and beauty in 2004 which was jointly conducted by the research agency Strategy One and the academics Nancy Etcoff and Susie Orbach. The outcome, 'The Real Truth About Beauty: A Global Report' (Etcoff et al., 2004), functions as a communicative tool to signpost the brand's new commitment to the cause. The study is still featured and referred to on the Dove website and has been utilised ever since to demonstrate the need for action in this area. Yet the report also laid the foundation for the strategic development of the Campaign for Real Beauty, as its findings set up the scene from which the brand became active in relation to body norms. The report features a literature review discussing academic work on the transformation of bodies and beauty ideals over time. Its empirical fieldwork is based on around 3000 interviews with women from ten countries, discussing their personal bodily experience. Most interestingly, the key arguments pre-empt the key approaches of the subsequent campaign elements.

The first section of the report focuses on female body and beauty experience, outlining women's well being as potentially endangered due to low self-esteem. It traces the interplay between bodily perception, satisfaction and general well-being, opening up the perspective that beauty is not only been perceived as a matter of physical attractiveness, but involves affective states, activity and self-realisation. The second section moves on to what the authors consider as one of the major causes of beauty pressure - the impact of popular culture, media and digital retouching. Here, the main finding is that interviewed women consider the media as driving up beauty standards, exclusively showing women that are more beautiful than the average. The emerging discussion of media and advertising is framed by discursive figures such as 'setting up ideals' and the 'failure to achieve them'. Hence, bodies and their experience are not understood as discrete and fixed entities, but as processual and exposed to affective dynamics.

Setting up bodies not as fixed but as relationally changing entities is necessary for the campaign and the final section of the report, which focuses on possibilities of interfering with and modulating the becoming of bodies. The third section explores a series of hypotheses about how bodily well-being and self-esteem might be improved, concluding that this can be enabled within relationships, through the feeling of being accepted and loved, but also through improving one's life and realising plans or dreams. The report tests a series of 'wishes towards media' and outlines participants' desire to see more diverse, active and international women in media imagery. The study concludes

with the claim that there is a need for so-called 'authentic beauty' emerging from participants' experiences and responses to media beauty, offering both an academic and strategic insight for the brand:

The study demonstrates that authentic beauty is a concept lodged in women's hearts and minds and seldom articulated in popular culture or affirmed in the mass media. As such, it remains unrealized and unclaimed. This idea of beauty appears to have been replaced by a narrower definition that is largely located in limited ideals of physical appearance. (...) Through this study, the possibilities for the beautiful to be known, found and represented have been infinitely extended. (...) Just as women lay some of the blame for the perpetuation of inauthentic beauty on popular culture and the mass media, they also believe that that the latter can be a force for reconfiguring the former so that true beauty becomes the new standard – with unprecedented power to open minds and move emotions. (Etcoff et al., 2004)

The study hence establishes female bodies in relation to three key forces. Firstly, the female body is understood and addressed as relational, exposed as being affected by other people, media, or one's own affective wellbeing, and its key relations are set out in the report. Secondly, in being part of such an affective force-field (Clough, 2009), the female body is set up to be endangered, as it experiences pressure to achieve and maintain a certain idea of beauty. The report measures beauty pressure in a variety of ways and outlines a set of causes that are subsequently being taken up in different elements of the campaign. Beauty pressure is addressed in terms of the discomfort of describing oneself as beautiful, as a pressure to achieve particular body norms, and as an ongoing comparison between other women. The third force is set out to function as a programmatic framework for the campaign: as the body is becoming in relations to other actors and media, it is possible for the brand to interfere in this process in order to enhance self-esteem and bodily well-being. The report explores a series of possibilities for such interferences, most notably alternative modes of presenting bodies in the media and the impact of personal relationships. The conclusion brings these concerns together into a dichotomy of inauthentic, unrealised and flat media beauty versus the authentic, enabling and more complex account of beauty that functions as a key motif for the subsequently developed Campaign for Real Beauty.

Since 2004, the different aspects of the campaign have taken up insights presented in the report and have stimulated various responses. The viral videos 'Evolution' and 'Onslaught' for instance present female, and particularly young girls', bodies as both relationally impacted upon by the media and as endangered. Just as the report sought to follow the rationale of 'deconstruct and reconstruct' (Etcoff et al., 2004), the viral clips present a particular idea of how the media both constructs and disseminates beauty, as well as what the report describes as unachievable ideals and beauty pressure. The Dove

website with its Self-Esteem Fund section follows a similar objective, providing visitors with information about bodies, beauty and their relational becoming in the form of quizzes and reports. Further elements of the campaign, such as the Real Women advertisements or the Body Talk workshops focus on enhancing and embracing bodily well-being and supporting more diverse bodies. The Real Women campaign in particular provides a direct translation of the responses to the question “What are better ways to depict women in the media?”, showing women in different shapes, sizes, from different age ranges and nationalities. These bodies, so Dove claims, are supposed to move beyond too narrow beauty ideals and instantiate a more diverse body norm, which is less defined through bodily properties, and more through mental well-being, self-esteem and a positive affective relation with one’s own body.

### **An Environmental Approach towards Bodies**

Rather than focusing on a discrete and representational instantiation of bodies in branding imagery, Dove’s Real Truth About Beauty report set in motion an environmental account of the relation between brands and bodies, understanding them as impacted upon by multiple relations and spaces. This not only allows me to return to initial questions of atmospheres and the creation of worlds (Arvidsson, 2006; Lazzarato, 2004; Thrift, 2008, 2011), but also opens up avenues to explore the continuation of both into each other.

In the case of Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty, the environment comes to matter along two dimensions. Firstly, as outlined before, the Real Truth about Beauty report invokes a relational, affective, and endangered notion of the body. Yet, secondly, it also addresses the environment of the brand itself, as if it could deploy an idea of the body that is different to that of their competitors. Hence, not only bodies are addressed as relational in this campaign, the campaign itself unfolds in relation to its environment, or put differently, its competitors. In order to establish its notion of ‘authentic beauty’, Dove requires the inauthentic and narrow beauty of the media as a background and in order to enhance self-esteem, it requires the report to find a lack of female self-esteem.

However, I have shown that the campaign is not limited to the strategic actions of Dove’s brand management, but happens in its continuation into the activities, affects and bodily becoming of multiple stakeholders involved. Just as the campaign responds and happens in differential relations to the background of female beauty in the media, it creates its very own atmosphere in which the brand appears in different forms, is responded to in different ways and in which the engagement with the issue of body

norms becomes invariant under deformation. While some consumers will only discuss the brand's campaign with their friends, others will take part in Body Talk workshops or interact with Dove on social media platforms. The different aspects in which bodies matter to the Campaign for Real Beauty cannot be encountered as discrete media representations, nor do they add up to a whole, but are experienced as fragments since not all of actors interact with all aspects of the campaign. Such a notion of branding has, so far, been addressed as becoming topological. In the context of the Campaign for Real Beauty, however, it becomes increasingly entangled with nature, or to speak in Massumi's terms, 'naturing' (2009).

### **Natured Bodies and Naturing Bodies**

Let me explicate the idea of naturing by returning to a specific instance of the case study, the Body Talk workshops. Dove's initial campaign activities, its attempts to make consumers question beauty ideals presented in the media in order to embrace a more inclusive beauty ideal, might suggest that Dove encourages consumers to accept bodies as they are. Yet, a detailed look into the campaign shows that rather the opposite is the case: consumers are invited to multiple exercises of self-reflection and self-evaluation and rather than accepting their bodies as they are, bodies are asked to feel better, to accept themselves, to interact better and to be treated better. This becomes particularly apparent in Dove's Body Talk workshops, developed as a cooperative project between Dove's Self Esteem Fund and Beat UK. Dove approached the charity during 2004 when the management had just decided to link the brand with the social cause of promoting bodily self-esteem. Seeking to translate its strategic ideas into actual campaign events, Dove was in need of a partner to enable the brand to reach new populations and consumer relations. Susan Ringwood, CEO at Beat, describes the process of aligning interests with Dove as follows:

Ringwood (2010): We sat down with each of our strategic objectives. One was to sell more products, one was to support self-esteem. We had strategic objectives which ranged from the beating eating disorders and do something about self-esteem. So there was this point in the middle where we had and shared strategic objective around self-esteem which gave us the possibility that we could work together. (...) And that was when the work with the schools came about. We, Beat, wanted to do something around body image and media literacy and did not have a funder to make that happen.

After a series of initial tests, Beat developed a workshop guide for teachers of students aged 11-14, providing the following objective: "To help young people build body confidence by understanding and dealing with feelings about physical appearance". The

defined long-term objective of the workshop was to prevent eating disorders, using self-esteem and beauty norms as vehicles and starting points:

Ringwood (2010): Yes, there is a well established link between low self-esteem and developing an eating disorder. The research points to this very clearly, it is not the only factor, but it is a significant factor. And yet the factor that can be addressed and where you can help people to build resilience. Unlike genetic components to eating disorder which are not amendable to being altered, this is a risk element which is available to be altered.

It is here that Massumi's latest writing on environments and nature becomes of relevance (2009), as the Campaign for Real Beauty and especially the BodyTalk workshops explicate female bodies as becoming in environments and climates of potential threat, of eating disorders, and of lack of self esteem or bodily confidence. This threat, in Massumi's words, is distributed and multi-causal, just as natural disasters are: "self-organizing, self-amplifying, indiscriminate and indiscriminable, tirelessly agitating as a background condition, potentially ready to interrupt" (Massumi, 2009: 160). Both situated in the future and impacting on the present, the workshops enact the threat of eating disorders as something that "is the just-beginning of an event, an eventfulness suddenly making itself felt" (2009, 161). The female body is set up as the subject of multiple affective dynamics rather than as a discrete body-as-organism (Clough, 2009), shaped in "a sea of movements, each of which has a potential effect on the body, capable of modulating which determinate threads are pulled from the relational continuum it carries" (Massumi, 2002: 204). Within this sea of movement, the threat of eating disorders poses a particular force in the BodyTalk workshops. It is being responded to by the pre-emptive power of enhancing 'self-worth' and 'confidence', as outlined in the Real Truth About Beauty report.

The workshop itself is divided into three sections, each featuring discussions and exercises. The introductory section begins with open questions about what 'positive self-esteem' and 'body confidence' are and continues with a brainstorming exercise on what builds self-esteem. The second section focuses on 'What affects body confidence?', addressing the role of media images and asking who benefits from the desire to look like models or celebrities. The section also introduces the Dove Evolution video and invites participants to discuss the beauty ideas promoted by magazines or toys, which are presented as creating unattainable and inauthentic images of bodies. So-called facts and figures, statistics from previous research, feature prominently across most workshop exercises and function as persuasive entities in order to convince participants of claims set up as the background of the exercise. One exercise, for instance, draws on the finding that looking at a women's magazine for 60 minutes can lead to a reduction of

female self-esteem by 80% - striving towards the question of why girls and women still read these magazines. A key focal point is the disassembly of fabricated media beauty through techniques of styling, lighting and digital retouching. By juxtaposing media images with the affects and experiences they engender for participants, the workshop not only indicates that bodies become through images (Coleman, 2008), but also operates on an affective level, trying to shape or modulate participants' affective experiences by enabling them to reflect on what affects them so that they might develop new responses.

The treatment of eating disorders, which was fundamental to the making of these workshops, only operates in the background during the happening of the event. Instead, developing pre-emptive - that is, protective capacities - and promoting the idea of authentic beauty is focused upon. The final section engages with bodies as becoming and being experienced in multiple relationships. In a partner exercise, participants are asked to finish sentences like "One thing I like about you is...", or "A really individual thing about you is...", while being advised to be respectful and to be attentive to the affective capacities of words. The workshop ends with a so-called Promise Card stating "From (date) I am going to make a difference to my life and the lives of others by making this promise". Suggested answers in the teacher guide are: "I do a reality check when reading magazines....", "I stop calling XXX skinny/fat". The exercises seek to draw participants' attention to their bodily experience in relation to peers and family members and sets them up to be transformed and modulated so that they have a more positive and confident bodily experience. While bodies are in movement, so this workshop suggests, some movements offer more happiness and confidence than others.

Taking a close look at the movement of participants' bodies that the workshop and other campaign elements aim to enable, a complex and also contradictory force towards authentic and natural beauty emerges. When talking to consumers during interviews and focus groups, this idea of a so-called 'natural body' very much informs their perception of and association with Dove. During interviews and focus groups, consumers have associated Dove with nature, relaxation, purity and cleanliness, with the sea, with water and with blue skies. Dove, so focus group participants state, brings together natural looks with personal well-being in order to juxtapose fabricated notions of media beauty, emphasising so-called 'natural beauty', 'natural bodies' or 'natural shapes'.

While participants are prompted to appreciate the specificity of their bodies, rather than striving towards constructed media bodies, their current state of embracing their body is



not enough yet, as they could potentially become more reflexive about beauty norms and experience more positive affects. It is here that I return to the work of Massumi (2009), suggesting that what Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty seeks to bring into being is a 'naturing body', a body emerging from self-causing activity, a force without actual substance. Departing from Spinoza's distinction between 'natura naturata' (being nature) and 'natura naturans' (doing nature), Massumi puts forward the notion of 'naturing nature', referring to a nature in process, as opposed to 'natured nature', which is more fixed. He writes: "Having no territory of its own, naturing nature can only 'give' of itself to various territories' systemic self-organizing. What it gives is a charge of indeterminacy to-be-determined, which strikes with driving force" (2009: 167). Nature, Massumi suggests, comes in plurals.

Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty seeks to approach consumers' bodies as naturing bodies, as non-discrete, eventive, affective and contained as natural whilst being set in movement. In contrast to feminist media studies' focus on content and textual analysis, the naturing body emerges in the interplay between strategic and differential branding activities and the responses of stakeholders. As the mapping exercises of this and the previous chapters have shown, it is non-discrete and morphing, becoming topological, as an affective force enacted by and distributed across actors.

### **American Apparel and the Issue of Contagion**

While Dove focuses on enabling bodies to develop more self-esteem, the relation between American Apparel and bodies unfolds along different dimensions, most notably the role of aesthetics and sexuality. Sexuality was a key element of the brand's early endeavours to render basic clothing, especially basic T-Shirts, more profitable and iconic. In its ambition to find a differentiating position in the US apparel market of basic wear in the 1990s, as outlined in Chapter 3, American Apparel decided to move away from the comfortable, loose fit cuts dominating the segment and offer more tightly fitting T-Shirts made of lighter material which can be worn close to the body.

Hence, it was the realm of production and product development where the modulation of sexuality entered the making of the brand in its early years. Exploring the possibilities of ethical production has been central to the brand since its early days in the 1990s, when fair production still occupied a niche approach. Combining ethical production with sexy, tight-fitting clothes, however, allowed the company to elevate its vertically integrated approach and connect it to the emerging interest in fair production and hipster culture. With the introduction of vertical integration in 2000, the notion of

transparency and authenticity further became central to the company's brand values (Moor & Littler, 2008), providing a differential position in contrast to rather opaque and sweatshop-based production approaches of competitors. Transparency, however, also operates at the product level. Rather than dressing bodies, interviewed consumers perceive American Apparel clothes as showcasing bodies and making their shapes transparent, enabling new modes of intimacy between products, consumers and others, as I discuss in Chapter 6.

American Apparel has been drawing on an aesthetics of raunchy, amateur style in their depiction of their clothes, combining street style with home-made photography in private settings and assumably 'everyday people' instead of high gloss photo models. The brand has been working with professional photographers like Terry Richardson to achieve this do-it-yourself look through the use of harsh flashlighting and locations that resemble private homes, most predominantly beds. In the course of the years, the visual imagery increasingly started to incorporate and borrow perspectives, postures and aesthetics from pornography. Just as with Dove, American Apparel deploys the visual conventions of its market segment as an environment to "undo' the image of the hyperglossy, unattainable, superfeminized, airbrushed clotheshorse" (Moor & Littler, 2008: 716). Instead, the brand management seeks to enact an 'authentic', 'unmediated' yet still sexually attractive account of beauty, which is also experienced by interviewed consumers:

GM: Yeah, I don't think that the models have the classical beauty. You can see some, well not ugly faces but you can see it is not the classical beauty.

However, not everyone agrees that American Apparel features 'unmediated' and 'authentic' bodies:

LM: I think there are things, there are things that I really don't like about the way they use images in their campaign, particularly of women. I am not, I am not against sexualised imagery per se and certainly, I think what it is that bothers me about is particularly... I mean, I guess, I am, I am against some use of sexualised imagery and that I also don't like playboy it is too tacky. But I think it is partly the way American Apparel masquerades as somehow being different. Although I sort of loathe hypocrisy as a charge because you can overdo accusations of hypocrisy. But the way it plays on things, on all sorts of weird underdog currency... ahm, I find kind of problematic.

While the brand makes an effort to present itself as 'fresh' and 'authentic', some interviewed consumers in fact experience this 'authenticity' as opaque, ambiguous and fabricated.

The fabrication of authenticity becomes even more explicit when engaging with the discourse around American Apparel's ongoing call for store models. Despite their attempt to be transparent, the official call for models is kept rather opaque: "If you think your personal style matches ours, send your photos, tell us where you're from, and provide a contact number where we can reach you" (American Apparel, 2012). Instead of asking for particular bodily properties, the company is searching for looks and these looks are supposed to be understood immanently by consumers. A series of blog and forum posts evolve around the explication of this aesthetic. The following excerpt from an eHow.com post entitled "How to look like an American Apparel model" (eHow, 2009) shows the difficulty of verbalising American Apparel's aesthetic and notion of bodily becoming:

Learn the American Apparel look. It might be difficult to explain in words, but American Apparel has a look. It's mindful of haute couture as it sneers at high fashion; and it evokes the values of fur while putting more store in animal rights than high design. Look at American Apparel catalogs [sic], clothing and videos to try to internalize the image. (eHow, 2009)

A more elaborate guide can be found on wikiHow.com (2010), explicating the required bodily properties and possibilities of attaining them:

1. Work out. Not all the AA models are twigs. Some of them actually look female. The trick is that while they have actual curves, they are healthy as well. Yoga, Pilates, cardio... whatever. Preferably something that lengthens and tones without adding too much bulk to your body. Try eating some healthy food. That means no soda, French fries, or twinkies. Believe me, it pays off. (...) Get sleep. Seriously- 8 hours will have you well on your way to looking youthful and fresh before you have even tried. (wikiHow, 2010)

Among the further rules are:

2. Carry yourself well.
3. Get sleep.
4. Use minimal makeup.
5. Messy long hair is quite an asset.
6. If you are biracial, work your individuality here!
7. But never fear.
8. Beyond the AA look, be more socially aware.
9. Try and not look too put together.
10. American Apparel models ooze a particular type of sexuality- the ongoing themes are about individualism, sensuality and approachable appeal. (wikiHow, 2010)

Different to the diffuse direction provided by American Apparel, these guides render the authentic body more explicit, stressing the impact of bodily properties, such as a slim figure or distinct facial features and how these can be improved through sports, eating, sleep, grooming and styling, as well as through a particular attitude towards one's body, fashion and social issues. The explanation shows how the seemingly careless natural

body requires high maintenance and in the end is based on a rather similar degree of fabricated aestheticisation to the industry standards from which it aims to differ. However, the efforts made are destined to remain as opaque as the style itself, so the following rule suggests in relation to sexuality:

10. American Apparel models ooze a particular type of sexuality- the ongoing themes are about individualism, sensuality and approachable appeal. Thigh high socks, hotpants and skin tight mesh wear can look garish on some- but if your confidence is based more on inner beauty and your face and hair are kept undone and clean- you can pull it off. It's about showing off some parts and covering up others, wearing sensual and soft materials, exuding touchable and desirable qualities- you don't need fake tan or false eyelashes to achieve what you want here. (wikiHow, 2010)

What is emerging, to return to Massumi (2009), is the appearance of a natured body through the instantiation of a naturing body. The authentic body comes across as an opaque form of 'being cool', whilst it is emerging through a variety of activities. Hence, American Apparel animates consumers' bodies to become naturing bodies and to explicate, understand and appropriate its aesthetics, as the how-to-guidelines for prospective models show. It is, however, the outcome of a series of monitoring, adjustment and evaluation processes, organised by the potential thread of being 'not cool enough', or 'no longer cool enough'.

### **The Making and Happening of Contagion**

Despite its opaque character, American Apparel's aesthetics, as well as the naturing body, remain recognisable whilst deforming into ever-new formations. As I have showed throughout the thesis, consumers have widely incorporated the style and aesthetics of American Apparel into their everyday activities. This is most obviously seen on Flickr, where the majority of results for the query "American Apparel Ad" are not actual adverts of the company, but either consumer re-enactments which are labelled as 'My American Apparel Ad' or images that just remind one of the company, described as 'Looks like an American Apparel Ad'.

During an interview, a consumer told the story of how she had been photographed by her partner on holiday. While taking the picture, the partner claimed that her style, pose and setting look like American Apparel and gave her instructions on how to embody the look even better. The brand's aesthetics thus inform this consumer's perception and experience of other bodies – making them recognise American Apparel poses in everyday life environments. The specific modes of bodily becoming and aesthetics have, so I argue in this section, become contagious.

Just as in the case of Dove, the emerging naturing body is not a discrete representational figure, but becomes a topological formation, recognisable but opaque and constantly altering. Although attached to it, interviewed consumers have difficulties explicating the brand's aesthetic, yet no problems in contributing to it themselves. The aesthetics informing the naturing body in the case of American Apparel are based on being taken up, internalised, imitated and put in circulation, hence, they are contagious. The notion of contagion has been explored across a range of disciplines, from biology to medicine in relation to infectious diseases, to security politics and the computer science of viruses (Parikka, 2007: 288; Dawkins, 1976; Galloway & Thacker, 2007). Contagious dynamics, however, are considered a key element of informational and network economies (Barry & Thrift, 2007; Lazzarato, 2004), as post-Fordist modes of production are less concerned with the production of discrete entities for consumption, and more concerned with ambiances in which consumption can create added value by engaging a number of stakeholders. Lazzarato contends:

The conception of an advertisement, the sequence and rhythm of images, the sound track, are constructed like a ritornello, or 'whirl'. Some adverts resonate with us like motifs or chorus. To your surprise you may have found yourself whistling the tune of an ad (at least it has happened to me). (Lazzarato, 2004: 190)

Each engagement with these worlds does not merely repeat them, but adds a surplus, a slight twist and difference, hence "contained the seed of something else" (Thrift and Barry 2007, 517). Contagious repetitions, Kullenberg and Palmås (2009) argue, are always also variations, as they are not direct copies of the original, but transform and vary it. The authors deploy Gabriel Tarde's account of imitation to address contagious dynamics as non-exact replication, as consumer incorporations hardly ever strive for an exact copy, but alter the initial form to a degree, while retaining recognisability. Once imitations are being imitated again, hence when they become contagious and spread, they are creating imitative rays as they resonate and spread through processes of multiplication. In this sense, imitation can be understood in terms of topological dynamics, as the process of folding and deformation of American Apparel's aesthetics through bodies, spaces, technology and media: "Viruses no longer constitute an exception, an external contingency of the code, but have become rather the rule of a viral networked order" (Parisi, 2009: 350).

The role of contagious entities within economies has received attention in regards to the contagious capacities of fabricated memes or consumer products. Meme theory, so Parikka (2007) states, originates in the 1960s and 1970s as a response to growing informational networks. An early account on memes was developed by Richard Dawkins

(1976), who understands memes as catchy, circulating consumer objects, such as “tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes, fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches” (1976: 206), inserted into practices of everyday life through marketing. Dawkins approaches memetic dynamics from a neo-Darwinian perspective, paying special attention to the evolutionary differentiation of memes in order to survive in competition. What is most interesting about the contagious dynamics of American Apparel and Dove’s naturing bodies, is that contagion does not always happen on a cognitive level, but often occurs as an affective and pre-cognitive dynamic, intermingling with the becoming of consumer bodies.

American Apparel in particular has facilitated the contagious character of aesthetics and offers multiple possibilities for the incorporation of the contagious spread into its branding practices, as well as channelling this into the desired direction. Consumers can apply as models and store assistants and partake in model contests, both online and offline. On the company website, but also on Facebook, American Apparel hosts its Seen and Submitted section,<sup>58</sup> inviting bloggers to send photos of themselves wearing American Apparel products to create “a place for us to feature bloggers and fashion enthusiasts wearing American Apparel in their own way” (American Apparel, 2012). Bloggers are supposed to be imitating, in a Tardean sense, American Apparel’s ‘natural’ body and altering it at the same time, while the company can pick and feature selected style on their web site or Facebook page. Although American Apparel asks for wide and open participation, it is the company that selects and features the final looks, thus making a distinction between desired and less desired contributions (Kullenberg & Palmås, 2009), and bringing to attention that this contagion is not endlessly open, but also directed.

Not all activities of the brand are as contagious for some actors as others. The previously discussed Best Bottom contest, for instance, was perceived as being very controversial among consumers and the public. The contest invited consumers to contribute material that is more explicitly sexual and gave the possibility of leaving comments mainly to lead to discussions about the ‘hotness’ of the submissions. Here, bodies were no longer approached in terms of their capacity to aestheticise and incorporate the style of the brand, but in regard to their properties and features. Besides critical media commentary, as discussed in Chapter 4, several interviewed consumers expressed a critical stance towards this. Consumers raised issues about the over-sexualisation of participants, but also considered the contest as being too tacky, too

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<sup>58</sup> <http://www.americanapparel.net/whatsnew/item.aspx?i=1526>.

cheap and too overtly sexual, that is, not ironic, immanent and knowing enough for their idea of American Apparel. One interviewed consumer contends:

LM: I just find it... it is sort of... it's, it's, it's... gross, it is low-grain and it is cheap and it's... it's treating people like meat.

Such a critique highlights how there are limits to the contagious capacities of American Apparel's naturing body, as its aesthetics were deformed so much in this competition that they were not recognisable in a positive way for the interviewed consumers. While the company considered the contest as a different instantiation of enacting their notion of the naturing body, not all consumers have taken it up and rendered it contagious in the same way.

### **Conclusion: A Vectorfield of Bodies, Brands and Relations**

This chapter has traced the interrelation between bodies, sexuality and brands by focusing on their enactment and becoming in contemporary branding practices. In relation to Dove and American Apparel, it has been shown that both brands embrace issues of body norms, bodily aesthetics and, in the case of American Apparel, also sexuality as part of their strategic branding endeavours. Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty, for instance, sets out to utilise its stance towards body norms and media beauty as a differential branding position. In doing so, it has created a relational and environmental notion of bodies as non-discrete, affective and exposed to the threat of low self-esteem or the development of eating disorders. Subsequently, the campaign tried to inform bodily becoming in such a way as to involve actors in moving towards a so-called more 'authentic' notion of beauty. In the case of American Apparel, sexuality was used in specific ways to elevate the product, basic apparel, and the vertically integrated production process. Like Dove, American Apparel develops its aesthetics based on an idea of 'authentic and unmediated beauty' in contrast to the conventions of fashion branding. What is emerging is both an opaque and highly contagious notion of bodily becoming and aesthetics, which has no actual territory of its own, but emerges in a distributed way across brand and consumer activities (Massumi, 2009). Its opaque yet recognisable character allows it to become topological, to remain invariant under deformation.

In contrast to previous feminist scholarship which has thought of brands and bodies in terms of representation (Gill, 2007; Gill & Scharff, 2011), or has focused on the affective capacities of media (Coleman, 2009), the perspective offered here has traced bodily becoming as being set in motion through encounters with brands. This particular mode

of becoming does not come with its own territories or discrete notions of media, but operates across events, spaces, relations, activities and aesthetics. Massumi's notion of the naturing body (2009) was invoked to address bodily becoming in relation to brands as distributed movement. What is of particular interest to his focus on naturing is its lack of materialisation and actualisation, in DeLanda's terms (2002). It not only refers to the materialisation of bodies in brand communication, or to consumers' responses, but addresses the force field of becoming which emerges between them, incorporating the multiple ways in which the brand impacts on and responds to the bodily becoming of consumers and other stakeholders. Just as I claimed in Chapter 4 that consumers do not encounter the brand itself but its actualisations in space, I argue here that Dove and American Apparel do not address consumers' bodies through discretised bodily representations, but through the making of specific environments, operating across their many touchpoints.

Hence, tracing the making of this naturing body is also entails tracing the affordances of becoming enabled in encounters with brands. Such a becoming in interaction with brands and other actors is not a straightforward one, but can veer, as shown, into multiple directions and is subject to constant monitoring and evaluation. In the case of Dove, consumers are entangled in numerous activities that suggest they monitor their own bodies in order to build a positive relation with them and to embrace a variety of bodily properties. In the case of American Apparel, the role of bodily properties is more complicated as it was shown that particular features such as slender bodies or distinct facial features, a slender figure and long hair are favoured over others. Both brands cut across notions of bodies as discrete organisms (Clough, 2008), but instead set out the body as environmental (Massumi, 2009) and relational, as always already part of something else: "A body is not an entity but is a process, is always becoming through the connections it makes with multiple and different bodies" (Coleman, 2008: 34). While brands initiate such dynamics through campaign activities, it is the activity of consumers in particular - their engagement, self-monitoring and impact on other consumers - that enacts the naturing body. In this context, distinctions between outside - the activities of brands, and inside - consumers' responses, are being complicated. Here, the work of Manning becomes of relevance again, who argues: "The movement within becomes a movement without, not internal-external, but folding and bridging in an intensity of preacceleration" (Manning 2009, 13). The pre-accelerating body is, thus, always relational and more than one, folding together both internal and external forces or, as I show now, vectorfields.



As the case of Dove has showed, the brand addresses bodies as becoming in a field of affects or forces, that is, media impacts, peer and family relations, and also one's own relation to one's body. This becomes most explicit in the case of American Apparel, where consumers embrace and partake in some aspects of the brand, such as its aesthetics, but criticise and abstain from others, such as the Best Bottom contest. The becoming of bodies and the relation between consumers and brands are not informed by a single force, but happen in a vectorfield of multiple, potentially conflicting forces. Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty, for instance, has developed and acted upon a relational understanding of bodies, in which media, celebrity and peer beauty ideals are presented as key influences on female bodies and are thus instantiated as forces the campaign seeks to oppose. Here, it was particularly the Real Truth About Beauty report that set out Dove's perspective on the vectorfield in which consumer bodies are becoming informed by media, peers and family relations. In this vectorfield, to draw on Massumi (2002) and DeLanda (2002), the naturing body is enacted as a specific force, enabling consumers and the brand to navigate the existing forces. Set up as an orientation towards self-esteem, reworking one's peer relations and beauty ideals, the naturing body enables the navigation of the forces involved. It is situated in the present and in the future, or as Massumi argues: "(i)t is not the present that moves from the past to the future. It is the future-past that continually moves through the present" (2002: 200). The naturing body emerges as an attractor, in the sense of DeLanda (2002), as an instantiation of a long-term tendency of becoming in an environment in which multiple forces operate.

Within the vectorfield of bodily becoming, the naturing body is brought into being as a particular strong tendency, which might, however, never fully be actualised but only be approached asymptotically: "attractors are never actualized, since no point of a trajectory ever reaches the attractor itself" (DeLanda, 2002: 29). However, DeLanda continues, "(d)espite their lack of actuality, attractors are nevertheless real and have definite effects on actual entities" (2002: 29). Attractors provide certain stability to systems in which multiple vectors are at stake, claiming that even when trajectories face small shocks or are diverted, they stabilise in their movement towards the attractor. Tracing the interplay of multiple forces allows for the possibility of abstaining from both a representational analysis and cause-effect relations between brands and bodies. To put it with DeLanda: "a space with multiple attractors breaks the link between necessity and determinism, giving a system a 'choice' between different destinies, and making the particular end state a system occupies a combination of determinism and chance" (2002: 38).

As introduced at the beginning of the chapter, the engagement of both brands with bodies and sexuality resulted from their strategic differentiation in relation to their competitors: Dove aimed to connect the brand to a cause in order to situate itself in a differential relation to the communication standards of the industry, while similarly, American Apparel started deploying its aestheticised account of sexuality to add surplus to its basic products and ethically oriented production processes. Both brands, thus, also sought to set up an attractor in relation to the branding efforts in their market segment. Following Ringwood (2010), Dove not only aimed to offer an alternative to what the management perceived as standards of media beauty, but also approached the subject at a time when their audience was interested and 'ready' for it. Today, she continues, the Campaign for Real Beauty provides "a reference point. Because now people talk 'Is it like Dove? Is it better than Dove?' Dove has set a reference point that hasn't been there before" (2010). A similar dynamic applies to American Apparel, yet in a more implicit way. The brand also established its 'natural' body in differentiation to the high-gloss aesthetics of fashion communication by following a self-made style and working with semi-professional or amateur models. However, it was the early adoption of the brand by hipster culture that allowed this aesthetic to become contagious and topological, therefore emerging as a differentiating attractor within the field of fashion communication.

This chapter has moved from a discrete to an increasingly open idea of both media and brands as impacting on bodies. It has suggested that as brands increasingly sink into the background and operate in immanent and topological ways while remaining structured, and their impact on bodies can be understood similarly. Brands and bodies, it has been argued, are non-discrete and increasingly extend into each other. The next chapter takes up this question of boundary making in the context of such environmental accounts of bodies and asks: where does a body start and where does a brand end?

# 6

## **Intimacy, Atmospheres and Modulation**

This chapter continues to explore the relation between brands and bodies by focusing on processes of boundary making. Taking departure from an environmental understanding of bodily becoming as developed in Chapter 5, I trace the interrelation between the becoming of brands and the becoming of bodies in greater detail. I explore the affordances through which brands inform consumer bodies and how this process of in-formation (C. Venn, 2010) feeds back to the brand. For this purpose, I focus attention on the questions of intimacy experienced by consumers in relation to Dove and American Apparel. With reference to Lazzarato's notion of the creation of worlds (2004), I show how both brands instantiate climates of intimacy (Berlant, 2000), but also of extimacy (Palombi, 2009; Ragland, 2004), complicating ideas of privacy and publicness in relation to brands. In doing so, I extend the focus of world-making towards affective modulation (Parisi, 2004) and trace how the creation of atmospheres of intimacy operates on an affective level, reworking the boundaries between bodies, media and brands. Put differently, this chapter sets out to study how brands move closer to skin and arrives at the question of whether brands also move under the skin.

### **Atmospheres of Intimacy - Getting Closer to the Skin**

Throughout the fieldwork, a series of consumers kept referring to American Apparel in relation to issues of intimacy. The brand store is characterised as an 'intimate environment', the imagery of its campaign as showing 'intimate scenes' and even the products are considered as entangled in intimacy, as this interviewed consumer reported:

KS: American Apparel clothes are all about intimacy. They are so tight, shape so closely around your body, touch your most intimate areas. In the end they advertise you body as they show more than they hide.

Consumers hence not only experience the aesthetics of the brand as enabling intimacy, but their own engagement with the products is frequently framed by ideas of the intimate, touch and softness. With its tight-fitting, yet mostly basic product line, American Apparel set out to differentiate itself from other basic apparel companies in the late 1990s, as discussed in Chapter 5. However, its particular product range also enabled a specific experience of their products, using lighter fabrics than competitors made their products softer in touch and more tightly fitting to body shapes. Working with bright colours allowed the brand to elevate their basic cuts from everyday wear and in combination with short and tight cuts are experienced as drawing attention to the body rather than the garments themselves, interviewed consumers argued. In a newspaper interview, the company spokeswoman Alexandra Spunt claims that it is exactly this intimacy that is both controversial but also central to American Apparel's aesthetics: "The criticism of our ads has more to do with their rawness and the intimacy of the pictures," Spunt says. "At the end of the day we sell T-Shirts and panties that have a sexier look. We're not using sexy images to sell unrelated products" (Spunt in Goodwin, 2006).

Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty draws on intimacy along a series of lines. As discussed in Chapter 3, Dove has made particular efforts to become part of and to inform a variety of relationships, including those between mothers and daughters, mentors, peers, media and consumers' own bodies. In Chapter 5, I discussed how these relationships have been singled out as central to bodily becoming in Dove's early Real Truth About Beauty report. Let me explicate how exactly the brand seeks to enact - but also to shape - intimacy in a series of relations.

The Body Talk Workshop and Activity Guides are of particular interest here again, providing mothers and mentors with advice on how to foster their mentees' bodily self-esteem and awareness. A central element of the guide are recommendations on how to open up conversations with daughters in such a way so that young girls are more likely to open up and share thoughts, feelings and experiences related to their bodies. Mothers areas asked to immerse themselves in the movies, music or magazines their daughters like, in order to create shared references and a common ground.

However, the guide also outlines the impact mothers' relations to their own bodies have on their daughters and sets them up as role models. These combined efforts, the guide suggests, enable mothers to create a climate in which daughters are more likely to share their feelings, experiences and worries about their bodies. The Body Talk and Activity Guides are designed to be inserted in the intimate relationship between children and

parents, or mentors and mentees at school, while aiming to render them even more intimate by making girls open up and be informed by their mothers and by Dove. The brand strives to become a producer of these intimate relations, but does, however, subsequently use these for brand communication, but to enable instead new intensities between mothers and daughters involved.

The experience of intimacy in regard to Dove, however, is not always initiated by the brand itself. In Chapter 3, I outlined how many interviewed consumers explained that they were introduced to Dove in the context of their families, by mothers, grandmothers or siblings buying and recommending it. My younger interview partners, that is, users under the age of 25, students and women in the early stages of their careers also consider Dove as slightly too expensive and luxurious for everyday use. Instead, they use Dove products as a relaxing treatment for the self, as a mode of unwinding, withdrawing and self-encapsulation:

LN: It is not like a quick sort of shower in the morning as if you are using just a washing gel. You wanna take your time and then maybe bath. For instance in the evening to unwind and relax.

Dove bath oil, shower gel and especially body lotions are part of their intimate encounters with themselves, enabling consumers to disconnect from everyday life and establish an inward focus, often referred to as “pampering oneself at the end of a long day” (PL, Dove consumer).

While in the case of product usage, this intimacy is not shared with the brand, there are encounters with Dove in which the brand utilises this inward focus to make consumers monitor and reflect on their own bodily experience. These include, for instance, the repeated questions featured on Dove’s Facebook account, asking fans whether they feel ‘gorgeous’ or ‘beautiful’. Here, the process of self-reflection is instantiated on Facebook in dialogue with the brand, as users responding to these questions rarely engage in debates with each other. Dove is turning intimacy with the self into an intimacy with the brand, and this intimacy is performed collectively. Hence, while Dove is deploying existing relations of intimacy in order to intensify them, the brand is also involved in making new spaces of intimacy.

In consumer interviews and discussion groups, Dove’s advertising campaign, for instance, was discussed in the framework of intimacy, as it exposes its audience to bodies which are usually not prominent and widely visible in advertising. Seeing women in larger sizes posing in underwear produced responses such as “I do not want to look like that” (PL, Dove consumer) to “It is very brave and courageous of those

women to show their bodies almost naked in public” (IL, Dove consumer). Focus group participants stressed that the models of the Real Women campaign must “have had lost of courage to expose themselves half-naked to the public without having perfect bodies”, as they are “exposing themselves in an intimate situation” (IL, Dove consumer) to an unknown and non-intimate audience. Other interviewees contend that “We are used to the nudity of skinny and retouched model bodies, but getting so close to normal bodies is rather weird” (PL, Dove consumer). Dove’s Real Women campaign evoked intimacy, yet also an troubling sensation, since it is an unfamiliar mode of intimacy of being so close to the skin of the average or oversized bodies of non-professional models.

### Enacting Intimacy

The notion of intimacy emerges as central, however, also as ambiguous and opaque in conversations with consumers. Looking into its academic discussion, intimacy, so Arnould-Bloomfield and Pucci (2004) claim, is the ‘least intimate’ of all concepts. The notion of intimacy is referred to in a twofold way, on the one hand as sexual intimacy and physical encounters, while on the other, as addressing an affective relationality characterised by closeness, trust and knowing one another. Beyond these viewpoints, the concept of intimacy has gained relevance in relation to architecture and space as mediators of public intimacy (Berlant & Warner, 2008; Bruno, 2007; Colomina, 1996), in regard to digital cultures and the practices of using social media to create intimate relations (Marwick & Boyd, 2011), and in the context of how media environments prompt users to constantly unravel intimate information (Thompson, 2006; Thrift, 2008), creating ambiances of intimacy.<sup>59</sup> The most explicate discussion of intimacy can be found in the work of Lauren Berlant (2000), who draws attention to intimacy as being tied up with spatiality, but also the public and the private, while at the same time reconfiguring them:

But intimacy also involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way. Usually, this story is set within zones of familiarity and comfort: friendship, the couple, and the family form, animated by expressive and emancipating kinds of love. Yet the inwardness of the intimate is met by a corresponding publicness. (Berlant, 2000: 281)

Intimacy can be understood as a mode of relating to some other, as a mode of intensive affective proximity characterised by trust or physical closeness. It is a form of qualitative nearness, inexact yet rigorous, to put it into topological terms.

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<sup>59</sup> However, the majority of literature focuses on intimacy in a more closed sense as sensual, sexual and haptic proximity, studying the evolution of intimacy from a historical perspective (Giddens, 1992; Luhmann, Gaines, & Jones, 1998) or in relation to correspondence as a means of intimacy (Barthes, 1978).

Intimacy, following Berlant (2000), is also connected to knowing and having insights about the intimate other, creating a foundation for shared experiences. Such shared insights draw attention to the entanglement between intimacy and exclusivity, as closeness with one or more entities requires a greater distance to others. Shared stories cannot be accessible to everyone in order to remain intimate; intimacy is “interior, profound and secret” (Arnould-Bloomfield & Pucci, 2004: 3). In order to enact an intimate relation, the degree of proximity between the intimate entities requires the exclusion of a less proximate third who is not part of the intimate encounter. Drawing on Simmel’s idea of being as being in relation with others, Pyyhtinen stresses this exclusive character of intimacy:

That is to say, intimacy is exclusive by nature: in an intimate relationship, something that the two partners share only with one another and with no one else is placed at the heart of this relationship and made into its main carrier or primary source of fulfilment“ (2009: 118)

Intimacy between two, he continues, pairs inwardness with a corresponding outwardness. But at the same time, intimacy does not dissolve the intimate ones into each other, it connects them while they remain separate, as each intimate relation retains a degree of strangeness. Intimacy is a mode of relationality of close, exclusive proximity, which is not necessarily homogenous, but can be characterised by conflicting and contradictory affects: “contradictory desires mark the intimacy of daily life: people want to be both overwhelmed and omnipotent, caring and aggressive, known and incognito” (Berlant, 1998: 5). Intimate relations can thus be characterised by heterogenous affects, in which experiences with each other do not add up to homogenous closeness, but can be internally different.

In the context of Dove and American Apparel, what is most crucial about intimate relations is that they need to be enacted and negotiated constantly. As outlined in Chapter 3, the becoming of both brands is tied up to processes of repetition and contagion. Dove, for instance, enacts such repetitions on their Facebook page by repeatedly asking their fans how they feel about themselves, their bodies, their friends, while American Apparel constantly asks consumers to contribute to user generated campaigns and share their own instantiations of the brand’s aesthetics. Intimacy, hence, does not exist for itself, but only within and through these entities and their relations, while at the same time affecting them.

While opening up intimate entities to each other, intimacy can entail the encapsulation of those who are intimate. In the case of Dove, consumers refer to such encapsulation when using Dove products in order to reflect and withdraw from the world, but they are

also actively instantiated through BodyTalk workshops and mentor/mentee conversations, both of which build on the exclusivity of the encounter. In his first part of the sphere trilogy, Sloterdijk addresses such events of encapsulating intimacy as bubbles (2011), drawing attention to the intermingling between their relationality and spatialisation. He introduces the bubble as a particular space of co-existence in micro-relations in which becoming is always understood as becoming with.

Other authors, however, explore the relation between intimacy, openness and closure in relation to the making of the private and the public (Berlant, 2000; Berlant & Warner, 2008; Bruno, 2007; Warner, 2005). Berlant, for instance, draws on the work of Habermas to argue that liberal societies are built on the careful regulation of intimacy into its public and private formation. Feminist and queer scholarship, in particular, questions the relation between intimacy, the public and the private, drawing attention to how intimate encounters, both understood as relations of proximity and in regard to sexuality, are not confined to closed spaces of privacy, but very often organised openly in public by a series of institutions and spaces. In their seminal article on 'Sex in Public', Berlant and Warner (2008) explicate how sexual intimacy is mediated by publics, more precisely by public spaces which organise the possibility for sexual encounters beyond the realm of the home or digital spaces online. Drawing on Foucauldian governmentality, Berlant and Warner trace the entanglement of public institutions in the making of spaces of proximity and intimacy by monitoring and modulating the failure to perform intimacy in accepted spaces and ways. Let me explicate how the relation between the public, the private and the intimate play out in my case studies below.

### **The Intermingling of Intimacy and Exitimacy**

Throughout this thesis I have traced how both brands create assemblages characterised by different degrees of openness and closure. While some encounters with both brands happen in rather encapsulating events which enact intimacy, both brands also deploy a series of means to set in motion relations of public intimacy, especially in digital media, participatory campaigns and flagship stores, and within the mentoring workshops. Both brands deploy different forms of spatialisation and social relations to create ambiances of intimacy in which involved populations, such as Facebook fans or competition participants, are invited to affect the brand and be affected by it, through the sharing of stories, experiences or aesthetics. What is emerging in, for instance, Dove's Facebook profile or American Apparel's Best Bottom or The Next Big Thing contest, are forms of



public intimacy which draw attention to the complicated borders between the interior and exterior in regard to intimacy.

To make sense of such practices in branding, the work of Thrift becomes of relevance, who connects the fabrication of public intimacy to Lazzarato's creation of worlds, linking the enactment of atmospheres of intimacy with the production of surplus value in contemporary economies:

Aesthetics and public intimacy are being intertwined in new ways as part of what I call 'worlds,' spaces formed by capitalism whose aim is not to create subjects (as happened in the older disciplinary regimens) so much as the world within which the subject exists (Lazzarato 2004). These spaces can be understood as new forms of body with the capacity to alert us to that which was previously unable to be sensed. (Thrift 2009, 449)<sup>60</sup>

Such ambiances of public intimacy create a simultaneous inward and outwardness, which is central to both brands: in the case of Dove, as explicating beauty pressure; and in the case of American Apparel, as deploying sexuality and self-made aesthetics to instantiate a sense of public intimacy in their aesthetics, but also creating spaces of public intimacy with consumer bodies, as in the Best Bottom and The Next Big Thing contests. In this line of thought, what emerges as public intimacy is also referred to as extimacy, a concept originating from Jacques Lacan's engagement with psychoanalysis and topology, or the "overcoming of the traditional opposition between 'inner' and 'outer'" (Palombi, 2009: 351). By drawing on the topological figure of the Möbius strip, Lacan puts forward the notion of extimacy to draw attention to the intermingling between inside and outside. Intimate encounters, Lacan contends, always carry a sense of strangeness, in which "extimacy, then, allows us to understand how subjectivity, society and space take place through the twists and turns of external intimacy and 'intimate exteriority'" (Lacan, 1992: 139). Conscious and unconscious processes, experiences and memories are hence understood as being entangled in a continuous way in which entities, affects and experiences can fold between the inside and the outside of the psyche.

Spaces such as Dove's Facebook page, in which users willingly share insights about their feelings, experiences and bodies, create such an extimate space, but also turn consumers' extimate acts of sharing into feedback loops as they produce valuable information for further brand management (Lury, 2004). Intimacy and extimacy not only fold into each other, they also deform each other, just as consumers, brands and bodies are being shaped in such encounters.

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<sup>60</sup> See also Thrift, 2011.

## Brands as Frames for Intimacy

Most interestingly, ambiances of public intimacy not only produce intimacy, but also organise it in particular ways. They operate as framing devices, enabling some forms rather than others. Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty, for instance, taps into and opens up these relationships for reflection on and re-configuration of bodily becoming; however, it limits the relations that matter in this process. Although the various materials on their website stress the impact of relations on the becoming of bodies, the campaign focuses on family and peer relationships and brackets out both sexual relations, but also relations with men in general. The section for mothers and mentors excludes fathers or any male figures, the questionnaires do not address sexual partners and their impact on bodies, just as the aesthetics of the campaign present almost naked women not in order to be sexually attractive, but to highlight their attitude through facial expression, gesture and posture. This is reinforced by the perception of the brand as pure and clean, focusing on an inward intimacy, as addressed by interviewed consumers. Intimacy, in this sense, excludes sexual intimacy and fosters a mode of affective proximity that is first and foremost focused on the individuals themselves.

American Apparel, however, focuses on exactly this interplay. The introductory quote to this section refers to the intimacy of American Apparel products: the interviewed consumer stresses the tightness of American Apparel clothes, touching the 'most intimate areas' and 'showing more than they are hiding'. They enable consumers to feel 'sexy' and 'attractive' and to 'advertise their bodies', hence inserting the brand into consumers' own negotiation of sexuality and intimacy. Interviewed consumers, in particular, outlined how American Apparel succeeded in making basic, everyday wear more 'sexy', but in a casual, careless and implicit way:

RS: Like tights. Nobody looks good in tights. There is a challenge to be fair: Trying to make tights look sexy. They have actually managed to put sex appeal into tights, you know...

Certain products, consumers contend, can almost no longer be considered as apparel items, but function as 'accessories for sex' rather than as actual clothes:

RS: All of their clothes only exist for you to take them off it seems, you know. (...) I can't really believe anyone buys their underwear from them. Because it is not real underwear. It is just bits of fabric, you know. They do these little sheer 'bralet' things and it is like 'When would you ever wear that?' You would have to change out of your bra, put it on for a few seconds, show your like cool hipster boyfriend that your are wearing this sexy thing and he'll take it off and then you will have sex which you will have anyway.... but you feel like you need to wear American Apparel in the middle.

American Apparel is not only getting closer to consumers' skins, it is also enabling consumers to get closer to each others' skins. In its advertising campaigns, lookbooks and photo series, American Apparel creates an aesthetics of intimacy, showing people mainly in private environments, such as beds, with messy hair, sometimes sweaty, sometimes showing bumps or body hair, sometimes alone and sometimes in pairs. The self-made photographic style seeks to create an atmosphere of intimacy between the viewer and the protagonists. It resembles the work of amateur photographers as the perspective suggests that the viewer might be an invisible participant in the scene. Aesthetically, this imagery draws particular inspiration from realistic photographers such as Wolfgang Tillmans, but also from the aesthetics of intimacy developed by photographers such as Nan Goldin and her documentation of her own social network (Goldin et al., 1989). In a newspaper interview, Matthew Swenson, a media advisor for American Apparel claims: "It comes down to real people and what they wear. It's almost Nan Goldin, snap-and-shoot in nature" (Walsh, 2005). While the campaign features a documentary character, it also makes consumers reflect on their own relation to being sexy and intimate. In response to a campaign picture featuring the porn actress Charlotte Stokely as a model, a consumer commented:

RS: This is interesting because this is quite different. (...) She is wearing her glasses, she is doing the whole geek chic and this is... I mean I would like to look like that. That's.. I relate to that image. (...) That's like an indie-hipster girl. And yeah, she is really skinny but she almost just as well not be. It is more like, she is cool. It is quite weird... the way they tapped into... I mean, obviously, just because you are a hipster does not mean you don't have sex. But it is weird to see this that sexualised. Because to me she looks like a Goldsmiths girl with wacky glasses and stuff. (...) Because she is not overtly sexy or typically porn star sexy in the same way. It is quite interesting.

The aesthetics are defined by a triangulation of casual, amateurish settings, irony and sexual explicitness which enable the company to test the boundaries of this explicitness, for instance, by featuring pubic hair on an online ad, or by featuring yet another former porn-actress Sasha Grey. Interestingly, the atmospheres of extimacy created by American Apparel do not seek to invite consumers to share their thoughts, responses, affects and feelings in a confessional mode to the same extent as in the case of Dove. Rather they aim at enabling particular pleasures through shared aesthetics, styles and attitude. They are creating an aesthetics of shared intimacy which resonates in the way that they shape and insert themselves into actual intimate relations between consumers. American Apparel hence brings a particular intimacy into the public, an intimacy intermingled with irony and citations from pornography. Different from Dove, which deploys a number of approaches to create intimacy, American Apparel focuses on the

use of aesthetics to achieve this and capitalises on user engagement to take part in this aesthetics.

With its user generated approaches and campaigns like the Best Bottom contest, American Apparel is taking the idea of extimacy even further. Participants in the contest, by showing a collection of amateur underwear pictures, are all trying to embody the American Apparel style, but are also exposing themselves to a critical audience who rank and commented upon the entries, and this exposes the fragility of extimacy. To put it in Berlant's terms:

[I]ntimacy builds worlds; it creates spaces and usurps places meant for other kinds or relation. Its potential failure to stabilize closeness always haunts its persistent activity, making the very attachments deemed to buttress 'a life' seem in a state of constant if latent vulnerability. (Berlant, 2000: 2)

Participants in the Best Bottom contest opened themselves and their bodies up to evaluation, creating relations of proximity with other users, but also becoming open to the affective capacities of their remarks. The brand creates spaces of aesthetic extimacy while at the same time informing consumers' own intimate encounters, rendering them more porous and open to each other.

American Apparel's idea of intimacy, moreover, is connected to the company's aspiration to be a transparent and accountable fashion producer, so Moor and Littler (2008) argue. Positioning itself as a vertically integrated manufacturer, it attempts to create intimacy with its production process, allowing consumers to move closer to where their products come from. Moor and Littler trace and discuss a series of means through which the company seeks to enact this connection between transparency and intimacy, including the regular worker documentations posted on their website, the self-branding of the CEO Dov Charney as a notorious and streetwise hipster, but also the corporate design which combines transparency and workshop aesthetics. The brand opens itself up to a controlled public intimacy, creating an ambience in which consumers experience themselves as being more tightly connected to the company by gaining insights, information and getting seemingly closer to the skin of American Apparel.

The use of intimacy in branding thus works along three main lines in the cases of Dove and American Apparel. Firstly, both brands focus on the enactment of intimacy by involving consumers, for instance, via user generated approaches or by making them share intimate insights. They are characterised by a constant folding of openness and closure, intimate and extimate, while at the same time carefully controlling this folding,

only allowing particular modes of intimacy to be connected to the brand. Secondly, the creation of climates of intimacy between consumers is tangled up with the creation of intimacy with the brand, its objects, products and services. American Apparel, for instance, is turning basic fashion items into intimate objects and enablers of intimacy, making consumers feel sexy when wearing a basic T-Shirt. The cosmetic products of Dove on the other hand are considered 'a treat' and thus used to create intimacy with one's own body and as a means of withdrawing into a private cocoon of self-pampering. Yet, thirdly, corporate intimacy also directly shapes and modulates existing intimate relations, inserting themselves in and reworking mother-daughter talks, or changing the ways in which American Apparel consumers perform their bodies. Both brands therefore not only create climates of intimacy, but also modulate the experience of intimacy in relation to other actors or one's own bodies. Brands, I argue in the next section, not only move closer to the skin, but actually move under the skin.

### **Affective Modulation: Getting Under the Skin**

So far, brands, bodies and intimacy have been discussed in relation to creating worlds or climates of intimacy that enable particular affects and forms of becoming rather than others. But the concept of intimacy also draws attention to the limits and tensions of thinking branding as merely creating worlds. It is not only the activities of brands which create these worlds, but their emergence is the outcome of a process of mutual engagement of consumers, bodies, practices, spaces and other stakeholders. However, such productive capacities of climates of intimacy are not limited to indirect affective dynamics. A number of approaches directly interfere in affective responses, bodily becoming and intimacy on a more molecular level, moving, so this section argues, under the skin. In what follows, I explore instances of boundary making in the interrelation between bodies and brands by drawing together a consideration of climates and atmospheres with reflections on modulation and variation.

#### **Intimacy and the Fabrication of Affect**

Let me return to Dove's Body Talk workshops and Activity Guides for mothers and mentors one more time. A key element of the workshop is to create an environment in which young students or mentees are willing to engage with questions regarding their bodily experience and interact with mentors and peers about this topic. The workshop and talkshop guides provide the reader with a series of means of producing such climates, from welcoming any opinions, to encouraging climates of openness, down to

detailed instructions on what to do to gain participants' trust. However, beyond the making of such climates, there is something else at stake.

One exercise addresses the impact statements by family or friends can have on bodily experience, juxtaposing the intended meaning with how the statements actually affected the person addressed, such as 'Act your age not your shoe size!' or 'You are not going out like that!'. Students are asked to explore the sensation these statements trigger, such as feeling bad, hurt or not being taken seriously. But the exercise also invites them to reflect on how such comments might have been meant by the other person – suggesting that the intention might not be aligned with their affective response. This insight is then be used to revisit their initial affective reaction and maybe experience such an interaction differently. Here, an intimate setting is necessary in order to open up participants to talking about experience, but the initial experience is also being transformed and modulated in the course of the exercise. This dynamic is taken up across a number of other approaches, for instance, in the mother and daughter Activity Guide or on the Girls Only section of the Dove website which offers a 'True You Decoder'. This feature translates statements of mothers into what they actually mean and juxtaposes this with how they are being experienced by girls, in order to make mothers reconsider their comments and make girls reconsider their responses to them. Hence, the exercises aim to transform or modulate behaviour and affects directly in order to foster positive affects.

The Activity Guide for mothers takes this approach even further by highlighting how mothers function as role models for their daughters and encourages them not to act negatively in relation to their own bodies. Mothers, for instance, are advised against sighing when looking in the mirror, are asked not to talk about dieting plans, or not to express a wish to have different physical features. The becoming of young girls' bodies is hence tied up with the becoming of their mothers' bodies and in order to promote their daughters' self-confidence, mothers are asked to develop their own:

Obviously it's not so easy to show a positive or confident attitude about your own body if you don't feel it. Reflecting on your own feelings and trying to stop showing any negative ones you have about your body when she is around (actually it would be great for you if you could stop altogether!) is important. Finding the right stance towards your own body might be tricky, but the more neutral to positive you can make it, the easier it will be for your daughter to develop a confidence about her own. (Dove, 2009)

On top of that, mothers are given directives on how to talk to their daughters to create climates of intimacy and to affect the way daughters feel about their bodies, by saying phrases like: 'The way you put your clothes together is really original', or to be positive

about the beginning of puberty: 'Wonder aloud whether she'll have your breasts, or aunt Jane's legs, or dad's height, or her sister's teeth.' The behaviour of the mother is directly tied to the affective responses of daughters and their bodily becoming:

If she senses that it isn't really all right to feel sad, that it affects you badly or worries you, then she will cut off that feeling and be a bit confused. The sad feeling may then return in a different form and she may not know how to deal with this. If she feels it is OK to be sad, then she will probably stay in a conversation with you and you can go on to say something like 'It's so disappointing when x happens...' (Dove, 2009)

The detailed and directive character of such advice directly impacts upon the becoming of mothers' bodies, as it aims at deforming mothers' bodily experience by appealing to their function as role models.

### **On Climates and Affect: Biomediations**

Returning to the question of mediality first addressed in relation to feminist scholarship on brands and bodies in Chapter 5, an interesting intermingling between the creation of worlds and the transformation of consumer affects emerges in the case of Dove. It has been the work of Sloterdijk in 'Terror from the Air' (2009), in particular, which has brought together such an environmental account of media as a background condition with its capacity to directly affect. Sloterdijk explores the role of air-conditioning and the creation of atmospheres as social and political, but also as economic. Starting from atmospheric terrorism and warfare, he contends that politics no longer address bodies through governmental techniques, but by immersive background conditions, attacking the immune system, or life environments, and thus modulating the body from the inside. These operations are framed as air-conditioning, as the creation of environments, which affects bodies and objects on a material and corporeal level in heterogeneous ways:

Air design aims at directly modifying the mood of airspace users – it serves the indirectly manifest purpose of enticing a space's passers-by with pleasant, smell-induced impressions of a situation, contributing to heightened product acceptance and willingness to buy. (Sloterdijk, 2009: 94)

But while Sloterdijk focuses his argument on branded spaces in a traditional sense, such as shopping malls and corporate environments, I would like to take a wider idea of atmospheres of intimacy and extend the focus to all encounters and relations with a brand, drawing on the broad notion of the spatialisation of brands developed in Chapter 4. In both case studies, the becoming of consumer bodies is not addressed as the autopoiesis of a discrete body as organism, but happens in a relational process throughout spaces, social assemblages, technology, information and, of course, brands.

Chapter 5 has argued that these relations create vectors or a “force-field of potentiality” (Parikka, 2010: 175), organised by a number of attractors, some of which are created by brands. I addressed Dove and American Apparel’s attempts to create more ‘authentic’ forms of beauty and bodies as the instantiation of a ‘naturing body’ (Massumi, 2009), an emergent *and* fabricated body, that is, one that is not fixed but inherently intensive and constantly actualising. Both Dove and American Apparel seek to inform bodily becoming in a particular direction, however, not through a linear process of affecting consumers. Dove, in particular, set out with an idea of bodies as emerging in relations and in environments and sought to set up a series of touchpoints in which the brand seeks to align the becoming of bodies with its own brand values, for instance in its workshops or Facebook page. In relation to American Apparel, the flagship store especially brings together the strategic making of air design, following Sloterdijk, through interior design, the look and behaviour of staff and the products and music playing, which at the same time has been understood as the creation of worlds throughout this thesis, but which also produces direct affective responses by consumers.

Such an intermingling between bodily becoming and media environments is central to affect theories of bodies as biomediation (Clough, 2008, 2010; Hansen, 2004; Parisi, 2004, 2009; Thacker, 2004). While I have paid most attention to the making of worlds and environments of intimacy so far, I now turn to the question of affects and their modulation in more detail. The idea of the biomediated body draws attention to how technologies, especially new media and bioinformatics, not only impact but also expand modes of bodily becoming, creating an account of the body which is informed by material, technical, digital, affective and economic dynamics. It offers a particular perspective on the organisation of material forces, “invested by capital into being” (Clough, 2008: 2) and contributes to putting the body as discrete organism into question (Parisi, 2004). Clough draws on Mark Hansen’s and Eugene Thacker’s accounts of biomediation to revisit the impact of technology on bodily becoming, in which the body is understood in relation to a post-biological threshold, as being beyond a discrete body as organism: “Thacker defines biomediation as a technical reconditioning of biology, a technological framing that enables biology to perform in novel ways beyond itself, while remaining biological (2004: 14–15)” (Clough, 2008: 10).

While Clough’s discussion is mainly driven and situated in the framework of bioinformatics and genetic modification, I would like to argue for a wider understanding of bio-mediated bodies in relation to contemporary branding practices. As I showed in the previous chapters, when engaging with Dove or American Apparel, consumers’ bodies are not only understood as a relational body being affected by relationships to other



humans, but also as being informed by non-human entities, such as social media platforms, technologies, products, spaces, rules and information. It is the brand in particular that contributes to the making and happening of environments, which allow multiple forces - technical, environmental, informational, intimate and promotional - to impact on bodies.

Following Clough further, she suggests understanding the role of media and of information in terms of the modulation of bodily matter:

The function of the media as a socializing/ideological mechanism had become secondary to its continuous modulation, variation and intensification of affective response in real time, where bodily affect is mined for value. (Clough, 2008: 16)

The idea of biomediation thus takes the informational account of media and promotional culture even further, thinking information as a capacity to modulate. In the same fashion in which bio-media can move under the skin and modulate, it also bears the capacity to monitor and control bodily becoming, creating instant feedback loops of information which, in the context of branding, affect further branding practices and feed back to the creation of climates (Thacker, 2004). Following Clough, biomediating bodies are not only affected but can be considered as data and information producing machines, generating feedback loops that can stimulate the environments in which they become. Dove and American Apparel aim to inform bodily becoming in the direction of the above mentioned naturing body, so that it contributes to the distributed becoming of brands. Yet, as it has been shown, this expansion is not only based on technology and new media, but operates through spaces, relations, issues and especially intimacy.

### **Environments of Affective Modulation**

Let me explicate the relation between environments and modulation by returning to the case of American Apparel. Here, it is especially the flagship store and the modelling contest which are of interest. The American Apparel stores have been subject to previous discussions throughout the thesis as strategically designed spaces which create a particular ambience in which consumers can experience and contribute to the brand (Moor, 2007). This ambience is created through the shop design, its combination of boutique and workshop elements, harsh lighting, white walls and bright colours, but also through the performance of the store assistants, their style, presence, movements and attitude of inhabiting the space and encountering consumers. The management not only understands the staff as an embodiment of the brand, but also as its curators, contributing to the brand's morphology into individual use contexts. The job call for

store assistants, for instance, explicitly prioritises the capacity to understand and add a difference to the brand's aesthetics over sales work experience: interested candidates are asked to submit "a photo of yourself (pref. head to toe) dressed in such a way that reflects your personal taste and fashion sensibility. Please remember we are open-minded and are looking for individuals who are of all shapes and sizes" (American Apparel, 2012). Within the job description American Apparel specifies why this is necessary:

Applicants should understand that we are looking for individuals who have a well-informed and sophisticated taste level, and the capacity to take a curatorial approach to our product line when styling themselves (individuals will be wearing and modelling our clothing when working at our stores). Individuals should be able to present themselves in a way that impresses and inspires our customer. There should be a firm understanding that our brand image embraces the natural human state including physical imperfections. (...) We are looking for people who present themselves as trustworthy tastemakers, and not trend followers. (...) We appreciate people who are studying or have studied at a reputable fashion school or art school. (American Apparel, 2012)

In an interview with former store assistant Lauren, she explains how these criteria play out during the application process:

Lauren: First of all, they assess whether your personal style, styling but also attitude match the image of the brand. They look at everything, what shoes you wear, how you do your hair, but also how you stand and talk. But they also want to know why you applied and what you think of American Apparel. They want people that kind of like the brand, enjoy it.

Different from initial claims that 'all body shapes are taken into account', the brand evaluates applicants' bodily properties and their capacities to present them, as well as their alignment with the brand's aesthetics. Besides, the management is also looking for a high level of enthusiasm and passion for American Apparel – an affective attachment which signals the potential employee's willingness to be informed by the brand and develop their style, grooming and bodily features in accordance to the brand. Such hiring criteria suggest that the staff bodies not just enact the brand or contribute to the deformation of its aesthetics, but that the bodily becoming of store staff might be modulated and affected by the brand into new directions. My interview partner continued:

Lauren: I really liked to wear American Apparel before and had quite a lot of items, but when working in the store they sometimes gave up new outfits to wear like mini skirts and bathing suits, things that I would usually not wear. So I combined them in ways that made me still feel comfortable and myself.

Although the initial look of the appointed candidates already matches the brand's aesthetics, the brand management deploys a series of activities to further the alignment

with the brand, first by providing them with selected clothes, but also by setting up a climate of ubiquitous yet immanent evaluation in their stores. In 2010, a series of supposedly official yet internal documents from American Apparel management was leaked to the blog Gawker, featuring a meticulous list of style requirements (Nolan, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c), including:

- a) Makeup is to be kept to a minimal- please take this very seriously. Liquid eyeliner, pencil eyeliner and eyeshadow are advised against; mascara must look very natural (...) Please do not use a shiny gloss on your lips; any lipcolor must be subtle.
  - b) Eyebrows must not be overplucked. Full eyebrows are very much encouraged. (...)
  - c) We encourage long, healthy, natural hair, so please be advised of the following:
    - Hair must be kept your natural color.
    - Blow-drying hair excessively could cause heat damage, so this is advised against.
    - "Bangs" or "fringe" are advised against. It is not part of the direction we're moving in.
- (Nolan, 2010c)

Most interestingly, while the company keeps the description of its own aesthetics rather opaque and implies that consumers and applicants should know it, this document indicates that there is a high degree of internal explication which invokes a rather discrete notion of style, bodily properties and grooming.

Employees confirm the existence of the detailed grooming guidelines reported on Gawker; however, they are only shared between the brand and store management and it is the store manager's decision on how to explicate and execute them on location. The guidelines, hence, do not function as a 'dos and don'ts list' for each employee, but are individually addressed by store managers – mostly, because staff are already embodying the criteria.

Instead, store managers, staff and the interaction with further management create an immanent climate of implicit modes of mutual monitoring in which all employees are highly aware and self-reflective of their own and other's outfit choices. Store assistants report that their outfits, style and presentation are always a key subject at their work place, but never in a straightforward way. The management, my interview partners reported, would quickly and quietly assess their outfit choices when turning up for work. Although the majority of employees manage to match the managerial expectations, staff members also report about colleagues who have been asked to adapt their style, as they have dressed 'too goth', 'too slouchy' or 'too much like a dancer'. Yet, the brand's responses to such mismatches are subject to the individual store managers' approaches. Employees, my interview partners reported, were told to abstain from using too much visible make-up and were asked to stop plucking their eyebrows so much.

The responses and reactions of store staff are manifold: while some did not experience such direction as intrusive or invasive in their own grooming habits because they did not use much make-up or did not pluck their eyebrows anyway, others have been irritated about the detailed and intimate level on which their employer attempts to regulate their bodies. In other cases, particularly enthusiastic, outgoing or cheerful employees, who dance or sing along in the store, were met with scepticism and resentful comments. Such expressive behaviour might have not been forbidden, but was less desirable than a distanced and less outgoing approach. The store manager thus holds a central position in the making of such atmospheres, functioning as a key touchpoint between store assistants and the regional and international management. Yet outfits and style also feature as a key conversational topic among colleagues, as everyone would observe the other's choices and comment on particularly inspiring or problematic styles.

What is emerging in the workplace of the American Apparel store is an interplay between the making of environments and direct affective modulation, bringing employees' bodies into being as "invested by capital into being" (Clough, 2008: 2). The interplay of environments and affection informs bodily becoming, or, to put it in Featherstone's terms, a reconfiguration of biology, in which bodies become in relation to brands, products, relations, spaces and issues:

Biomedica results in a technical reconditioning of the body, providing a body that is informational (the body in the database), but also productive in the sense that it gives rise to a body which is post-biological in its capacity to mutate and be reconstituted as reformed matter. (Featherstone, 2010: 209)

Just as the Gawker articles claim, store managers are asked to regularly report and document the aesthetic performance of their assistants to higher levels of management, for instance, by taking regular so-called 'classroom-pictures', that is group photographs featuring their employees' outfits. The company has established a series of evaluative moments in which the becoming of bodies is monitored and if required, intervened in. The classroom images, so store assistants are being told, are directly forwarded to the CEO Dov Charney for approval. No matter whether or not the CEO actually evaluates several hundred classroom images or not, the announcement makes assistants accountable to the CEO directly and creates a climate of intimacy and of monitoring, performing a sense of transparency and proximity within the corporation itself. Hence, what is at stake in American Apparel stores is the intermingling of the creation of climates of mutual inspiration between colleagues and management with, at the same time, the close monitoring and modulation of them on a molecular, yet not always explicit, level (Clough, 2008). While the required style is explicated and developed on

the managerial level, it is only communicated implicitly in the stores. Staff are supposed to understand what is expected of them through observing, comparing and aligning themselves with the brand, as the store management only occasionally explicate the directives they are given.

Let me explore such processes of affective modulation by drawing on the experience of the former employee, Lauren, whom I interviewed. In our conversation, Lauren reported that she initially applied for the job as she enjoyed the look of the brand and was interested in participating in it. While she felt closely related to the brand in the first place, her actual work experience exceeded this initial relation of proximity, as working for the brand challenged her to develop her style and grooming habits in new directions aligned with the brand. She started consciously planning her outfits for working days and began to wear items she would usually abstain from, such as swimsuits, hotpants or very short mini skirts. While these pieces of clothing made her feel connected to her colleagues in the store, she also reports that they felt slightly awkward to wear when walking to work or leaving for lunch, and experienced the feeling of being looked at or even directly commented upon: “So your mother lets you run around like this?” (Lauren, American Apparel staff). At the same time, Lauren claims to have enjoyed the experience of being impacted on by the brand as she started experimenting with new outfits, trying new items she would not normally wear or testing different grooming options. While her interest in the brand started off as the possibility of expressing her own ideas on aesthetics, the experience of working in the store soon moved her to be in-formed by the brand in her bodily becoming:

Lauren: It was like a bubble in which we would do things and wear things we would normally not wear. It was alright as long as we were in the store, but once you leave work, you notice that there is a different world out there.

The store turned into an encapsulating space, a bubble in the sense of Sloterdijk (2011), in which she had to perform a role that modulated the way she would present and groom herself. It put both a restriction and an extension on her body, as it channelled her experiences into directions she would not have engaged with before.

The strict rules and the attention to all details of the body and its fashioning thus contributed to the modulation and creation of a variation of the staff's bodies, bringing together the creation of climates and affective modulation. However, the capacities of brands to modulate bodies and set in motion dynamics of biomediation does not suggest that the relation between them is determined by brands, nor that brands seek to limit processes of happening. Rather, brands attempt to strike a careful balance between

modulation and enabling, as seen in the case of the American Apparel store, in which store assistants are expected to evolve both within and beyond the aesthetics of the brand. What emerges are bio-mediated bodies that are informational (Thacker, 2005; Clough, 2008) in multiple ways, whilst thinking information in the sense of Simondon (2005) as a capacity to impact. Simondon develops a concept of information that moves beyond ideas of information as content submission, as in the cybernetic model of information transmission, but cuts across a bifurcation between form and content, drawing attention to its capacity to connect, impact and affect; this formulation sees the thinking of information as in-formation which bears affective capacities (Clough, 2008), in-forming other bodies, in-forming the brand and providing feedback loops of information to the brand. Such feedback loops can also be understood as extimate, folding from bodies to brands to climates of intimacy. Here, finally, the question arises of where does a brand end and a body start?

### **Conclusion: Brand Management and Abstract Sex**

The two chapters on brands and bodies have taken a particular journey in order to map out the relation between brands, bodies and sexualities. Throughout both chapters, I have shown that American Apparel and Dove address bodies as environmental, as becoming in relation and aim at creating intensive dynamics within this vectorfield of mutual in-formation (DeLanda, 2002). The making and happening of both brands creates ambiances of intimacy whilst modulating bodies on an affective level and at the same time directing their becoming along lines that are aligned with the brands themselves. The exploration of intimacy, in particular, as climate and as a means of modulation has shown how brands aim to re-configure bodies by getting closer to them, monitoring and interfering in them. At the same time, bodies also inform and modulate brands in return as brand value and the brand's invariance under deformation are increasingly tied to the becoming of bodies. As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, the becoming of brands is animated by their appropriation and immersion into new use and life contexts, a process that I addressed as the becoming topological of brands as they remain invariant whilst constantly being recombined. Chapter 5 traced the entanglement of bodies in these processes of immersion and arrived at the conclusion that brands and bodies are being tangled up in an extimate relationship, as they continue into each other, yet remain distinct. Bodies are being biomediated by brands and brands are being modulated through bodies. The boundaries between both are intersecting without dissolving and are different for each consumer and each encounter. While topological distances are understood as inexact yet rigorous (DeLanda, 2002), the relation between

brands and bodies can be understood as continuous, as hanging together (Bell, 2009), yet remaining distinct.

Such boundary making between brands and bodies is crucial to the experience of American Apparel's Best Bottom contest. The contest - its announcement, rhetoric and embeddedness in American Apparel's brand communication - sought to create a climate in which the raunchy, DIY-aesthetic of the brand is at the same time embraced, but extended into the realm of user generated imagery. However, the experience of taking part in the contest was also informed by the affordances of interactivity, and the feedback, comments, sentiment and ranking participants get from other users. On her blog, a participant describes the experience as follows:

There was something kind of awesome about all these women photographing their real butts, privately and (mostly) respectfully. I couldn't help but think, 'What would happen if I photographed my donk?' My curiosity outweighed my feminist rage and the next thing I knew, I was slipping on my AA lace body suit, bending over for my camera, and actually kind of enjoying it. (Anonymous, 2010)

This quote illustrates that the participant was not expecting a predefined experience, but was driven by her curiosity at being shaped by the affective dynamics which her participation would engender - although she does not seem to expect negative responses. She opened herself up to being affected by both her own sensation and the reactions of others:

But as soon as I saw my pics, all of my concerns melted away. Does that hot donk belong to me? I was so pleasantly surprised by the beauty of my own behind I decided I had to enter my bum in the AA competition. This initial positive feeling has been strengthened when being reflected in positive comments. (...) My butt is currently ranked number 489 out of 901 entries and my overall rating is 2.51 out of 5.0. Not too shabby for a former butt hater. Yes, Dov Charney is still a perv, but seeing my naked butt up there on the entry site makes me proud in some weird way. Not just proud ... empowered. (Anonymous, 2010)

What is emerging here, to return to Chapter 5, is a naturing body, which is everything but natural. It does not refer to an actual body, but is the materialisation of an abstract force; it is the outcome of strategic branding, the activities of the brand and consumers' responses, that enable a particular experience which is singular to each consumer.

What informs the making of bodies in the context of American Apparel is shaped by an abstract account of bodies developed as part of strategic brand management and which brings together the brand's relation to hipster culture, its DIY aesthetics and its references to pornography. It is developed in differential relation to the brand's competitors and brought into being in a distributed way through the involvement of a series of actors, spaces and events. It is here that Luciana Parisi's (2004) notion of

abstract sex becomes relevant to addressing the interplay between feedback loops of information, abstraction and affective modulation, blurring the boundaries between natural and artificial sex and offering a different perspective to the image of brands as invariant under deformation.

Parisi develops an informational and eventive account of sex which does not think sex as the sexual activity of bodies or as the physical sex of a body, but puts forward an informational notion of sex, focusing on its generative and combinatorial capacities to intermingle material and immaterial entities. From this perspective, sex can be thought of as organic, bodily, environmental and technological. For example, abstract sex turns bodies into information and information into bodies. Linking a Deleuzian philosophy of becoming and the molecular biology of Lynn Margulis, Parisi's eventive idea of sex transgresses distinctions between the material and immaterial, between digital and biological matter: "Far from opposing matter to immateriality, abstract sex points to the potential mutations of a body that are not defined by a transcendent substance but by the incorporeal (abstract) transformations of matter" (Parisi, 2004: 15).

Chapter 5 outlined how Dove and American Apparel have brought together their brand values with a particular idea of bodily becoming in a strategic process: in the case of Dove, this was mainly framed through the Real Truth about Beauty report; and in the case of American Apparel, this was through making basic wear more sexy. The strategic enactment of the naturing body is hence enabled through a process of abstraction of the possible modes of becoming for both brands and bodies and their insertion into consumer lives and practices. It is in this sense, that American Apparel's Best Bottom contest can be addressed as abstract sex, as the modulation of bodies on a molecular level, which does not confine them to the autopoietic becoming of a body as organism, but is based on processes of exchange and recombination of information, affects and technology; it is the interplay between brand, contest, participation, responses and affective reactions that enables the particular experience for the above mentioned participant. Abstract sex signposts the multiple layers in which bodies are being organised and re-organised.

Through her engagement with cloning and bioinformatics, Parisi develops an account of biodigital sex in which bodily becoming is constantly turned into information and affected by information itself. Bodies are abstracted into forms of bio-digital databases, in Parisi's case, mainly referring to DNA information, where they are modulated and recombined in order to create new forms of bodily existence, for instance through cell and DNA modulation, such as in bio-digital cloning. The assemblages involved



constantly turn bodies into intangible information in bio-digital databases just as brands constantly monitor and research bodies in order to abstract them in regard to their strategic positioning. It is the repetitive and contagious dynamics and the feedback loops of information that create further abstractions, as the becoming of consumer bodies is constantly monitored and turned into information about their behaviour and intimate insights into their affective states, preferences and interactivity data, which feed back into brand management (Lury, 2004). This information is utilised to create and refine the climates of intimacy that modulate and transverse consumer bodies and sexuality in order to align them with the strategic objectives of the brand.

It has been shown how brands try to modulate the becoming of bodies, but not all consumers evolve in a predictable way and often follow disjunctive trajectories - as in the case of American Apparel's The Next Big Thing Competition- which might still add surplus to brands. Parisi links abstract sex to capitalism, drawing attention to a 'bio-informatic phase of capitalism':

Rather than repressing the capacity of a body-sex to reproduce, the biodigital order commercializes the unpredictable (the virtual and not the possible) power of mutations marking a new bifurcation between the molecular control of sexual reproduction and the molecular proliferation of bacterial sex. (Parisi 2004, 25)

Parisi connects bio-digital sex with (cybernetic) ideas of control: life and surplus are generated through variation, and it is exactly the unpredictability of this variation, the 'new' it can add to brands, that bears its economic value. Such bio-informatic capitalism is hence reliant upon both invariance and the deformation of brands.

The argument that has unfolded throughout the last two chapters has proposed an informational understanding of brands and bodies as abstract, recombinant sex. Throughout this chapter, I have shown how brands operate through climates of intimacy and extimacy, seeking to get closer to consumers' skins. However, brands not only inform consumer bodies through the making of environments, but also through affective modulation, enabled through intimacy. In this interplay between ambiances and modulation, consumer bodies emerge as bio-mediated bodies (Clough, 2008), bodies that are reconfigured in the interplay between brands, media, spaces, issues and relations, moving 'beyond a post-biological threshold' whilst remaining biological (2008:14).

Discussing the experience of working in the environment of the American Apparel store, former store staff report how the brand creates climates of attachment, by hiring people who both understand and endorse the brand. However, these climates also directly shape and affect staff bodies, modulating their style, grooming and self-presentation on a

detailed level, as the becoming of staff bodies is tied up with the becoming of brands. In the final section, I addressed this relation with reference to Parisi (2004) as a form of abstract sex, in which brands and bodies fold into each other whilst remaining distinctive. Just as with brands, bodies emerged as happening and as being made in the context of American Apparel and Dove. The notion of abstract sex allows to address the folding of brands - their values, issues and aesthetics - into bodies, resulting in a recombinant mode of becoming. What is at stake in such abstract sex, however, is the becoming topological of brands and bodies in relationality, as their becoming is animated by constant recombination and deformation. The role of societal issues in the case of American Apparel and Dove therefore not only sinks into the background of encounters with the brand, but also into the background of bodies, informing them in heterogeneous ways.

# 7

## **Brands and Continuous Economies**

This thesis set out to explore the role of brands in the context of increasingly participatory and distributed branding practices. I departed from the observation that brands increasingly attempt to tie up the production of (brand) value with the production of relations, affects, social assemblages, but also societal issues. From here, I developed a sociological response to the growing interest in so-called co-creative approaches to branding, which refer to the strategic deployment of consumers' and other stakeholders' engagement with the brand as a means of orienting it in valuable directions. I traced how this development currently manifests itself in marketing discourses on co-creation (Cova & Dalli, 2009; Cova et al., 2011; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a), how these discourses inform and are informed by changing industry practices, and how sociology responded with a critique of consumer labour and exploitation (Cova & Dalli, 2009; Cova et al., 2011; Zwick et al., 2008). Departing from sociological accounts of brands (Arvidsson, 2006; Lury, 2004; Moor, 2007), this thesis has sought to make a contribution to the study of brands in the context of economic sociology by focusing on their making and happening. In doing so, I drew attention to how brands are not only strategically designed and company-centric entities, but emerge in relation to multiple stakeholders, and are distributed across a series of events, spaces and temporalities. Just as brands make consumers act, talk and engage, brands are also being made by consumers and other entities; they are both made and happening, active and passive - while the relations between the actors involved do not necessarily have to be symmetric.

Following from the changing role of brands in the context of co-creative branding practices, the thesis has focused on the research question of how contemporary branding is involved in organising the boundary between social and economic life. As a sociological contribution to the study of brands, this thesis gave attention to how the

becoming of brands is entangled with processes of boundary making (Lury, 2011a), on the one hand between economy and society, but also between the inside and outside of corporations, between present and future and between production and consumption (Arvidsson, 2006; Lury, 2004; Moor, 2007). In this framework, I applied a twofold focus, shifting from an interest in the embeddedness of brands in social relations and affective dynamics to an interest in the background conditions or environments of the brands' making and happening, or what has been addressed as the creation of worlds (Lazzarato, 2004; Sloterdijk, 2009). In both cases, the question of immersion and immanence was of importance, as well as a mode of affection that operates beyond what is considered active and passive (Manning, 2009; Massumi, 2002).

In doing so, attention was directed towards three key dimensions of the making and the happening of brands: the relations and social assemblages of brands, the spatialisation and distribution of brands, and the relation between bodies, sexuality and brands. I engaged with these three focal points by exploring two case studies: Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty and American Apparel. Both brands were of interest and relevance to this thesis, as they have been deploying a participative approach since the early 2000s and ever since have strategically connected their brand values to a particular idea of bodily becoming and, in the case of American Apparel, sexuality.

Deploying a mixed set of sociological and digital research methods, the empirical fieldwork focused on tracing how the brands evolved over time in regard to social relations, their spatial instantiation and their interplay with bodies and sexuality. More precisely, I traced how different actors encounter and experience the brands, how they engage with them and how they are affected by them, as well as how brands are affected by these encounters themselves. Rather than seeking to map out a complete picture of the multiple instances involved in the becoming of the brand, I put forward the idea that engagement with brands remains multi-sided and multi-vectorial, not adding up to a coherent experience but remaining partial, fragmented and internally heterogeneous. The methodological approach reflected this perspective, bringing together elements of tracing, that is descending into the lifeworlds, spaces and relations of brands, and mapping; a mode of sense making that gives attention to multi-layeredness and interrelation.

The overall objective of the thesis to investigate the role of the brand as organising the relation between economic and social dynamics attuned me to questions of boundary making, partibility, the interplay between invariance and deformation, atmospheres and world-making, as well as affective modulation. I developed the claim that contemporary

brands - as well as their relations, spaces, aesthetics, and issues - are becoming increasingly partible, reliant on their constant re-appropriation by a series of actors and are entangled in a becoming topological, as they are defined through relations which can only be experienced from the inside.

## **Chapter Summary**

The thesis started out with an introduction to my initial observation, that is, Dove's attempts to produce brand value and economic profit by engaging with societal concerns and the production of social relations and interactions. From here, I developed my interest in the increasing interest in participatory approaches in contemporary branding practices and set out to consider branding as potentially boundary making practice, (re-)organising the relation between social and economic life. Tracing such intermingling between the social and the economic, I mapped out a series of wider concerns, including the non-linearisation of production (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2006; Slater & Tonkiss, 2001; Thrift, 2005), the role of world-making (Lazzarato, 2004), the relation between production, consumption and sociality, as well as the role of the making of possible futures come to matter (Grusin, 2010; Thrift, 2008) and identified them as intermediate layers of the thesis. From here, the notion of continuity is introduced and discussed in relation to boundary making. Finally, I introduced the specific structure of the thesis, focusing on sociality, spatialisation, as well as bodies and sexuality as three key sites of the making and the happening of brands.

The first chapter offered an overview of the field of branding from four perspectives. First, it traced key instances in the history of brands, showing how branding expanded to inform an ever growing set of practices both within and outside of companies. I argued that with the rise of informational capitalism, branding has been increasingly tied up with knowing and understanding consumers. The last ten years, however, have seen a growing interest in implementing ideas of co-creation, consumer involvement and participation (Ind et al., 2012; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a; Ritzer et al., 2012; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010), fuelled by new possibilities of interactivity in online media, but extending beyond that. While particular strands in marketing literature herald so-called co-creative accounts of branding as a paradigm shift compared to traditionally more company-centric accounts of brands, the actual implementation of co-creative approaches varies within the industry. Engaging with a set of key sociological accounts of brands, I traced how brands have enabled companies to move beyond a mere price competition and render relations between consumers and corporations more interactive,

yet not less asymmetrical (Lury, 2004). Stressing how brands operate both as frame and enable activity, Lury understands them as flexible and structuring objects with more than representational capacities, while Moor (2007) pursues the idea of social and cultural practice further by exploring the emergence and transformation of brand values into different material forms. The first sociological account of co-creative branding, however, offered by Arvidsson (2006) outlines how branding has been striving towards 'putting consumers to work' and operates the embodiment of informational value and capitalism. Instead of engaging in the current tendency to criticise co-creative branding as an avenue of turning consumption into a new form of labour and thus exploiting it (Zwick et al., 2008), I suggested a return to Callon's economy of qualities (Callon & Méadel, 2002), the idea of assembling brands (Lury, 2009) and finally the notion of partibility (Foster, 2011; Strathern, 1990) to open up avenues for the particular perspective on co-creation that the thesis puts forward.

In Chapter 2, I introduced the methodological approach of tracing and mapping deployed throughout this thesis. I outlined a set of concerns relevant to methodological development, most notably the interest in making and happening, the social and spatial distributedness of brands, the focus on social issues and on the interplay between affection and background conditions. This plane of concerns was transformed into an empirical research project focusing on two case studies: Dove and American Apparel. I proposed a methodology that took special inspiration from Lash and Lury's object oriented methods (2007), whilst attending to questions of tracing. Key to the idea of tracing, I argued, is to descend into the lifeworlds of different actors by taking up their experiences, affects, responses and interactions, and never exactly knowing where they will lead the research, nor seeking to create a complete picture. A key element to tracing, so I showed, is the acknowledgement and use of distributed analytical capacities, that is, of devices, actors and objects. The chapter outlined how I deployed a mix of social and digital research methods to achieve this. The notion of mapping, on the other hand, was introduced as a mode of sense making of such tracing and I outlined how the different traces recorded do not necessarily need to add up to a homogeneous or complete story of the brand, nor to cause-effect relations.

Rather, I have taken an interest in the emergence of the sociology of the surface (Adkins & Lury, 2009; Savage, 2009) which focuses less on rules, causes and deep meaning, but on relations, sequentiality and pattern finding, a sense making from the inside which does not seek to create comparability between the case studies. Drawing on Sloterdijk (2009), I develop an interest in explication, the making explicit of immanent modes of affection and the background conditions of the becoming of brands.

Following from here, the first empirical chapter, '(Re)Composing Sociality', addressed the role of social relations and sociality in contemporary branding. Taking its departure from an increased interest in deploying sociality for branding purposes - materialised in discussions on brand communities, collectives and brand tribes - this chapter traced the relations that matter to the case studies. Rather than engaging with the notion of brand community, I drew on the concept of the assemblage (DeLanda, 2006) and traced the multiple assemblages that are involved in the making and happening of both brands. In the case of Dove, such assemblages were seen to be held together by an interest in either the product or its stance towards beauty norms, and, in the case of American Apparel, connected to global hipster culture. I moved on to show that they are subject to the constant de- and recomposition of actors, and are characterised by an excess of inclusion of the stakeholders over belonging (Mackenzie, 2012). That is, belonging to an assemblage is not a mutually exclusive relation, but remains partible, just as their relation to brands (Foster, 2011; Strathern, 1990).

Chapter 3 then moved on to explore the processes of such boundary making by tracing modes of repetition and the need for re-enactment in the case of American Apparel. In this process, the brand's aesthetics were understood as becoming topological, that is relational, and can only be understood from the inside, or as 'invariant under deformation' (DeLanda, 2002; Duffy, 2006). Each process of re-appropriation of the brand into individual use contexts, remains connected to the brand whilst altering it. Such repeated participation, I argued, not only emerges based on consumer initiative, but both brands deploy a series of means to create ambiances that invite repeated participation. In the case of American Apparel, model competitions pose a particular instance of such a making of climates, producing ambiances of continuous relations between participants whilst ordering them on rankings and ordinal scales (Guyer, 2010). The chapter hence introduced a viewpoint on brand sociality that does not give pivotal attention to the role of community, but to internally different and interconnected social assemblages characterised by different processes of boundary making and local variation.

In Chapter 4, 'Brand Spaces', I traced the spatialisation of such social assemblages, revisiting the idea of brand spaces and thinking the becoming of brands as a spatialising process. Starting off from consumers' increasingly spatial experience of both brands encountered during my interviews, the chapter focused on the different instances in which brands are brought into being in spaces. It expanded the notion of branded spaces from a focus on strategically designed spaces to all spaces in which actors can encounter brands or encounter each other in relation to brands, such as clubs, bars, but

also personal homes. These so-called brand spaces are not empty containers in which activities take place: I have suggested that they emerge as both performative and more than representational (Ingold, 2000; Thrift, 2008). Further, I understood brand spaces as becoming topological (DeLanda, 2002), as they are not organised by external coordinates, but through practices, relations and the re-appropriation of the brand's aesthetics or issues. The chapter was particularly interested in the continuation of different spaces into each other, but also the specific ways in which brands are being experienced, discussed and negotiated across spaces. Here, special attention was paid to digital spaces the specific forms of engagement with brands online. I suggested that it is the happening of the brand, enabled through the affordances of the space, that allows the specific aspects of the brand to become invariant under deformation.

The chapter then returned to the initial finding that brand spaces are performative and explored the affective capacities of the American Apparel store. It mapped out the interplay between the strategic making and consumers' experience of the store, or how affective spaces aim at directing consumer affect and experience into a particular direction, seeking to delineate desirable horizons of possibility. At this stage, I proposed the argument that the spatialisation of brands, their continuation into multiple spaces, is tied up with their continuation into the future. Brand spaces created by the brand management aim at premediating potentially valuable future activities (Grusin, 2010). However, I suggested that the performative capacities of brand spaces are not limited to the production of affect, they also create affordances in which social activities can be transformed into new form, such as data, which can then enter processes of exchange and value production. Here I turned to social media platforms, that is Facebook in particular which has increasingly developed infrastructures that enable web users to share external web content with selected social assemblages on the platform. The medium-specificity of the platform and its features render affective responses topological, I have suggested; they deform them into a number on a counter which remains invariant, yet they have the potential to enter multiple relations of exchange, to bear affective capacities and to create further social assemblages on the platform.

The chapter concluded by revisiting Lury's claim regarding the centrality of the logo in branding (2004). Lury assigns particular significance to the logo as a central framing entity and as the face of the brand. Engaging with the spatialisation of the brand, however, showed that consumers do not necessarily engage with the brand itself, but in relation to the brand, with its specific spatialisation, aesthetics, relations to other consumers or negotiations of issues. Brands, I concluded, operate as virtual capacities or



forces (DeLanda, 2002), as consumers do not encounter them as such, but only partly, in relation to their spatialisations.

Chapters 5 and 6 drew attention to the engagement of both brands with social issues, more precisely, with the role of aesthetics, bodies and sexuality in the making and happening of brands. Chapter 5, 'Brands and Bodies', mapped out how both Dove and American Apparel have been increasingly tied up with a particular stance towards bodily becoming. First, I revisited previous feminist scholarship on the relation between bodies, sexuality and promotional media, finding that even though main contributions have moved from focusing on a discrete notion of media, limited to advertising and visual material, towards a more immanent and ubiquitous idea of media, most scholarship gives pivotal interest to the representation of brands. In order to trace how in contemporary branding practices, brands not only inform the becoming of bodies but also how bodies increasingly affect brands, I showed how in the cases of Dove and American Apparel, brand values have been gradually tied up with a perspective on bodies. More precisely, I traced how Dove has set up the protection of bodies as a social cause for the brand, whilst American Apparel is deploying sexuality as a means of making its basic apparel more interesting to wear and to stand out from competitors. In the case of Dove, it was a report commissioned towards the beginning of the campaign that established the key insights and concerns that subsequently drove the campaign. In contrast to so-called media pressure and un-realistic beauty ideals, Dove set out to orient their consumers' bodily becoming towards a more 'authentic' and 'inclusive' notion of the body. Drawing on Massumi (2009), I argued that what is emerging is not a more natural body, as suggested by Dove, but a naturing body, a force impacting becoming in relation.

While in the case of Dove, it is mainly the activities of the brand management that seek to enact the naturing body, in the case of American Apparel it is brought into being through the repetitive re-enactment of the brand's aesthetics and, thus, relies on what has been understood as contagious dynamics. In this process of becoming contagious, the particular idea of bodily becoming put forward by American Apparel introduces micro-variation whilst remaining recognisable. Drawing these findings together, I have contended that the naturing body - the multiple forces seeking to inform consumers' bodily becoming - rather than having a direct impact on consumers, operates as an attractor (DeLanda, 2002), opening up one particular horizon of possibility for consumer bodies among others. In doing so, I offered an alternative perspective on the relation between brands and bodies than that proposed in previous feminist media scholarship, one which does not single out branding to discrete media formats, but that addresses

brands as distributed and ubiquitous forces, whilst thinking their impact on bodies as one attractor among others at interplay.

Subsequently, Chapter 6, 'Atmospheres, Intimacy and Modulation', moved into a more detailed study of how both bodies and brands actually inform each other and how the boundaries between the two are negotiated (Clough, 2008). The chapter started with the observation that consumers recurrently experience both brands as intimate: in the case of American Apparel the consumers claim that the clothes are 'all about intimacy', while the brand management focuses on enacting intimacy in the brand communication and transparency strategies (Moor & Littler, 2008). In the case of Dove, the brand is embedded in multiple intimate relations whilst enacting intimacy with differently shaped bodies throughout their campaign. The creation of intimate relations of proximity is based on processes of exclusion, bringing about a corresponding outwardness (Berlant, 2000). While some instances of Dove's and American Apparel's campaigns seek to deploy exactly these exclusive modes of intimacy, others such as the modelling competitions, the advertising campaigns and the Facebook interactions attempt to perform relations of intimacy in more open environments, as events of extimacy or public intimacy (Palombi, 2009) in order to enable a topological movement between the intimate and the extimate.

Brands, however, not only move closer to but also under consumers' skins, impacting and informing, to draw on Simondon (2005), modes of bodily becoming on affective levels. This intermingling between media effects and bodily becoming in the cases of Dove and American Apparel allowed me to revisit the notion of biomediation (Clough, 2008; Hansen, 2004; Thacker, 2004). I suggested that contemporary branding is characterised by a sinking into the background – but also a modulation of – affective consumer responses along multiple lines. By engaging with the specific case of the American Apparel store, the interplay between intimacy and biomediation is mapped out. What was initially discussed as climates of intimacy and extimacy, was complemented with a focus on affective modulation in this chapter, a twofold movement addressed by Sloterdijk as 'air-design' (2009), as the making of immersive background conditions with the capacity to modulate becoming on an affective and precognitive level. Brand management, this chapter concluded, sets up its own idea of bodily becoming and seeks to create affordances that contribute to its actualisation, thus linking the becoming of brands to the becoming of bodies. Drawing on Parisi's eventive and informational account of 'abstract sex' and focusing on a recombinant and generative idea of sex rather than one tied too closely to physical or cultural sex, I returned to the argument of brands as becoming topological. Dove's and American

Apparel's engagement with the issue of bodies, I conclude, not only sink into the background of media, but also into the background of bodies, informing them alongside heterogeneous lines.

### **Branding as Boundary Making Practice**

Let me now return to the initial research question framing the thesis, that is, how contemporary branding and the increasing impact of participatory practices reconfigure the role of brands. The various tracing and mapping exercises related to the case studies of Dove and American Apparel showed that brands are not discrete entities defined by the strategic planning of companies, but are both made and happen. What a brand stands for, and what its generative capacities are, can neither be accounted for by the activities of a cooperation alone, nor be addressed through extraneous measures; it can only be traced from the inside, by mapping out the multiple relations, modes of affection, in-formation, eventive encounters and processes of spatialisation that brands are involved in.

Brands, so the thesis claims, are defined in relation and these relations are multi-fold. As a consequence, they are redistributed and partible (Foster, 2011; Strathern, 1990), as it is the combined interplay between different actors, spaces, issue formations and affective dynamics that produce brands and is informed by them. In order to assemble social relations, to inform social issues, and ultimately to enact processes of happening, contemporary branding creates opportunities for its own recombination in which consumers take up parts of the brand and bring them into their own lifeworlds. Put differently, brands and their values are defined by their capacity to become partible (Foster, 2011; Strathern, 1990), to be altered while remaining the same, to be appropriated and used by consumers while belonging to a company and to give while keeping. These aspects, although circulating, are never fully detached from the brand in the moment of recombination, just as consumer contributions are not fully detached from themselves when appropriated by brands in competitions or user generated activities. In this process, consumers take the becoming of the brand into a particular direction, which is sometimes embraced by, but sometimes also rejected by the brand, as the responsivity of brands is characterised by partibility and asymmetry itself. The brand operates as a key form, so my final argument, to continue economic value production into the realm of the social alongside multiple, yet not always reciprocal lines.

Brands, however, were also discussed as becoming topological (Duffy, 2006; Lury, 2009), as what a brand stands for and how it changes, cannot be addressed from the outside,

but only by tracing its constitutive relations distributed in specific space-times. Being constantly re-combined, brought into new relations, contexts and form, brands, their aesthetics and issues were considered to be subject to constant change whilst remaining invariant, recognisable. Operating in multiple spaces and in relation to multiple audiences, the becoming of a brand inevitably is as multifocal as the consumer experiences it makes possible. And these multiple focus points do not necessarily add up to a coherent whole. Branding, its making and happening are animated by this invariance under deformation, just as brands animate it themselves. Their potential to be deformed allows thinking brands as persistent without having to be coherent.

Subsequently, the question emerges, if the encounter of brands is defined by deformation, what remains invariant (Duffy, 2006)? What is it that consumers still refer back to the brand during the multiplicity of different encounters with it? The engagement with the cases of Dove and American Apparel showed that it is not necessarily the logo, design, name or products of a brand that are central to invariance, but the fact that actors still associate and recognise brands. In the case of American Apparel and Flickr, for instance, a series of images that appear for the query “American Apparel ad” are neither tagged or described as such, but user comments associate the photos them to the brand: “This looks like an American Apparel ad!”. While user re-appropriations such as outfit posts or campaign remakes recombine and deform the aesthetics of the brand, these activities are still related and associated to American Apparel. Invariance under deformation hence brings together association and recombination.

The issue of partibility and invariance under deformation tie in with another central question: brands’ entanglement with boundary making between social and economic life, but also as part of the branding process itself. On the most basic level, branding can be addressed as a boundary making practice as the brand is designed to differ, change and be recombined. Here, it is the role of the brand management to create opportunities and relevance for such recombination to happen. In the case of American Apparel, such differential positioning was strategically approached by connecting a basic apparel product with a specific cultural formation and aesthetics. In the case of Dove, the brand sought to expand into new debates, spaces and social formations by engaging with the cause of body norms in media. If brands are created in relations and as distributed in spaces, the becoming is entangled with boundary making itself, as each time consumers discuss a brand, relate to each other regarding a brand, upload content referring to a brand, they render the brand partly attached to their own lifeworld and therefore alter its boundaries. What is at stake is a twofold process of boundary making, first the de-

and recomposition of relations and secondly organising their reconfiguration of what contributes to the value of the brand. In this context is not necessarily individual events or consumer activity that matter, but the relations created between them, the constant de- and recomposition of attachments, values and practices, as Callon puts it (2002). In this process of re-composing relations and making brands part of their becoming, brands constantly redraw the boundaries where social relations start and where economic value production begins.

However, such boundary making does not only redefine the edges and limits of brands and what contributes to their value, but defines their very middles. Such a perspective complicates the notion of the boundary through the ideas of belonging and inclusion (Latour et al., 2012; Mackenzie, 2012). What is at stake in social assemblages of brands is not the individual actor and their relation to the brand. It is the inclusion of actors in multiple social assemblages related to the brand, the de- and recomposition of relations between them. Actors, brands and issues cannot belong to these assemblages, however, they can be included in many of them as a part. As Chapter 3 showed, this inclusion is not fixed once and for all, but itself subject to change.

This excess of inclusion over belonging operates similar to what has been addressed in relation to Mackenzie's (2011) reflection on relational databases throughout the thesis. In such databases value does not reside in elements as belonging to the database but in the relations that can be created between them and the sub-sets (Badiou, 2008) they be included to. He argues: "No-one belongs to a database as an element, but many aspects of contemporary lives are included as parts of databases" (2011: 12).

Such a perspective bears relevance for branding along two lines. First, it draws attention to the productive capacities of branding as boundary making practice and their contribution to processes of inclusion and exclusion. Secondly, it complicates the notion of the boundary through the ideas of belonging and inclusion. Consumer activities, affects and debates do not belong to brands or to economic value production per se, they do not constitute work or labour, but can be temporarily included in them and as they become partible (Foster, 2011).

### **Continuous Economies**

In a final step, I expand the argument that contemporary branding is becoming topological into the claim that brands can be considered as a key form of what I call 'continuous economies'. In such continuous economies economic value production

increasingly arises from non-economic activities and becomes inherently partible to social activities. The various ways in which economic and social dynamics are interrelated have so far been accounted for in terms of informational, intensive, immaterial economies (Lash, 2010; Slater & Tonkiss, 2001; Thrift, 2005), the shift from producing goods to the creation of worlds, in which life itself becomes of value (Lazzarato, 2004). Here, however, I have put forward the idea of continuity as being central to contemporary modes of value production, that is, the displacement of value production into social relations, multiple spatialisations, bodies and social issues but also into the future, being based on the continuous extension of such relations.

A key element of continuous entities is their capacity to be endlessly divisible without changing themselves (Bell, 2000, 2005), akin to the idea of invariance under deformation central to topological spaces (Duffy, 2006). In contrast, discrete elements can only be decomposed to a particular level as they “cannot be divided without effecting a change in their nature: half a wheel is plainly no longer a wheel” (Bell, 2009: 1). Brands, on the other hand, as consumer experiences have shown, behave like multiply divisible entities, emerging in new contexts, shapes, forms or conversations, whilst remaining recognisable and the same.

Just as Lury (2004) argues that brands move competition and purchase decisions beyond price, contemporary participative forms of branding redistribute brand value production temporally, relationally and spatially. Brands continue the interactivity and engagement with goods, services and associated companies before and after the process of purchase, before and after the moments of use. They create a system of interaction between consumers and companies in which the balance of exchange is designed to never be restored, in which exchange is designed to be ongoing, embedded in and entangled in a set of relations and expectations.

In what follows, I conclude the thesis by outlining four key points in relation to brands and continuous economies, first taking the idea of partibility further to arguments of multi-valence (Marres, 2011), then addressing temporal dimensions of continuity (Grusin, 2010; Manning, 2009), before examining the interplay between continuity and discontinuity. Finally, I revisit the critique of consumer exploitation and working consumers.

## Organising Multi-Valence

Consumer activities, relations and spaces were discussed as becoming partible in the context of contemporary branding with reference to Strathern (1990); they are both social and economic, and produce relations of proximity and contribute to the becoming of brands and their value. This simultaneity of activities creates value for the social and economic realm and poses a key condition of what I understand as continuous economies. Rather than creating straight equivalence (D. Mackenzie, 2008) between the social and the economic, the brand creates climates, relations and affordances which allow activities and affects to create multiple forms of value, or, to draw on Marres, to become 'multi-valent' (2011), framing them alongside multiple registers and value forms. Marres develops the notion of multi-valence in contrast to equivalence, highlighting how activities which can be evaluated alongside multiple axes, produce related - yet not exactly comparable - forms of value. In her particular case of devices for carbon accounting, Marres contends that these:

[D]evices facilitate a mode of co-articulation of participation that is more comprehensive than that of 'involvement made easy': they enable the organisation of spaces of multi-valent action, in which a routine act like making tea is at once a technical, economic, and ethical act. (Marres, 2011: 13).

Such accountability to multiple axes of value has been considered as central to brands by Lury and Moor (2011a, 2011b), as brands establish the very values they are evaluated against. In this context, "brand valuation techniques extend the chain of comparisons upon which its metrology depends, so that it includes relations that extend in many (differently organised and heterogeneous) directions simultaneously" (Lury & Moor, 2011a: 22). Furthermore, the authors understand this operation as the becoming topological of value, as it is the brand itself that calibrates which values it seeks to be evaluated against, while the tools to measure value are furthermore implicated in its very production. This thesis, however, showed that it is not only the brand that operates alongside multiple value axes, as its own value is embedded in the multi-valence of connected activities, practices, affects and relations and their de- and recomposition. The notion of partible value (Strathern, 1990; Foster, 2011) suggests that such activities create value for both consumers and corporations.

It is the capacity of the brand to remain invariant under deformation, to be constantly recombined but still be associated with the same set of values, aesthetics or causes that allow for this multi-valence. Becoming part of debates, educational environments, media discussions, social interaction, communities, bodily becoming and peer relations allows the brand to bring together societal, educational, cultural and economic activities

and partly connect them to its own becoming. Multi-valence refers to the capacity to create continuity between social activities or bodily becoming and the brand without dissolving both into each other. It is the brand that ties up consumer debates, peer relations, social assemblages and spaces to the production of economic value without subsuming them into it each other. It is the brand that re-assembles social relations without collapsing them into the brand alone. Creating multi-valence can be considered as the lifeblood of continuous economies with brands operating as one of its key forms. In the continuous economies emerging in the case of Dove and American Apparel, consumer activities and affect are not subsumed under the category of labour or work, as suggested by other authors (Cova & Dalli, 2009; Cova et al., 2011; Zwick et al., 2008), but are partible and multivalent.

Multi-valence therefore on the one hand refers to the production of multiple forms of value, that is economic, social or cultural value. But it also directs attention to the multiple purposes of activities, to the multi-focal modes of becoming of brands and consumers involved and the capacity to create connections between the different axes. They do not add up to a coherent notion of the brand, yet they are connected by its invariance. The brand operates as a persistent yet non-coherent entity and its boundary-making capacities allow the creation of such forms of multi-valence. It emerges as both connecting and limiting points between these value axes. To draw on Brentano (as discussed in Bell, 2009), these are forms of 'plerosis', creating connectivity and continuation through inherent boundaries of transition between economic value and social relations, between the present and the future, between existing brand values and their deformation through consumers. Following Brentano, plerosis refers to a quality of boundaries and highlights the different directions in which it demarcates different areas but is at the same time informed by them:

Brentano believed that the concept of plerosis enabled sense to be made of the idea that a boundary possesses -parts, even when the boundary lacks dimensions altogether, as in the case of a point. Thus, while the present or —now is, according to Brentano, temporally unextended and exists only as a boundary between past and future, it still possesses two —parts or aspects: it is both the end of the past and the beginning of the future (Bell, 2005: 144).

He understands boundaries as being bi-directional, as posing a limit whilst opening up into two directions. One of the most relevant boundaries is the one between past and future, the moment before change and movement set in: "if a thing begins to move, is there a last moment of its being at rest or a first moment of its being in motion?" (Bell, 2009: 11). In this sense, the boundary is stable and moving at the same time, situated in



the past and in the future simultaneously. Brands and brand value operate at exactly this limit point. The boundary brings together both invariance and deformation, as it creates a persistent association to the brand while offering frames for recombination in order to fuel multi-valent activities.

However, thinking collaborative branding practices as creating multi-valence also draws attention to the question who can realise such multi-valent value? Such partibility of value is, as shown in the engagement with theory and the case studies, not accessible for all actors involved. While corporations can realise its economic value through sales and developing brand value, consumers can mainly realise the social or cultural value, a viewpoint that adds to the asymmetry of relations emerging in contemporary branding to which I return in the last section.

### **Temporal Continuity**

The embeddedness of brands in relationality not only creates a form of continuity between value systems but also reworks the temporal dimensions of brands. This becomes apparent when comparing the engagement with brands with that of commodities. The acquisition of commodities, that is generic marketable items, so Foster argues (2011), poses a discontinuous event of transaction in which consumers purchase a good based on its use value and purchase it for an agreed exchange value. The transaction is finite and restores balance between the actors, as it is completed with the payment of the exchange value. Brands, however, redistribute this process temporally. Contemporary branding substantially reworks the making and purchasing of value (Callon & Méadel, 2002; Foster, 2011; Normann & Ramirez, 2004), as consumers contribute to the qualification of brand and its products even before and after the act of purchase and in the act of buying can only acquire partial access to the brand itself. Buying branded products therefore only enables participation in a set of values that consumers themselves partly co-produced. The temporality of contemporary branding hence renders processes of exchange and purchase non-discrete and continuous - as the process of exchange is never completed, but the brand remains an unalienable possession (Foster, 2011; Weiner, 1992).

Such temporal continuity is not only specific to brands but also introduced by other practices of exchange, contributing to the making of continuous economies. David Graeber for instance, understands debt as prolongation of exchange, connecting the lender and the debtor through relational ties (2012). Exchange, on the other hand, “allows us to cancel out our debts. It gives us a way to call it even” (2012, 104). Making

debt is thus making relationships, as each loan is an investment into the probability of a debtor's capacity to repay and bind the parties involved to each other. Similar to brands, debt cannot be experienced as such - even though it can be quantified in monetary value - but it can, however, be partly detached from the debtor, circulate further and create new debt relations. Given the relational ties and nets of dependency debt produces, Graeber continues, debt relations are only partly built on the expectation of debt to be repaid, to be cancelled out, but rather operate on the assumption of ongoing circulation of debt, keeping nets of relations, obligations and expectations alive: "Consumer debt is the lifeblood of our economy. All modern nation-states are build on deficit spending" (2012: 4). Just as debt animates economies in which balance between lender and the debtor is never entirely restored and in which they remain constantly entangled with each other, brands produce similar effects of continuity, ensuring that relations between consumers and with companies maintain and are constantly renewed. The partibility of brands and activities bringing brands into being even suggest that consumers and companies are indebted to each other on multiple layers, as it is crucial to such systems of distributed brand-making that the engagement with the brand is not discontinued.

Branding, to think this idea further, is both based on the anticipation of engagement and its unfolding into a desired direction and this thesis traced how Dove and American Apparel create a series of instances to ensure its ongoingness. Encountering the brands in their multiple touch points and the different affects and experiences they enact, becomes, following Knorr-Cetina (2005), like engaging with the 'multiplicity of a stream', which is exposing consumers to dynamically updating opportunities to engage with the brand in real-time (Berry, 2011). Knorr-Cetina argues:

The carpet grounds experience; we can step on it, and change our positioning on it. But this carpet only composes itself as it is rolled out; the spatial illusions it affords hide the intrinsic temporality of the fact that its threads (the lines of text appearing on screen) are woven into the carpet only as we step on it and unravel again behind our back (the lines are updated and disappear). (Knorr-Cetina, 2005: 133)

The durationality of such a stream-like experience that Knorr-Cetina refers to as a carpet, only unfolds once actors start responding to it. The actors involved, both from within and outside the company, are exposed to multiple possibilities of participation, however they cannot engage with all of these. It is the interplay of the multiple encounters which creates the experience of the brand, bringing into being a variety of real-time experiences.

Contemporary branding not only seeks to ensure the durationality of engagement, but also makes efforts to direct this engagement into desired directions, as shown in relation to the American Apparel store or the Dove Body Talk workshops. What Arvidsson frames as pre-structuring consumer activities into valuable directions (Arvidsson, 2006), I addressed as climates of anticipation enabling some horizons of possibilities rather than others. Such climates operate, as I showed in Chapter 6, both on an atmospheric level and through affective modulation (Sloterdijk, 2009). Cutting across the conscious and non-conscious (Clough, 2008), the brands seek to inform and colonise the moment before real-time, the 'elasticity of the almost' before movement and responsivity set in (Manning, 2009). A series of brand spaces, but also climates of participation, are designed to deploy such a logic of premediation (Grusin, 2010), that is, the preemptive remediation of the yet to come. Grusin understands premediation as a key affective condition of contemporary media, being defined by the framing of particular futures in anticipation:

Premediation would in some sense transform the world into a video or computer game, which only permits certain moves depending on where the player is in the space of the game, how far advanced she is in achieving the goal of the game, or the attributes of her avatar. Although within these premediated moves there are a seemingly infinite number of different possibilities available, only some of those possibilities are encouraged by the protocols and reward systems built into the game. (Grusin, 2010: 45)

Contemporary branding practices, such as Body Talk workshops or modelling contests, seek to make desired responses, which take up the aesthetics or issues of the brand in positive ways, more likely to happen than others. The premediating capacities of brands not only operate in the background of brand spaces and atmospheres, but also immanently, resembling what Manning terms pre-acceleration (2009), a movement without beginning or end, but characterised by its past and pull towards the future. She argues: "The movement within becomes a movement without, not internal-external, but folding and bridging in an intensity of preacceleration" (2009: 13). It operates as a limit point or plerosis, situated at the edge of past and future while extending into both as a moment of the 'almost' or 'just before' (Manning, 2009: 20). The interplay between the making of climates and modulating affective responses as discussed in Chapter 6 seeks to inform this moment of pre-acceleration by tracing the willingness of consumers and other stakeholders to engage with the brand and interfere in their actions through affective modulation. American Apparel, for instance, selects their store assistants based on their existing attachment to and understanding of the brand in order to further direct their style into a direction aligned with the brand. The temporal continuity created by brands therefore not only redistributes value production beyond the mere process of

purchase into past and future. Contemporary brand management can also be understood as ensuring the deformation of brands into the future, by informing the moment of the almost, the moment before real-time in which engagement with the brand has neither a fully fledged beginning nor an end.

### **Continuity and Discontinuity**

The making of continuity, however, comes with a simultaneous making of gradual discontinuity in relation to brands. As outlined in the literature review, branding has been strategically deployed to create difference through strategic positioning in relation to competitors (Lury, 2004; see also: Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2002; Kapferer, 2008; Kornberger, 2010). Furthermore, despite the emphasis on flexibility and deformation, brands do not set in motion free floating change, but 'manageable flexibility' (Lury, 2004: 127), a strategic interplay between continuity and discontinuity. Tracing the history of Dove's and American Apparel's branding approaches, I showed that the initial brand values and their strategic positioning have been developed in differentiation to competitors. Discontinuity, in the case of brands, does not pose a cut, but is partible, as being different from a competitor can only be thought in relation to the same.

But discontinuity also comes to matter as a key element of Dove's and American Apparel's campaigns themselves, as discussed in relation to boundary making above. Especially in the case of American Apparel, the making of social assemblages related to the brand is characterised by boundary negotiations, in which inclusion is decided based on actors' capacities to 'be cool'. While such discontinuities emerge in interaction between consumers, a series of events draw attention to the ways in which American Apparel itself reinforced discontinuity, most notably by denying Nancy Upton the first prize in the Best Bottom contest, but also through their meticulous grooming rules and the enforcement of this in flagship stores. Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty presents its strategy as an attempt to discontinue and alter beauty and body conventions found in the media and, especially, advertising. However, in the multiple relations the brand addresses as influencing factors on the body, media, parental and peer relations are foregrounded, while sexual relations are bracketed out.

Just as the becoming of brands is distributed, multi-focal and does not add up to a whole, consumer experiences are also characterised by being internally different, if not contradictory. Talking to American Apparel consumers, female consumers in particular report that they do enjoy buying and wearing the products, but experience controversial and conflictive affective responses when engaging with the brand's visual

communication and advertising campaign, which they enjoy, but also feel ambivalent about. Responses and affective reactions do not align, but might create confusion or feeling 'icky' about the brand in one moment, whilst enjoying it during the next. Brand experience emerges as internally different vector-field of continuous and discontinuous relationality, in which the numerous affective reactions exist simultaneously. Brands thus unfold a vector-field (DeLanda, 2002) of experience allowing consumer relations to the brand be multiple.

### **Conclusion: Towards Multi-Valence, not Exploitation**

The increasing strategic involvement of consumers in the making of brands has been responded to with various forms of sociological critique, as outlined in the literature review. The majority of these critical voices take at least partial inspiration from a neo-Marxist perspective, suggesting that consumers are turned into 'working consumers' (Cova & Dalli, 2009), are 'being put to work' (Zwick et al., 2008), perform 'immaterial labour' (Arvidsson, 2006) or are considered as engaging with 'consumption work' (Foster, 2007; Miller, 1987). New modes of branding, these authors suggest, extract ever more value from consumers without providing remuneration but by enabling new forms of exploitation. While the above mentioned accounts rightly point out that a too discrete distinction between consumption and work is becoming obsolete, the recurrent emphasis on exploitation fails to recognise, first, that the productive capacities of acquiring and using goods have a long history predating the current emergence of co-creative endeavours in branding (Lury, 2011b; Malinowski, 1922; Mauss, 1970; Miller, 1987). Second, such perspectives fail to draw attention to the wider background conditions of such processes, in which activities, affects and relations potentially connect to multiple spheres, including those of production and those of consumption, while never being fully contained in them.

The notion of continuous economies, defined by partibility and multi-valence, however, draws attention to the relationality and distributedness of economic value production and the fact that the exchange of goods is always only partial, a process of 'keeping while giving' (Foster, 2011; Weiner, 1992). With recurrence to Strathern (1990) and Graeber (2006), Foster continues: "What is being compared in the giving and receiving of objects, then, is the respective capacity of the actors to attach and detach parts of their own and thus other's identities. That is, the comparison is not about establishing equivalence" (2011: 50). Brands, so Foster points out by drawing on the work of Weiner on 'unalienable possessing' (1992), can never be fully transferred to another owner, but

only be lent to others. Just as debt, brands partially remain attached to the owner and consumer activities related to brands always remain partly attached to consumers themselves. Brands emerge as such unalienable forms in a twofold sense, as consumers cannot acquire the brand as such, but only its partial actualisation in products or services, while companies at the same time cannot contain and control the value of the brand themselves, as it partly resides with consumers. In his seminal account of the gift economy, Mauss elucidates on inalienable modes of exchange: “It is even incorrect to speak in these cases of transfer. They are loans rather than sales or true abandonment of possessions” (Mauss, 2002: 55).

However, even though the contributions to the making of brands are distributed and always remain partially attached to specific actors, their relationships are not characterised by reciprocity and symmetry. In such climates of multi-valence, power relations do not disappear but become multi-directional, as not all actors can realise all forms of value. While consumers can deploy brands, their aesthetics or issues for making relations, for bodily becoming or for self-presentation and are occasionally given rewards by brands, for instance when winning a competition, it is companies which capitalise on their brand value (Lury & Moor, 2010, 2011), on sales, on cooperating partnerships and on making relations with consumers continuous.

Such asymmetric and non-reciprocal relations contribute to the background conditions of value production in continuous economies in which the production of economic value is directed towards and added to brands. An imbalance arises, in which not all actors involved in the making of multi-valence can draw on the multiple forms of value they create. Instead, contemporary branding is fuelled by avoiding such equivalence and symmetry but is characterised by mutual, un-restored expectations, partible relations and relational obligations. Just as financial debt is designed to animate economies by exactly not restoring balance (Graeber, 2012), brands also foster climates in which balance remains unresolved. The relational notion of the brand, its embeddedness in the ongoing de- and re-qualification in relationality, creates a system of mutual indebtedness, as the value of the brand for both actors inside and outside of the company is dependent on the activities and involvement of others. The redistribution of the making of brand value, potentially starting long before the purchase of branded goods and extending past it, renders companies indebted to consumers, while consumers become indebted to the brand through their attachment to it and the need to co-constitute its value. Debt, in this context, is understood as the necessity to keep engaged (Graeber, 2012), to keep contributing to the making of brands. The question arises of who owes what to whom?

Thinking branding as creating continuity and multi-valence poses a different point of departure for critique, one in which consumer activities are not subsumed to labour per se. Rather, this perspective asks to account for the specific ways in which activities contribute to the making of profit, without collapsing the two into each other. This thesis sought to explicate the background conditions of value production based on relationality, continuity and multi-valence. It proposed that the particular relations that brands create between social and economic life can be accounted for as continuous economies. Further, these continuous economies are being animated by the fact that ever more social and cultural activities can be made multi-valent, that is producing social and economic value at the same time. Continuity, in this context, does not refer to the collapse of the social into the economic, the brand into consumer relations, but addresses a specific mode of boundary making, one that brings together yet maintains difference, that connects, however is based on imbalance and asymmetry of relations. Most notably, it is the brands' capacity to remain invariant under deformation, to descend into multiple lifeworlds, practices and affects, yet keep them associated to the same brand, that allows for such boundary making.

The brand was introduced as a key socio-economic form to enable such multi-valence and continuity, yet brands do not constitute the only form of such continuous economies, as indicated in relation to debt. By ensuring the continuous engagement of consumers, media and cooperating partners and the continuity of this engagement into particular directions, brands create assemblages of relations between multiple actors, entities and spaces that are set out to change, yet remain persistent. In such emerging continuous economies, branding practices set up climates in which equivalence, reciprocity and an end of continuous engagement are not desired states, but in which attachments between brands, consumers, spaces and issues are constantly shifted, reorganised and continued into the future. It is the interplay between invariance and deformation that allows for this ongoingness of relations as well as their multi-valence and that is the very essence of what I call 'brands'.

## Interview Partners

A series of 15 expert interviews with professionals working at Dove, American Apparel, related cooperation partners and co-creation or branding agencies have informed the thesis. The following selection of interview partner appear with direct quotations and full names in the thesis:

Fabian, Craig (2008), Consulting Director and Head of Knowledge, The Brand Union.

Koch, Felix (2010), Director of Consulting, Promise Communities.

Lury, Giles (2012), Executive Chairman, The Value Engineers

Ringwood, Susan (2010), CEO, Beat UK.

Stanifort, Martin (2011), External Consultant, Campaign for Real Beauty.

Wilfer, Christian (2008), Senior Strategist, DSG Solutions.



## Table of Figures

Figure 1: Associations with Dove. Drawings created during consumer focus groups.

Figure 2. Dove Real Women Campaign, Phase 1 and 2. Retrieved from:

<http://www.baerpm.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/dove11.jpg> and [http://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2012/04/12/article-2128717-051F98D40000044D-799\\_964x1202.jpg](http://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2012/04/12/article-2128717-051F98D40000044D-799_964x1202.jpg)

Figure 3. American Apparel Advertising Campaign. Retrieved from: <http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-Z65Hhhy0DdQ/T30-LyJcvgl/AAAAAAAAWjY/W-q0xi9nx5Y/s1600/aa3-big.jpg>, <http://perpetualforma.files.wordpress.com/2009/09/6989d.jpg>, [http://1.bp.blogspot.com/\\_n5FGGPw-hNY/TGgBWuyEshI/AAAAAAAAEEA/wv8oXsOKsnE/s1600/7105\\_american-apparel-ad-Detroit-RealDetroitWeekly-Leggings-170909.jpeg](http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_n5FGGPw-hNY/TGgBWuyEshI/AAAAAAAAEEA/wv8oXsOKsnE/s1600/7105_american-apparel-ad-Detroit-RealDetroitWeekly-Leggings-170909.jpeg)

Figure 4. American Apparel on Flickr, Chictopia and Lookbook.nu, screenshots.

Figure 5. A selection of status posts on Dove's Facebook Page, screenshots.

Figure 6: American Apparel Best Bottom contest and The Next Big Thing contest, screenshots.

Figure 7: Tagclouds of Google result titles for "Campaign for Real Beauty" and their top 50 actors.

Figure 8: Tagclouds of Google result titles for "Campaign for Real Beauty"+"women", "Campaign for Real Beauty"+"girls" and "Campaign for Real Beauty"+"retouched".

Figure 9: Tagclouds of Google result titles for "American Apparel" + ad and their top 50 actors, 2004-2012.

Figure 10: Tagclouds of Google result titles for "American Apparel" + "Best Bottom Contest", "American Apparel" + "The Next Big Thing", "American Apparel" + "lawsuit" and "American Apparel" + "employee\*"

Figure 11: Screenshot from Dove 'Evolution', Delicious tag cloud for 'Evolution' and Youtube viewcounts for related parodies, spoofs and remakes, screenshots.

Figure 12: American Apparel Flagship Store London. Retrieved from [http://www.myretailmedia.com/uploads/images/american\\_apparel\\_kensington\\_store.jpg](http://www.myretailmedia.com/uploads/images/american_apparel_kensington_store.jpg) and <http://ladyonavespa.files.wordpress.com/2010/05/american-apparel.jpg>.

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