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Modernity and Its (dis)Contents

A Review of Daniel Miller's *Modernity: An Ethnographic Approach, Dualism and Mass Consumption in Trinidad*.
Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1994, 340 pages

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Review article / *Article commentaire***Modernity and Its (dis)Contents:**

A Review of Daniel Miller's *Modernity: An Ethnographic Approach, Dualism and Mass Consumption in Trinidad*. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1994, 340 pages.

By Kristin Norget *

Over the last couple of decades the problem of "modernity" has captured the intellectual imagination of thinkers whose works span high-minded treatises on political philosophy to the most deconstructivist of post-modern reflections on the sign-saturated industrial world. Daniel Miller, identified primarily as a theorist within archaeological circles, has joined the ranks of this varied coterie with his recent ethnographic exploration of the experience of modernity in Trinidad. With a work as erudite, original and incisive as this one, Miller has distinguished himself as an important social thinker whose eclectic ideas show - appropriately - the best face of the intellectual climate known as the post-modern while at the same time repudiating some of its most characteristic premises.

Arguing that "modernity is more often invoked than described" (p. 291), Miller attempts to ground his own contemplation of modernity on the ethnographic fabric of present-day Trinidad. Miller chose Trinidad for particular reasons: it is a society which potentially has a strong sense of social rupture as its historical path originated in slavery and indentured labour, followed by cultural creolization (major sources being Spain, India,

Africa, France, Britain, the U.S.), then by regular and increasing transnational flows of people and commodities. In contemporary terms, this offers a richly textured and dynamic setting for diagnosing the nature of the modern condition, especially how it becomes manifest in a cultural setting in which modernity as a material reality was derived initially from a situation of external socio-political domination, rather than from a singular, more independent social historical trajectory.

From cultural critics including, most notably, Berman (1982), Giddens (1990, 1991); Habermas (1987) and Harvey (1989), the characterizations and consequences of "high" modernity and post-modernity are by now well known: mass accumulations of material goods and an increasingly technologized reality join with stepped-up flows of communication and people across the global landscape to create hybrid cultural worlds and new modes of social interaction. Modernity is a distinct spirit or collective mind set, a new awareness of time, space and self - a kind of gestalt of consciousness whose configuration is all fragmentation and fluidity, a sense of ephemerality and intensification of the present. This condition is

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intertwined with very evident processes of economic and ideational globalization, realignments of political power, along with the erosion of reigning canons of thought and of consensual commitment to the quest for "totality" as epistemological possibility and ideal.

It is now common knowledge that current processes of globalization and the coinciding experience of modernity do not lead inexorably toward homogenization and a cultural reality whose "authenticity" is diluted by plurality. Instead of providing yet more evidence to support this view, Miller is concerned in this work to present an alternative diagnosis of the reality of modernity. This approach involves a compelling rethinking of the role of consumer goods (customarily seen as emblematic of our absorption into materialistic superficiality) in mediating people's relationship with their social environment. Miller's approach, an extension of his earlier interesting ideas on consumption and material culture (1987, 1993) is an attempt to distill a working theory of modernity as *process*. It is worth pointing out that his perspective, while not strictly Marxist, rests heavily on the same premises regarding the creative nature of people's relationship with their material environment and the nature of the dialectic entailed by that conceptualization. Hegel looms large on the argument's stage, Marx lingers in faded, yet still conspicuous from behind the scenes, and other thinkers supporting this intellectual cast in more indirect ways are worked into the discussion to lend it substance and scope. In true Hegelian style, *objectification* is the dominant paradigm, conceived as the necessary development of a given subject through her/his creation of, or projection on to, an external world – an essential process underlain by concern with the concept of alienation and the emergence of new kinds of social consciousness which enable societies to progress. In this aspect of the theoretical explication Miller also gives an important role to Habermas, whose important insights concerning an altered awareness of time in the context of the industrial capitalist social order lend another dimension to the argument's framework.

Thus, while seeming to offer on one level yet another (neo)modernist refutation of post-modernist conceptualizations, Miller confounds all prefixes by presenting a fascinating analysis which engages much of the newest, most interesting literature related to (post)modernity and consumption

at the same time as he reveals its pretensions. Amidst a mass of ethnographic detail and fine insight, the discussion dances in a lively way from heady overarching theoretical elaborations to micro-level glances at such things as toothpaste brands and upholstery texture, never missing, it seems, an intellectual beat.

Miller's argument is deceptively straightforward and lucid in its unfolding, but also multi-stranded and complex. I cannot do full justice to its richness here, but shall attempt a basic outline of the core substance of this unique book and explain why it is, in my view, a work that deserves notice. Seven chapters enclose a logical build-up of issues tightly and coherently organized. Chapter One introduces the problem - modernity - and situates it in the research setting of Trinidad. Chapter Two outlines Miller's own concept of modernity, and sketches the historical development of global mass consumption that provides a comparative framework for the analysis of Trinidad. Chapters Three and Four work together as a complementary unit: here Miller gives evidence for a central ordering principle of "dualism" in Trinidadian culture which he argues rests upon two opposed temporal orientations and extends to all realms of everyday life. Chapters Five and Six include further elaborations of the principle of dualism, showing its expression in social relations and its increasing accentuation following the Trinidadian oil boom in the late 1970s and the infusion of imported goods. The final chapter offers a synthesis of ideas which responds to the problems laid out at the beginning of the discussion, and continues by suggesting a promising way forward for making sense of the complex cultural practices and processes characterizing our contemporary world.

Miller did his fieldwork in Trinidad in four housing estates he sees as reflecting the island's ethnic make-up and contemporary trends within Trinidadian society. In dealing with these varied modern traits both within and among these communities, his analysis goes beyond conventional analytical categories such as class, focusing instead on a fundamental transformation in human consciousness toward a new temporal awareness which he discerns as the defining characteristic of the modern condition.

In his review of existing ideas on modernity, Miller determines that the issues treated by Hegel, Habermas and others stem from a quest to recon-

cile and resolve the contradictions of modernity, particularly the problem of alienation (as defined by Marx). This fundamental contradiction lies in the essential externality and abstraction of human socio-cultural development, which entail an intrinsic tendency toward reification so that, as Miller puts it, "forces which were developed to enhance human understanding may become instead the reified goals of life and obfuscate and oppress their own creators" (p. 66). Through the process of commodification (an aspect of objectification), value seen in qualitative terms is reduced and gradually usurped by notions of value measured in quantifiable terms. In modernity, the heightened diverse and abstract character of the objective world, particularly an accompanying (conscious and unconscious) awareness of the "constructedness" of culture, becomes more and more difficult for people to deal with and "the self-knowledge that one is modern proceeds through a rupture between the present and the past towards a new temporal consciousness enhanced by a transformation in our productive and communicative abilities" (p. 67). This shift is accompanied by the development of a new sense of change: from being something continuous and gradual to something accelerating exponentially. In Habermas' terms, according to Miller, this new awareness emerges as a new concept of intensified "presentness" involving an impression of continuous renewal. This result in turn has moral consequences, engendering both a sense of loss and challenges to customary morality and the criteria of legitimacy.

A new perspective on the concept of contradiction is central to Miller's unique theoretical synthesis. Instead of trying to point a way toward resolving certain identified contradictions of the modern condition, Miller understands contradiction as an intrinsic dynamic of modernity. In this view, he takes his acknowledged theoretical cue from Simmel (1978) who differed from Marx in seeing alienation as derived from the contradictions inherent in the process of abstraction itself, rather than simply in the process of economic production. According to this view, objectification is a process both freeing and estranging: the progressive nature of capitalism (the abstract and quantitative nature of money allowing new-found fluidity between spheres of value) is necessary for the modern concept of freedom, yet this same movement towards abstraction engenders an opposite desire to keep intact a sense of the specific value of certain traditional aspects of life previously resistant to such abstraction.

Miller thus sees his argument as rejecting the classical Marxian model and the labour theory of value which saw *productive work* (especially production relations under capitalism) as the primary site of alienation and creation of the "unhappy consciousness." His own interpretation regards alienation as integral to the *process of objectification* itself, rather than being merely a necessary symptom of the modern capitalist condition. He also departs from Hegel in relating objectification not to the notion of dialectic (which he claims as a "particular kind of logic"), but to his own conceptualization of *culture*: "a process by which humanity creates forms in which it comes to have consciousness of itself and give meaning to itself" (p. 66). Here Miller takes his own path away from both Simmel and Marx, seeing mass consumption not as symptomatic of our loss of self and seduction by abstraction and the order of simulation, as Baudrillard (1975) and others argue, but as a medium for actually *confronting* the sense of alienation.

One might question whether Miller's development of his polemic is successful; he appears, somewhat paradoxically, to insist on emphasizing people as the creative *subjects* or agents of history (following Hegel), at the same time as he constructs a paradigm for how modernity as a social process "works" in which people are necessarily subject to certain key characteristics of modern consciousness, and utilize commodities in particular, almost systematic ways. Miller also neglects to elaborate sufficiently on how his materialist definition of culture, while deviating (though not far!) from the idealism of Hegel, is as significantly distinct from Marxian views as he claims. Nor does he discuss the full theoretical implications of this assertion as it pertains to the applicability of Marxist ideas more generally.

What greatly redeem some inconclusive aspects of Miller's argument, however, are the strength and cogency of others, especially the chapters he devotes to substantiating his conceptualization of modernity. These are among the most interesting and innovative parts of the book, partly due to the way Miller appeals to certain profound cultural factors in explaining surface phenomena. From his preoccupation with consciousness, two opposed sets of normative values are isolated whose ideals are visible in major Trinidadian festivals and underlain by different kinds of time. Ritual here is taken in Turnerian fashion as a kind of social drama; these festivals – Christmas and

Carnival – are seen as fundamental to Trinidadians' conceptions of themselves and represent relationships "which are otherwise submerged in the pragmatic concerns of everyday life" (p.13). Their particular salience, however, stems from the way they are used to objectify the fundamental paradigmatic principles upon which Trinidadians structure their ideologies and social practices. The distinct sets of values each of the festivals is seen to express are explained as reflecting two underlying and systematically opposed principles, the key symbolic idioms by which other aspects of life are encompassed. As with Bourdieu's concept of the *habitus* which sees a homologous symbolic logic structuring all realms of everyday life, each one of the symbolic codes expressed within each of the festivals is also reflected in spatial, social and temporal domains. In a manner reminiscent of Bourdieu's analyses of consumption practices in France (1977, 1984), Miller here bases his ideas on the consumption he observes in relation to the festivals, such as house decorations, food, drink, music and other aspects of everyday life.

Further elaboration of the above notions also echoes Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984[1968]) ideas of opposed high and low cultural aesthetics, though Miller takes the distinct symbolic configurations more as socially pervasive coexistent codes rather than as representative of different sectors of a given hierarchic social structure. Christmas, "the key annual ritual of family reaffirmation as a moral and expressive order" (p. 100), is seen to exemplify the centripetal aesthetic; an emphasis on covering over and enclosing forms, wherein the domestic, as an enclosed space, seeks "to incorporate as much of the outside world into itself as possible" (p. 101). The festival is thus taken as a stylized expression of moral values and the focal point for a nostalgic view of the past constructed by means of certain forms of property and household goods. This view is one of a constant unity, one striving for a transcendent temporality opposed to the ephemeral nature of modernity. The celebration of Carnival, on the other hand (as Bakhtin (1984[1968]) so brilliantly described of carnival in Medieval Europe) displays an exteriorizing, centrifugal aesthetic, oriented to display, profligate expenditure, the exposure of hidden truths, the bacchanalian spirit, an emptying out of the self.

The two diametrically opposed representations of values, moral principles and "cultural projects" Miller labels, respectively, "transcendence"

and "transience" (p. 107ff). In their replication in the household, he observes an opposition between certain kinds of property (representing the idiom of transcendent mass consumption) and certain modes of sexual expression (the idiom of transient unstructured kinship); through the constant oscillation between them in everyday life, these two idioms and opposed value systems make possible certain kinds of sociality and freedom. The transient values of Carnival try to undermine those of transcendence through the celebration of an ephemeral present that appears to subvert all forms of prescribed sociality by means of an exhilarating carnality, revelry and sense of freedom. Christmas, however, is time for constructing a rooted sense of tradition, a continuity constituted by the household's "pure incorporative sociality" (p. 107). Particularly interesting is the way in which Miller also links these festivals in a relationship with the nation's state-making projects on a larger social level: Christmas, as a highly normative ritual, is involved in formulating a sense of a timeless and stable national culture, in structural tension with another form of Trinidadian globalized culture - Carnival.

These dualisms of systematically opposed ordering principles and kinds of consciousness may also be observed during ordinary time, though in a more refracted, less obvious way. In documenting the importance of these symbolic codes in social relations Miller addresses a wide array of authors, repudiating the classic dominant characterizations of Trinidadian, and Caribbean, society which tend to essentialize people through the conventional grids of ethnicity and class. Social groups, according to Miller, "are better understood as objects in this process rather than subjects" (p. 259): in other words, class, gender, and ethnic group are modes of distinction *used* by people to objectify a sense of order, as these conceptual categories are tacitly agreed upon and become embellished with particular characteristics. Forms of kinship, property and ethnicity are thus partly explainable as attempts to objectify the sense of being modern and the contradictions which emerge from that condition. Miller sees that modernity creates a new fragility and sense of impermanence (the idiom of unrestrained sexuality), but also an opposed struggle for the establishment of stable institutions and concern for the maintenance of descent ("property").

The important point in the above is this: in

modernity, ideals already objectified in other domains such as kinship are maintained, though they now have other material justifications as well as expressive channels by which to become objectified. At this point Miller reactivates his conception of modernity and articulates it in the case of Trinidad. In an enlightening comparison with British society, he indicates how in modernity self-consciousness and self-knowledge in relation to a range of ideals are even more acute, representing a major rupture, a fundamentally new temporal consciousness. The increase in external form (the objectified world) advances the initial phase of self-alienation. According to Miller, because many academic treatments of modernity focus on global processes that characterize late capitalism and often assume homogeneity, they disregard an equal but counter-orientation toward a localization of new commodities by the specificity given them within particular social and historical contexts. Miller claims that the contemporary condition allowing this localization of commodities to occur in Trinidad and elsewhere is a certain identity of interests between capital and labour within the increasing technological development of industrial society; people have reduced the time they spend working and increased the time they spend buying things, leading potentially to the actual subservience of capital to the demands of the market as consumer goods are encompassed by people for new social or cultural forms of production.

Following Miller's view, the modern process of consumption can thus be seen as part of the great process of "sublation" (Hegel's term) by which society attempts to realize itself dialectically by reappropriating the consumer object, the symbol of alienation: instead of being a mere commodity in strict Marxian terms, only a continuation of all the alienating processes which led up to its production, here "the object in consumption confronts, criticizes, and finally may often subjugate these abstractions in a process of 'human becoming'" (Miller, 1987:191). Put another way, if a commodity is defined as the product and symbol of abstract and oppressive structures, then the object of consumption in Miller's sense may involve a potential *negation* of the commodity in the former sense - that is, a transcendence of its alienating capacity. Indeed, Miller goes so far as to argue that this process is immanent in consumption itself.

Miller's critique of reigning conceptions of the post-modern material environment is pointed

especially at proponents of the Baudrillardian school of thought who discuss what is called the "flattening" of the sign and its absorption into its signified object, a perspective which also assimilates human relations to the seeming ephemeral turnover of style. Contending instead that "goods shouldn't be separated from the people who use them," Miller questions the materialism and individualism argued to be a part of contemporary consumption. In careful consideration of the nature of people's relationships with the objective world, mass consumption is here portrayed as key in the creation of an "inalienable setting" in which industrial commodities are essential to the formation of particular social relations and group identities and hence to the very process of social reproduction itself. This perspective is bound up with the productive capacity of the object, a conception reaching back to Mauss' notion of the gift, and developed since then by others such as Appadurai (1990): material goods are seen as capable of creating cultural significances which go far beyond their initial exchange value as commodities. Following from an interest in the use of objects in this sense for self-expression, true alienation in Miller's view would therefore be seen to occur whenever people are "unable to appropriate those resources by means of which they are forced to express themselves" (p. 74). The discussion does not dwell further on this notion, but one could logically assume this inability refers to conditions such as extreme poverty where consumer freedom is heavily limited, or situations such as a centrally planned economy under a communistic state where the availability of consumer goods is also constrained.

Miller goes on to argue that certain cultural consumptive practices cannot be reduced to reflecting mere social status (*à la* Bourdieu), but rather should be seen (as he describes in an earlier work) "constituting a highly specific and often extremely important material presence generating possibilities of sociability and cognitive order, as well as engendering ideas of morality, ideal worlds, and other abstractions and principles" (1987:191). In Miller's argument, the material objects themselves are imputed a salient social signifying power. So subcultures, characterized in part by certain consumptive practices (for example, English punks, or housewives) can be seen to have consumer objects as an integral part of the active construction of their particular cultural identities. This model seeks to explain how such

plural forms of identity assertion are made possible within the same conditions of modernity: people are seen able to transform the value of the objects of consumption in the process of a kind of bricolage, developing a unique style and thus constructing identities with the (re)appropriation of these elements of the modern.

From this perspective, Miller allows for consumption to be an activity of *resistance*, since he sees it as the only cultural domain which seems to offer possibilities for "self-construction" (p. 318). The *authenticity* of artefacts as culture derives not from their relationship to some tradition or manufacturing process, but rather from their involvement as artefacts in a process of self-creation in which they are directly constitutive of people's understanding of themselves, and of others in their social world. This reappropriation or sublation results from the transformation of goods, by means of consumption activities, into potentially "inalienable culture" (p. 310). Mass consumer goods are used to recontextualize and therefore transform industry-produced images, or to create small-scale social groups in the reappropriation of materials from alienated forms of production to re-emerge as what Miller calls the "specificity of the inalienable" (p. 296). He argues that such projects may include propositions of preferred modes of social interaction, even models of idealized pasts and utopian futures cultivated through style, or prescriptions of certain moral values. Cultural practices related to fashion and style could therefore be viewed as part of identity construction, forms of sublation.

Thus we can see how Miller's model destroys the logical linchpin of many rather pessimistic outlooks on the path of modernity. This view of consumption gives an account of how material goods can be instrumental in enabling and maintaining the contradictory nature of everyday culture: cultural strategies such as "framing" (using material culture to delimit a setting evocative of certain kinds of behaviour or attitudes), can allow for contradictory forces to coexist without coming into conflict. Thus, his argument goes, consumption objects may often become the source of a kind of liberty rather than of alienation, and such modes of personalizing consumer goods can be seen as a *positive* response to a necessarily contradictory modern world.

The perception of the demise of "authentic" culture and tradition signalled by the supposed

path toward fragmented, de-rooted cultural identities has been at least partly challenged by recent discussions demonstrating the myriad sources of resistance used by different peoples and groups around the world in maintaining cultural integrity. Miller's approach suggests how material culture and mass popular consumer goods could be implicated in this process. Although the rise of contradiction and the alienation of modernity are associated with the increasingly abstract nature of industrial material culture, Miller claims that the latter may be in fact a critical source of insight for understanding cultural dynamics beyond the context of modernity. Apparent contradiction may be identified in other more traditional communities where such strategies of consumption and recontextualization are used to confront the alienation of mass consumer culture, and the capitalist logic of the market is systematically separated from that of ritual exchange. Brought to mind here are June Nash's (1979) and Michael Taussig's (1980) important post-colonial analyses of local interpretations of capitalist infiltration in peasant Bolivia and Colombia, respectively. While Miller does not pursue this interesting line of exploration to the extent one might have hoped, we could add to such framing strategies the way in which "foreign" commodities are involved in the construction of culturally significant arenas in which such distinct local identities may be enacted, and through which they are, in fact, partly reconstituted. In popular Catholic fiestas in traditional parts of Mexico, for example, clearly defined fantastical settings are created in which modern mass commodity forms - luridly coloured plastic decorations, clothing, games, foods - are seamlessly incorporated into sacred contexts, and thereby assimilated into a contrived material moral sphere where their objective alien quality is effectively irrelevant (Norget, 1996). Similar views of the role of material culture in symbolizing the resilience of local significances also arise in works such as Jean Comaroff's (1985) account of South African Tshidi Zionists' transformation of external goods in order to relocate them in an alternative order of values and imbue them with new social and spiritual meaning and in Dick Hebdige's (1979) description of "style" as a salient signifying practice of English punks, who "reposition and recontextualize" the goods of dominant society through acts of eclectic bricolage which subvert their assumed valences and objectify a shared sense of identity. In sum, though Miller's view is not completely novel in this regard, its value lies in the way it helps us to contextualize

such ethnographic examples and see them as part of larger, more fundamental global social processes.

The advantages of an ethnographic approach to modernity for Miller stem from a two-way process: both finely descriptive ethnography and theoretical debates on modernity may be challenged by and interpreted in relation to each other. In the theoretical exposition of this aspect of his discussion, Miller draws on an impressive array of thinkers, adding to those already mentioned the likes of Kant, Benjamin, Eco, Wallerstein, Althusser and Foucault, the well-known Trinidadian novelist V.S. Naipaul and historians of Medieval Europe (for example, Schama). Rather than weighing down the text, the straightforward and lucid quality of Miller's presentation makes the invocation of these figures seem perfectly congruous, in keeping with the multi-faceted texture of his Trinidadian ethnography.

In constructing his dialogue between the micro - and the macro - Miller is a self-named "kitchen-sink ethnographer," "happy to incorporate any information that comes my way" (p. 4). Indeed, what could be called "salvage ethnography, post-modern style" amazes in its denseness: tables of quantified data and statistics gathered through systematic surveys are woven in with observations of consumption practices related to soap operas, upholstery styles, vitamin pills and house decorations. As Miller extracts from a wonderful assortment of colourful colloquial slang, Trinidadian novels, marriage patterns, dialect poetry, wedding speeches, soap opera narratives, newspaper commentaries, lyrics of calypso singers, consumption related to car parts, and other aesthetic elements such as clothing, dances, and cake decorating styles, he evinces the kind of sagacious interpretive skills needed to meet the complex coherence of the "post-everything" world.

The text of this book is also spiced with creativity, wit and reflexive sensitivity. Miller attempts to thwart possible criticism not by peremptory dismissal of opposing perspectives but through humble reaffirmation of his own stance. His declared insistence on "ethnographic realism" (p. 296), and explicit and sensitive account of his modes of data collection give the work extra credibility; such a solid corpus of information based on empirical fieldwork provides the

perfect antidote for anyone uncomfortable with the slipperiness and obscurity sometimes encountered in current published treatments of modernity and post-modernity. From beginning to end, Miller's line of argument has the penetrating edge of such refreshingly down-to-earth and equally imaginative British critics of popular culture as Stuart Hall, Dick Hebdige and Paul Willis.

Despite its clear strengths, the ambitious quality of this ethnography may also be the source of some of its weakness. Miller hides logical gaps or ambiguities in his forceful argument in eloquent but elliptical prose. As suggested earlier, a number of these uncertainties concerns the redemptive capacity he imputes to consumption itself. Though compelling, the work fails to completely convince, for example, that consumptive power in the form of simple accessibility of mass goods equates so readily to freedom in the rather romantic, Hegelian terms Miller implies. The apparent dependence on such mass goods in the first place, especially the implications of their displacement of local customary modes of social relation, are not satisfactorily addressed: in this light, it seems problematic to see so sanguinely the craving for such consumer goods as mirroring an individual or group quest for the "humanization" of the object of consumption. Nor, given its concern in part to overturn Marxian notions of objectification and alienation, can Miller's model fully account for the intimate coexistence of abject material poverty and desires for conspicuous consumption that anyone familiar with popular culture in Latin America and the Caribbean has experienced.

Yet, although the practice is pervasive within academe, poking holes in an argument even if one's general assessment of it are strongly positive, seems un-constructive. Whenever such a strongly asserted and succinct theoretical statement is ventured, this comes necessarily with tricky territory, the inevitable implied underside of ambiguity and stifled counter-argument. We should also recognize that launching a polemic with such sophisticated flair takes intellectual courage –and the intellectual muscle to go along with it; in this fine work, Miller demonstrates that he has both. Indeed, his provocative and fresh reading of modernity here and in other writings represents some of the most stimulating ideas coming out of consumption studies today, grounded insights that go far beyond more shortsighted readings of modern sensibilities held captive to the manipulations of

late capitalism's sophisticated mindgames and immersed in an alienating world of images.

Of more far-reaching relevance, however, may be Miller's critical ideas related to fashion and style, which embed aesthetics in sociality with an analysis of perception rarely seen since Raymond Williams and Walter Benjamin (despite the fact some of Miller's materialist ideas oppose theirs). This concern relates to the myriad ways in which elements of material culture mediate between human beings and their social settings on a more general level as key expressive vehicles through which people render concrete their experiences of the world around them, and through which they also apprehend it. From such a perspective, which dwells on the inherent creativity in everyday social existence, Miller is able to shed important light on how it is partly through interaction with our material environments that our identities are both solidly constituted and performed, instead of being only the nebulous and ephemeral effects of "diverse discursive practices" of which post-modernists speak.

The exponential rate at which his provocative writings have begun to appear in the last couple of years suggests that Miller himself seems to have fallen subject to the time-space compression characteristic of the (post)modern state he has theorized so trenchantly. Among the more notable of these, *Worlds Apart: Modernity Through the Prism of the Local* (1995) is his new edited volume treating similar issues in consumption, to be followed soon by another work we can definitely look forward to, *Capitalism: An Ethnographic Approach* (1997), Miller's second installment of his Trinidad ethnography.

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