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**THE CONFIGURING OF DIAMONDS:
A STUDY OF CONSUMPTION**

by

SUSAN FALLS

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,

The City University of New York.

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT:**THE CONFIGURING OF DIAMONDS: A STUDY OF CONSUMPTION****BY SUSAN FALLS, ADVISOR: PROFESSOR MICHAEL BLIM**

Based on 12 months of fieldwork in New York with diamond consumers, and archive research on the history of diamond marketing in the United States, this dissertation is an ethnography of the everyday consumption of diamonds which demonstrates how people bring their own experience to bear in making meaning of commodities. Analysis of narratives suggests that the set of themes promoted by De Beers through their billion-dollar marketing strategy, particularly romance, status, and glamour, is just one resource among many that consumers draw upon to interpret their own diamonds. Personal history, memory, context and local contingency also play important roles in how people interpret these objects. This work is contextualized within a broader understanding of the history and processes of globalized diamond production and marketing.

The overarching theoretical skein of this dissertation works from Silverstein's critique of the referential ideology of language in linguistics to rethink how we might deepen our understanding of consumption as a meaningful practice. Consumption theory, heavily indebted to a "culture as text" analogy, has imported and then applied a metaphor that not just contains but is built upon a referentially based conceptualization of language. My analysis of consumer narratives suggests that people do interpret diamonds referentially, but also as motivated poetic, and performative signs. Ultimately I argue for a re-invigorated approach to consumerism where commodities are historically contextualized and also investigated as to how consumers attribute meaning to them.

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Stefan “S” Kochs endured more talk about signs than any human being should have to. I also want to thank my beautiful grandmother Anne E. Falls, and my parents for getting me through this.

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INTRODUCTION DIAMOND SIGNS: TOWARDS A NEW THEORY OF CONSUMPTION

“Consumption theorists seem to accept that the substantive relationship with objects begins and in large measure is determined by the management of want and the expression of choice realized when money is exchanged for goods during shopping. I want to argue that there are other practices of living with objects that can be more important in understanding material culture than those associated with consumption as purchase”.

(Dant, 2000:60)

“A rock!!! It’s just a rock, OK? So, I mean, what’s it all about anyway?”

Tom, Diamond Consumer

The Emptiness of Diamonds

The presence of commodities in contemporary American society can hardly be over-stated. Commodities acquire meaning during consumption and it is by, through, and with commodities that people negotiate their lives. Diamonds are one such commodity. But what do diamonds mean? Once acquired, how do diamonds become meaningful in everyday lives? What can the study of diamond consumerism tell us about consumerism in general? Two encounters led me to explore the consumption of diamonds.

A few years ago my grandmother gave me a diamond she had owned since the 1920s. This diamond was given to her by my grandfather several years after they were married (she called it a “friendship ring”) and she wore it every day until she passed the

ring on to me. At the time, I hesitated to accept it, wanting her to keep it. She felt that it was better to give it to me while there was “still time for us to enjoy it,” to see it together on my hand instead of on hers, rather than “wait until it was too late.” I was uneasy with the overt references to her death, but I took the ring. I have an enormous sentimental attachment this diamond, only wearing it on special occasions, particularly when we will be together. It ties me to her, to my grandfather whom I never knew, to my greater family, and an entire lifetime of both memories of the past and ideas about the future that my grandmother and I have shared. This diamond stands between, unites, and calls forth, a multitude of significations that we, together and individually, place, impute, put upon it.

Around that same time, I attended a class taught by Geshe Michael Roach on Tibetan Buddhism held at a school on 4th street in Manhattan. As part of his lecture on the “Wheel of Life,” Geshe Roach held up a pen and asked, “What is this?” People shifted in their seats, wondering whether to answer this odd question by stating the obvious, or to cast about for something more esoteric, but finally someone volunteered, “It’s a pen.” “Yeah,” Geshe Roach affirmed in his customarily colloquial way, “that’s right, you know this is a pen. It writes and it’s got ink in it and I can squiggle lines and that’s what it is, it’s a pen”. He let that to sink in, and continued, “but, I mean, what if you were a dog? If you were a dog what would this be?” and he held the thing up high for all to see and then... silence. “OK, If you were a dog,” he argued, “if you were a dog, you come up to it and you look at it and to you this is not a pen, this is a chewing stick, you see, you can chew on it and it feels good and you probably don’t even know what a pen is anyway and so this thing *is* a stick. You see this thing *is* not anything *from its side*, it’s from *your side* that it *becomes* a pen or a chewing stick or whatever... ”.

Geshe Roach was advancing an argument that draws attention to a) the non-essential nature of things and, b) the concomitant power of the imputing subject to determine meaning. Non-essentialism is, of course, not unique to Buddhism, but the example Geshe Roach used to launch a discussion about how situated subjects who impute significance to things they encounter in accordance with contingency and local historicity was elegant and powerful. Although he was using the illustration to begin a lecture about Buddhist philosophy, it resonated for me because I had been reading about meaning and the exercise of interpretation, particularly in the work of Charles Saunders Peirce on subjectivity in semiotics (Peirce 1931-58)¹, and by Hans Gadamer, who argues that experience, situatedness, and prior understanding structure interpretation (Gadamer, 1975). I was impressed by Geshe Roach's use of a simple, concrete example to succinctly demonstrate how the perspective of the subject in the interpretive encounter operating within various constraints determines meaning and not the other way around.

Geshe Roach's lesson highlights a contrast between meaning-making as a process of *discovery* versus one of *imputation*, two distinct epistemological stances describing the relationship of people to meaningful objects (as signs²) in the world. An epistemology of discovery posits that people come to know an apriori meaning, whereas an epistemology of imputation focuses upon the context of the encounter and allows for differences between subjects who invest significance upon objects. I have exaggerated the differences between these two stances as a heuristic device to help us understand more

¹ Charles Saunders Peirce (1839-1914) was an American philosopher and scientist widely credited as the founder of American pragmatism and developed a system of signification that highlights the interpreting subject called semiotic or semiotics. Semiotics is the study of representations.

² A sign is a meaning carrying entity.

thoroughly studies of commodities which might locate the genesis of commodity meanings either external to (as in the case of discovery) or within (as in imputation) interpreting subjects. To help orient the reader in a general way, I would simply suggest for now that an epistemology of discovery is at the heart of a Saussurean linguistic paradigm, the kernel of anthropological structuralism, where meaning exists externally and prior to subjects who come to learn what things mean. An epistemology of “imputation” is characteristic of anthropology using a broader semiotic more apt to consider subjectivity, historicity, local context and contingency in meaning-making. I will show how meaning-making processes draw upon both discovery and imputation in diamond consumption.

Recently, a friend commented on my diamond. I explained, “Actually, it was my grandmother’s. They, she and my grandfather, got it in Shelby, North Carolina,” and then detailed my family tree and how I acquired the ring. As I talked, I realized that it was, like Geshe Roach’s pen, an object whose meaning was at once subjective, historical, situated, cultured and contextual. Coincidentally, a few days later, I learned that the diamond is tendered in Buddhism as a metaphor for the concept of “emptiness”.³ Thus Buddhists encounter the diamond with a notion that uses the generic idea of diamond in the service of a conceptual project that is quite different from the way I think about my particular diamond, or even compared to how the generic diamond is constructed in contemporary US cultural discourse, for example by the “diamond is forever” ad campaign. Listening to my grandmother talk, I started to question whether the diamond

³ See particularly in “The Diamond Cutter Sutra” which is one of the most popular Mahayana teachings on the concept of emptiness. In this context, emptiness refers to the non-essential nature of all things.

was actually becoming a different kind of thing, transforming at an ontological level from an exemplar of the generic “diamond” to a specific “this diamond,” when it was relocated from the retail stage to my grandparents’ lives. I wondered how other consumers treated diamonds whose existence as meaningful entities, as signs, seemed to take place as particular items in individual lives with idiosyncratic histories and contexts. Were diamonds, perhaps like all commodities, “empty” in the sense that consumers attribute meaning through ideas acquired from a combination of responses to public discourse and from their own experience and idiosyncrasy? I knew that diamonds as signs have meanings, but, to understand the process of meaning making works in specific instances (This diamond) of generically known things (the idea of diamond in general), I set out to investigate people’s interpretations of particular diamonds taking place within a particular socio-historical landscape. This, I believed, might allow me to discover a range of sign types that consumers take diamonds to be. And I hoped that identifying the sign types consumers take diamonds to be might eventually shed some light on how consumers as subjects operate through material culture.

I began reviewing studies on consumerism and paying attention to people’s diamonds and what they said about them, to De Beers ads, to the appearance of flashy diamonds as “bling” on Entertainment Tonight (an “infotainment” show about rappers, celebrities, actors and musicians and Hollywood life-styles) and to the appearance of diamonds in politics and in the media. The existence of a massive marketing operation is obvious, but how far is its reach? To what extent does the media establish the meaning of diamonds? How are they embedded in the at-large cultural life of the United States and within a global production chain? Moving beyond “a diamond is forever,” I wondered

how these bright little stones, having a particular socio-cultural history, were inserted into people's lives. I began interviewing diamond consumers as individuals simultaneously entrenched in large-scale socio-historical dynamics, superlocal contingencies and everything in between. I found that people do draw on the cultural discourse that sets a tone and context for diamond consumerism, but consumers author meanings that surpass in notable ways the content of the at-large discursive universe.

In contemporary American "consumer society," commodities are ubiquitous, and serve as signs that anchor us in the world. While the question of why things have meaning at all is an ontological one that cannot be easily engaged using anthropological methods, we can productively investigate HOW things come to have meaning. By asking consumers about their own experiences with particular diamonds, this dissertation explores what diamonds mean, and how those meanings are generated. Analysis of these narratives illustrates how consumers, operating within the context of a social world rife with powerful discourse, are creative producers of meaning.

Commodities and Meaning

In the last decade, anthropological work on consumerism has flourished as scholars established the importance of recognizing the role of commodities and consumption practices in contemporary social theory (Appadurai 1990, Lee & LiPuma 2002, Miller 1995, Storper 2000, Holt and Schor 2002). Scholars' interpretations of ads and/or commodities are often remarkably imaginative and persuasive, but there has been surprisingly little work based on the empirical study of practical relationships between consumers and commodities as told by consumers themselves. This is particularly the case once commodities are acquired and integrated into everyday lives (Dant 1996).

This dissertation is based on a body of narratives gathered in interviews, and during many casual conversations with diamond consumers.⁴ In identifying individuals' primary considerations in attributing commodity meanings, I analyzed narratives to discover how meanings were generated with respect to particular diamonds. For example, where a diamond is taken as a souvenir, as the word suggests,⁵ personal memory plays an important role in the interpretive process, and thus meaning is partly reflective of individual history. Or, where a diamond is taken to represent exploitation of workers, ideas about capitalist labor practices are at play, and the diamond indexes such practices. But, in realizing that consumers consume within a larger socio-political context, I examined how narratives cohere with or deviate from industry frameworks for interpreting diamonds in general. For example, where a diamond is said to mean "love", industry sponsored symbolism is operative.

The variety of idiosyncratic factors in consumers' meaning-making, or "semioses" (Deely 1990), in addition to those explored in dominant consumption theory, particularly with respect to symbolic associations, was surprising. Semioses of diamonds as reflected in talk about meanings, is, as this research demonstrates, layered and complex. This process includes treating diamonds as signs whose meanings are influenced by symbolic valences promoted by marketing, as well as signs that are primarily iconic and indexical, poetic or used in performance (all of which are explained

⁴ From this point forward, language taken from interviews will be marked by the use of italics.

⁵ A souvenir is a token of remembrance, or memento. The term comes from the French souvenir, from the Old French verb souvenir, "to remember, come to mind," and from the Latin subvenire, "come to mind," from sub- "up" + venire "come." From on-line etymological dictionary at <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?l=s&p=33>

in further detail below). Although this research is focused on semioses of diamonds, findings will likely hold at a general level in contributing to a fuller understanding of how people tether themselves to the world through commodities.

“Diamond Row”

What is known about the initial appearance of diamonds as a cultural artifact is sketchy, but diamond is present in text at least as early as in an Indian manual for administration and taxation, the Arthashastra, generally dated around 296-320 BCE (Harlow, 1998: 116). Once very rare, reserved for royal men and enclaved in elite circles by sumptuary laws, the discovery of diamonds in South Africa in the 1870's would herald a democratization of the stone, partly due to the emergence of Cecil Rhodes' De Beers Consolidated Mining Corporation which today stands as the critical pillar of the industry.

The center for polished stone was located in Europe until the 1930's when the Nazis came to power and diamond merchants, mostly Jewish, fled from Antwerp, a city which continues to be a major diamond center. Many of these Europeans brought their businesses to Canal Street at Bowery in New York, but moved to 47th Street after World War II. At that time, other refugees entering the NY diamond market helped build the district. Today, as a result of transformations both in the global political economy and within the diamond industry itself, the demographic makeup of merchants on 47th street is changing. What was once an almost exclusively male Jewish business environ now also includes women and those representing a wide range of national and ethnic identities. As one diamondeer (as diamond dealers are known) put it, *“you hear every language in the world spoken on this street”*.

The overall health of today's industry is upheld by American demand. The U.S. is the largest market for diamonds, absorbing well over half the polished diamonds that come onto the retail market annually.⁶ The heart of the U.S. diamond industry is New York City's "Diamond Row" (located at 47th street between 5th and 6th avenues) and the surrounding area, where research for this project was initiated. This diamond district is in the hub of midtown Manhattan, just a few blocks south of Rockefeller Center and close to the high-end shopping area around 57th Street and 5th Avenue.

A large proportion of diamonds, upwards of 90%, sold in the United States come through the New York diamond market (known as a "bourse"), at the Diamond Dealers Club (DDC). I was able to secure a visit and an interview with a high level officer at the DDC who agreed to talk "off-the-record" ("*You're not taping this are ya?*," he asked from one of the rooms in the non-descript, high-security building, underscoring the covert nature of diamond trading) and gave me a fascinating tour of the trading floor where packets of polished stones are bought and sold. Not only is 47th Street home to the DDC, but virtually the entire block, both at street level and in most of the office space in the buildings between 5th and 6th Avenues, is occupied by some type of diamond operation. In fact, over 2,600 shops are located on Diamond Row, selling loose stones and estate jewelry, and everything in between, at all price levels.⁷ Right around the corner, high-end retailers such as Harry Winston, Tiffany, Van Cleef and Arpels, and Movado sell

⁶ Japan comes in a distant second. Compared to the success of selling diamond to Americans and the Japanese, efforts to market diamonds have only been partially successful in Brazil and in some European countries.

⁷ http://www.forms-surfaces.com/projects/municipal/diamond_district.htm (visited on November 4, 2004)

signature wares. And the De Beers flagship retail store opened in June of 2005, just a few blocks away at the corner of 54th and 5th avenue.

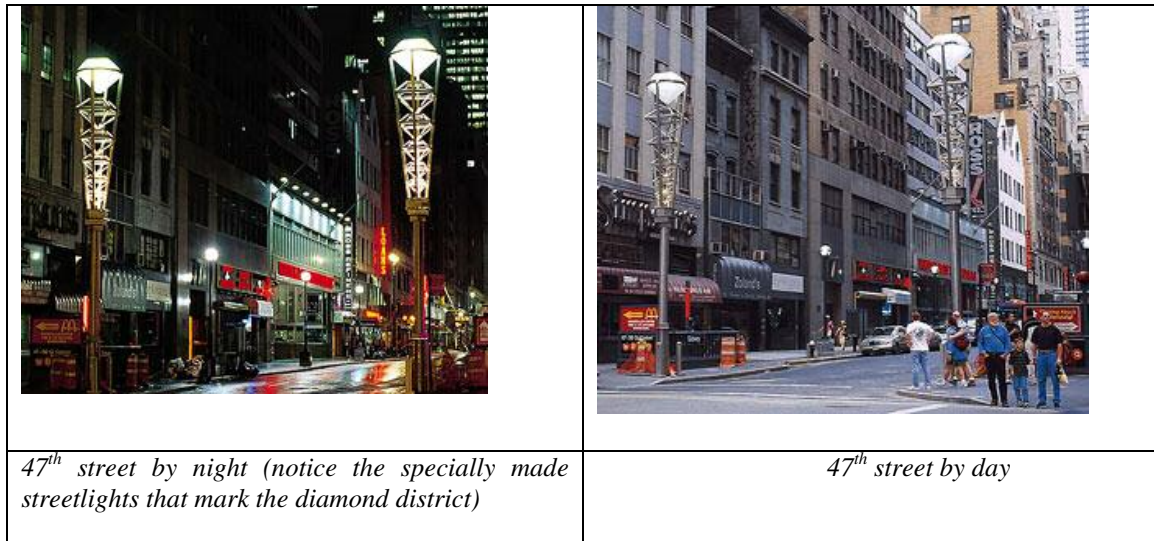


Figure 1-1 47th Street between 5th and 6th Avenues, New York City

Besides the DDC and retailers, another powerful organization is located on Diamond Row: the Gemological Institute of America (GIA). GIA, the grading body of the industry, developed and maintains through regimented training of employees, hegemonic grading standards, not just for the US market, but worldwide, making it one of the most important elements in the institutionalization of the industry and in the maintenance of the pricing/value structure.⁸ Evaluating diamonds is an elaborate affair which, to do well, requires years of training and experience, but understanding the basic contours of grading can be gained through programs offered at the Gemological Institute.

GIA is recognized by many as the final authority on polished diamond grading and identification: GIA standardized the “4 C’s” of diamond value (color, cut, clarity and carat weight), including the D-Z color grading scale and the flawless-I3 clarity grading

⁸ GIA has been around for about 70 years.

scale. Cut diamonds from all over the world are sent to GIA labs for grading, and diamonds are sold in the US, and abroad, with GIA certificates detailing the characteristics of individual stones. Though GIA does not price gems, it is the stone's characteristics as identified by GIA which determine market value. Sometimes a fifth C, a GIA certificate is said to confer additional value upon a polished stone, explaining why diamonds are sometimes advertised as "*GIA Certified!*" But certification has material consequences: minute discrepancies in grades can be expressed in significant price differences. The prices of stones sold up and down 47th street, and all over town, are legislated and legitimized by a hierarchical industry framework and GIA certificates. This retail landscape, undergrid by marketing and production, form the context within which people consume diamonds.

Entangled spheres of diamond consumerism: Consumers and Producers

I held interviews with diamond consumers (defined as people who have or have had diamonds) and conducted research on many aspects of the industry. The central element of this research was narratives gathered through formal interviews. These narratives must be understood as entangled with, contextualized by, the twinned spheres of diamond production, where diamond is constructed as both material artifact and ideological entity. To understand this contextualization, I worked with geologists to learn about diamond's structure and formation, traced the production chain from mining to marketing through archive research, and took a diamond-grading course at GIA.

One way to think about diamond is as an object of scientific investigation and to understand them as such, so I researched the geological processes involved in diamond formation. Several years ago, the American Museum of Natural History in New York

sponsored an exhibit on diamonds, which was one of the most popular in the history of the museum.⁹ Following the exhibit, museum geologists were kind enough to explain to me crust and magma tectonics and mechanics of diamond formation, in addition to providing a bibliography of sources to help me acquire essential information on what these rocks *are* from a geological perspective, giving them their especial features such as hardness and light refraction which are present in consumer narratives and key to transforming them from raw material to cultural artifact.

I saw some rough diamonds, and frankly they did not look very exciting. I doubt most people would be able to recognize the greasy looking rocks as diamonds before they are cut and polished, as the transformation in appearance is substantial. A diamond in the ground passes through many hands before being purchased out of a glass case on 47th street. Investigations of diamonds as reflective of these many hands of labor practices, commodity chains and global geo-politics has been undertaken by historians, journalists and others, and drawing upon these resources helped me to develop an image of the cultural matrix out of which diamonds materialize.

I traced how a diamond goes from being just another rock in the ground to a unique and expensive gem, but my research was primarily focused on the last node in the production chain: meaning-making of polished stone by consumers. Over the course of a year, I conducted 40 formal interviews with consumers in New York, acquired through snowballing techniques, and had many incidental conversations with people that led to discussion of their diamonds. To find participants through snowballing, I asked people I

⁹ According to Dr. George Harlow, personal communication.

knew to put me in contact with others in their social network who might be interested in taking part in the research and in turn asked those people to introduce me to others and so on (see Low 2001 for similar approach to gaining informant access). I met both men and women on a casual basis, at parties or other social gatherings, who upon hearing about my research said things like, *“I’d love to be interviewed...”*, or said *“Oh, I have story for you....”* and launched into a detailed anecdote, or told me, *“You should really talk to”* and offered to introduce me to them, and I acquired some narratives in this fashion.

The criteria for selecting interviewees was that they be diamond consumers. I worked with both women and men (mostly women), between the ages of 25 and 40, mostly “white” but representing a range of ethnicities, who fell into the gross category of the educated, “middle-class”. This is demographic data that I surmised, both visually and based on what people said, directly and indirectly, about themselves. The pool of participants in this study can in many ways be said to represent one of the most highly targeted audiences of diamonds advertising in terms of age, ethnicity and class, making findings that the ways in which their meaning-making diverges from marketing discourse all the more suggestive. A more general consequence suggested by my examination of these target audience narratives was a surprisingly high degree to which matters of style are implicated in self-identification with respect to categories such as class or ethnicity, as well as the ways that people ascribe emotions and impute hopes and thoughts to others who are also categorized as a matter of style. I did not specifically ask informants to give me detailed information about self-depictions or their salary, age, religion, sexual orientation, marital status, or the cost of diamonds, though sometimes people volunteered such information. I did not aggressively pursue life histories or other data beyond what

emerged in the course of discussion of diamonds. Within the dissertation, I have provided some contextualizing information about interviews and informants where necessary.

Doing interview research with those who are not part of one's social network in a large, urban setting such as New York is difficult. People are very busy, people cancel, people want to meet at odd times in odd places, etc. and it can be challenging to schedule an appointment, but by and large, those I worked with were generous with their time and energy, took the interviews seriously and made earnest attempts to explore with me how they are interpreting these objects.

At first, I taped my interviews, but then found that taking detailed notes created a more effective atmosphere. Some interviews were both taped and taken by note, while others were only recorded by note taking. Towards the end of research, almost all interviews were recorded only by detailed note taking. The interview structure was relatively open-ended. Though I tried to nudge informants towards certain issues, I allowed them considerable freedom in taking the narrative in a direction that was natural *to them*, and to use a vocabulary that was their own. I prompted consumers to tell the "story" of a particular diamond. I asked about circumstances of acquisition, possession, loss, recovery, and any plans for future divestment. I asked them how their diamonds are cared for, when they are worn or displayed, how they might compare to other gems, how they believe others may "read" it, and for specific details related to how these objects become meaningful elements of their daily lives. As stories unfolded, I sometimes pressed people to expand upon interesting points, or to pursue further trains of thought that might have been parenthetically introduced. This interview strategy was productive

in that it allowed people to introduce matters that I would not necessarily have asked about using a strict questionnaire.

As a rule, interviews fell into one of two categories: expansive or constricted. Some consumers gave me short and pat answers, or seemed to be attempting to tell me what they thought I wanted to hear, or were unwilling to take the discussion in to their own hands, and those interviews, which surely could have been improved with greater skill on my part, tended to be brief, stilted and a little bland. A few seemed to think that I was, or would be, making a critical argument against diamond consumerism, and declined the interview or took a slightly defensive stance: though this is not at all my project, sometimes I was not able to, without referring to the problem overtly, erase their suspicion. I did not find occasion to use the most constricted interviews very extensively in this dissertation since analyzing what type of sign a diamond is taken for from a narrative is not always possible from short and pat statements. Most people, however, were expansive, and relished the opportunity to tell me their stories, giving me plenty of information from which to work.

Even though one of the very first things people said, usually in a joking manner, were taglines like “*diamonds are a girl’s best friend*” (highlighting the fact that meaning-making is not a completely individuated process but is embedded in social contexts inundated with discursive activity¹⁰), I found that people, both consciously and unconsciously, draw upon, but are far from constrained by the grading system, diamond production and marketing discourse in talk about their own semioses. But, diamond

¹⁰ See Putnam 1975:227-9 for an interesting discussion on the relationship between meaning-making and social context.

consumption, as process of meaning-making, takes place within a historically constructed social milieu including diamond industry activities. My own understanding of this context was developed through research in 4 domains: retailers, grading, advertising and marketing, and the history/production of diamonds.

I took the Gemological Institute of America's diamond grading course where students are trained in evaluation techniques. There I met and talked with retailers and other industry employees, learned how polished diamonds are produced, and was taught to grade diamonds in accordance with GIA's standards. I learned to recognize diamonds' most common "features" and "inclusions" (black spots, cracks, chips, etc). Instructors taught me how to use a loupe (a small magnifying glass), a pointer, a gem microscope, master stones, and special light sources to plot characteristics on maps against those produced at GIA labs. I was also introduced to grading "fancy" cuts (non-round shapes such as marquise, oval, pear, etc.), colored stones (diamonds come in virtually every color of the rainbow) and techniques for identifying diamond simulants such as cubic zirconium and Moissanite.¹¹ At the end of the course, students take a test in which they are asked to correctly grade a number of stones in order to receive a certificate of completion. Grading must be in-line with that of the official GIA lab and although there is a subjective element to grading, after practicing on literally hundreds of diamonds, I

¹¹ Naturally occurring moissanite is extremely rare, as it is not formed naturally in any quantity within the Earth, and thus is found only in tiny quantities in certain types of meteorite and as microscopic traces in corundum deposits and kimberlite. Virtually all of the silicon carbide sold in the world, including moissanite gemstones, is synthetic. Natural moissanite was first found in 1905 as a small component of a meteorite in Arizona by Dr. Ferdinand Henri Moissan, after whom the material is named. In 1998 C3, Inc. (Charles and Colvard) introduced gem-quality synthetic silicon carbide onto the market under the name 'moissanite'. Touted as the best, most convincing diamond simulant to date, moissanite kicked up quite a stir: Gem quality moissanite is manufactured exclusively by Charles and Colvard and is sold as a lower cost alternative to diamonds. From: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moissanite> . Retrieved July 2005.

did finally get the hang of it. Being able to discuss elements of valuation was helpful during my conversations with retailers and also with consumers, some of whom have educated themselves about grading and its relationship to market value.

GIA is not just a technical training ground, but also offers instruction in sales. Instructors discussed at length the language retailers should use to sell diamonds. For example, one instructor told us, while holding up a tiny gem, *“This one is junk, but to the customer, you know, ‘Every diamond is beautiful!’”* I guess everyone thought this was pretty funny because it was followed by a round of laughter. The students in the class, save me of course, were established members of the industry, mainly retail, and they talked with me about their work. Through contacts made at GIA and by talking to anyone and everyone I knew about the industry, I was able to interview several retailers. I conducted “semi-structured” interviews using prompts meant to elicit specific examples of general statements made by retailers regarding diamond evaluation and experience with consumers (Bernard 1994:209). For example, when a retailer, in discussing the fact that many people come to her counter knowing exactly what caratage, color and clarity they are looking for, told me that, *“women are smarter about these things now – it used to be that nobody knew that much,”* I asked her for an example. She explained to me that, *“just yesterday a guy came in here with his girlfriend and she had done all the research, I mean you can get this information on line now, and she knew exactly what cut and size and so forth.”* In this case the seller was relieved of doing the “consumer education” that I heard being discussed at GIA and enacted by retailers at other times. I browsed for diamonds on 47th street and in the old diamond district at Bowery and Canal as well as in high end stores such as Harry Winston and the De Beers store, estate merchants such as

ABC, and “discount” stores like Zales in New York where merchants talked to me about the 4 C’s, and I observed salespeople working with customers, noting the *in situ* reproduction of industry evaluative standards by retailers attempting to “educate” consumers.

The retail industry is propped up not only through consumer education at the point of sale, but by an extensive ad campaign, both of which have been and continue to be, puppeteered by De Beers. The De Beers archives of the N.W. Ayer and J.W. Thompson advertising agencies are located in the Special Collections Library at Duke University in Durham, N.C.¹² These records contain corporate correspondence; advertisements for both US and foreign fora; videos on selling diamonds created for retailers; “press releases” that mimic real news stories written by agency employees for newspapers and radio; old photographs/descriptions of each stage of diamond production; photographs of De Beers executives; annual reports; information on diamond mining, cutting, polishing and grading; newspaper articles; and customer research. Though most of the records in these files is over 30 years old, the archive provided an incredible record of the history of ads and public discourse in the United States since the 1930’s. One can plainly see the emergence of the famous “diamond is forever” tag and the pointed repetition of themes such as scarcity, glamour, and romance that began more than sixty years ago, but still characterize ads to this day.¹³

¹² I was able to gain access to this archive through a grant from Duke University’s J. Walter Thompson Foundation.

¹³ To see the current series of print and television ads, see Diamond Information Company (a subsidiary of De Beers) website at: <http://www.adiamondisforever.com/hot/asadvertised.html>

Outside of these corporate records, copious books are devoted to detailing the history of the diamond rush in South Africa and the rise of De Beers, many of which are veritable hagiographies of Cecil Rhodes and members of the Oppenheimer family (who continue to maintain control of De Beers). Scholarly literature, based on research from fields outside of anthropology such as economics, history, comparative literature and political science, and popular/journalistic books cover the social, political and economic history of the industry backgrounding contemporary diamond consumption. Interpretation of any one diamond takes place at the plane of the individual, but diamond consumerism is itself sited within a larger historical landscape of the diamond as commodity, the details of which inform individual interpretations. Understanding how diamonds were introduced and continue to be constructed in US society was therefore, significant to analysis of consumer narratives.

Analysis of Diamond Consumption

In my analysis, I sought to identify the variety of ways that people go about making meaning of diamonds, that is to say the mechanics of diamond interpretation, and so focuses upon narratives themselves rather than delving into individual life histories. Taking as the locus of investigation consumers representing the target marketing population revealed that individuals operate in tension between the sphere of discourse and their own creativity and socio-history.

I transcribed the interview tapes and typed up notes from interviews and casual conversations. The narratives were subsequently coded, which allowed me to manage the whole set of narratives with greater facility (see example in Yans-McLaughlin 1990). The code consisted of variables generated from reading through the narratives and identifying

themes, in addition to thinking through overarching research goals. Variables included items such as performance, symbol, memory, personal circumstance, and market value. Once the themes emerged, data underwent a line-by line coding process in which informant statements, such as “*when I look at this diamond, I remember my grandfather,*” were marked with appropriate variables, such as “memory” or “kinship.” Other themes developed as interviews were coded and then re-coded. I was able to cull excerpts from narratives to use as examples from this line by line procedure. This method of narrative coding is well-suited to studies of subjectivity (Reissman 1993), but requires close attention to the concepts under discussion and is thus best carried out in a tongue and cultural setting in which the researcher is as “fluent” as possible: it was, therefore, ideal that this research took place in New York among English speaking consumers.

This research was designed to gather evidence on post-acquisition consumption habits in terms of how people make meaning of diamonds: the nature of the data I gathered was self-reported narratives about meaning prompted by interview rather than say observations of activity, or discussions that occurred without my provocation. Complicating the interview process is the fact that interviews are somewhat odd social interactions in which people are speaking in ways that do far more than transmit information about the subject at hand: people are indexing who they are, who they think I am, performing identities threaded with ideas about aesthetics and style, race, class and ethnic markings, and either creating or disarticulating a power-rife relationship with me, the interviewer. I have tried to maintain a sensitivity of the indexical properties of interviews texts (such as for example, a interviewee who is “telling” me that she feels herself to be cosmopolitan and elite through dismissive statements about suburbanism

and the “crass” nouveau-riche) but only in so far as it directly applies to my focus on identification and discussion of the taking of diamonds as signs.

Data was gathered not as an experimental “sample” to enumerate frequencies (Yin 1989), but as a pool of narratives that could be analyzed in such a way as to draw conclusions about the variety of strategies people use to interact with commodity objects as signs. During the analysis, I could not help but recognize the constant appearance of idiosyncrasy, memory, performance and creativity and worked to determine how these elements might be explained using existing consumption paradigms. It was not a very good fit as a result of two related fundamentals: a) many consumption theories are predicated upon on a “culture as language” analogy, and b) within the “culture as language” analogy, language is conceptualized as “referential.” By referential, I mean a rather technical formulation, that linguistic communication is conceived of as an activity which denotes and describes, reflects the world, real or imaginary, *as it already is* via a putting together, in a grammatically satisfactory way, of lexical elements in a code that exists at the supra-individual level. Language is understood as a tool of propositionality, rather than as a productive activity. The variation in meaning-making techniques evident within the narratives suggests that diamond consumption must be understood as a social practice that operates beyond the culture as (referential) language model. I have attempted to elucidate variations in meaning-making evident in interviews.

Organization of the Dissertation

In asking what kinds of signs consumers take diamonds to be, I examined coded data and identified what seemed to be the most apparent and frequent sign types: symbol, index, icon, poetic and performative. Identifying these sign types, and thinking through

how they work, provides us with a semiotic basis for constructing consumers as historically situated, creative subjects. The organization of this dissertation follows the path of my inquiry, from the construction of diamonds as mineral commodities to an inspection of specific consumer narratives.

Proving a basic framework through which diamond commodities in the U.S. can be understood, Chapter One covers the basic history and shape of the diamond industry, including the emergence of De Beers. Chapter Two provides an overview of the anthropological literature on consumption in which the production of meaning is taken at a premium. Chapter Two details the primary arguments I will be making about the referential and non-referential character of diamond signs and provides a theoretical lens through which subsequent chapters should be considered.

Studies of material culture can be classed into two categories: “hard” and “soft.” “Hard” studies focus on an object’s material configuration, all the way from observable qualities such as color and texture down to the molecular level, while “soft” approaches investigate implicit and explicit cultural meanings (Prown 1996). Diamond production constitutes both the forming of the material artifact and as well as developing and promoting ideas that inform peoples’ engagement with it as a meaningful object. Because physical properties can be equal in importance to the culturally generated meanings that constitute an object, with one often informing the other (see Freidel 1993), this dissertation combines a “hard” with a “soft” approach in understanding diamond consumerism. As production, circulation and marketing undergrid consumption, Chapter Three provides an overview of the formation, constitution and extraction of diamonds using a global commodity chain model. Though it is an incomplete gesture, material

production transforms raw diamonds into meaningful objects, and so in considering a politics of connection between production practices and consumer awareness, this chapter also explores how consumer knowledge informs consumption.

The Gemological Institute of America (GIA) is one of the most important organizations for diamond grading, developing specifications for grades. Diamond grading is a principal industry activity, along with advertising, by which mass produced gems are choreographed into greater uniqueness and by which they accrue market value. Chapter Four discusses this process and argues that the market value of gems should be understood as operating alongside, over and above, underneath or irrespective of the ways that people make sense of these stones. Though people placed at various nodes in the industry, from miners to cutters to retailers, pay particular attention to grading and price, most consumers I talked with have a poor idea of how to grade diamonds or how much they cost. It is difficult for the average person make distinctions between costly versus inexpensive, natural versus simulated, or fine versus poor quality diamonds on sight, or even by close examination, as price affective gradations are literally microscopic. Nevertheless, fine distinctions are maintained by the industry and by consumers and impact the way that diamonds are understood.

Per above, diamond consumerism occurs within a general political economy and amidst a culture of commodities, but more specifically is enabled by the activities of production and grading, supplemented and framed by marketers. The “diamond is forever” campaign has been very successful, one of the most triumphant in the annals of ad history. People constantly made references to diamond ads and the symbolic meanings promoted within them, often as additions or foils to their own interpretations which

usually went far beyond the ideas promoted in ads. Chapter 5 looks at how the diamond industry sponsors discursive flows that are reflected in narratives of semioses.

The tendency to view language as solely propositional rather than as some combination of propositionality, indexicality and/or iconicity, has been transported into the social sciences, via the metaphor of culture as language, to produce an ideology of consumption in which commodities are thought to function essentially referentially. If a referentially wrought linguistic ideology that works to occlude non-referential signing functions are applied in commodity studies, it becomes difficult to appreciate at both the theoretical and empirical levels the various non-referential functions of commodities that emerge in narratives. Scholars have drawn upon the work of Charles Saunders Peirce¹⁴, particularly with respect to his tripartite semiotic of symbol, icon and index, to address non-referentiality in language; I have explored in Chapter 6 how this paradigm might be productively mobilized to examine consumerism by examining how consumers themselves treat the diamond as an index, and/or icon.

Chapter Seven investigates how people treat diamonds as a kind of sign that can be described as a poetic device. Analysis of interviews and cultural discourse about the visible role of diamond-wear in the style of Ghetto Fabulous, popularized by rap stars, pop/culture figures, and professional athletes (particularly in the sport of basketball), and subsequently adopted by urbanites, illustrates how people read, or wear, “bling”, the wearing of big flashy diamonds, as a playful, and at times political, poesy.

Combining insights garnered from Austin's work "*How To Do Things With Words*" on the performativity of language (Austin 1962), with a focus on linguistic idiosyncrasy which takes the individual as the locus of meaning production (see for example Johnstone 2001), Chapter 8 examines diamond consumer narratives that show how people wield diamonds in idiosyncratic performative events. I demonstrate that people can use diamonds, like words, to "do things".

Chapter 9 revisits the questions that opened this introduction, reviews themes emergent in ethnographic materials that support my basic argument, and discusses how this work might be productively expanded in other directions. I hope to be able to visit diamond mines and production facilities in the future, and to work on expanding my understanding of the technical implications for subject construction from this research.

Conclusion

Work on the contemporary consumer society has made inroads into understanding how commodities and commodity flows are situated within the global political-economy, how commodities are produced, both as material and as ideological entities by powerful marketing and grass-root adaptations, and how they are used in contemporary societies as both reflective and reproductive of social categories and relationships. There has been less research on what happens to commodities once they become integrated into everyday experience. Starting with the premise that diamonds as commodities are meaningful entities, or signs, this research gathered data on what happens to diamonds once they are imbricated in people's lives by collecting and analyzing consumer narratives, archive materials and industry discourse.

My examination of consumer narratives, archival research and cultural discourse (such as song lyrics and media reports of diamond wear) illustrates that marketing practices generate symbolic meanings of diamonds which inform the social, moral and political universe in which diamond consumerism inevitably takes place. Interviews suggest that diamond consumers draw on such symbolic meanings but operate creatively, sometimes idiosyncratically, in local contexts that are created with personal histories, fancies, and hopes. While industry-produced meanings of diamonds (for example, as signifiers of status, glamour and romance) can be understood as Peircian symbols, three additional modes of semioses, or meaning-making, emerged from analysis of consumer narratives. These non-referential meaning types were: motivated meanings, poetic meanings and performative meanings.

The anthropological project can work to better understand culture by examining the sometimes incongruent relationship between shared cultural registers and the beliefs, practices and values of individuals within it; these incongruencies can be accounted for by emphasizing the “foundational status” of individuals and individual differences from which culture is ultimately abstracted (see Hymes, 1979:35) while also considering the contextualizing, and sometimes defining, social context in which individuals operate. Far from trivial, individual difference is what makes living in society bearable and intelligible and its presence must, therefore, be included as a core element in developing social theory. Identifying the various ways in which signs are interpreted provides us with a semiotic basis for constructing subjects operating individually within society as such. In conclusion, I call for continuing attention to the multitude of ways that people make

meaning with commodities within the socialized, individuated and contingent contexts where this activity takes place.

Chapter 1 The Rise of Diamonds: Contingencies of History

Diamond

Diamond is precious gemstone consisting of pure carbon in regular octahedrons now consumed by Americans in the form of jewelry.¹⁵

Like a diamond in the sky...

The word “diamond” first appeared in English print around 1310¹⁶ in Thomas Wright’s “Specimens of Lyric Poetry,” verse 25: “*A bourd in a bour ase beryl so bryte, Asa diamaunde the dere in day when he is dyht*” (Simpson and Weiner 1989).¹⁷ The association between stars, dew or frost and other things that shine or shimmer, literally or metaphorically, and diamond, is well known, as in:

Twinkle, twinkle little star
How I wonder what you are
Up Above the world so high
Like a diamond in the sky
Twinkle, twinkle little star
How I wonder what you are
Jane Taylor (1806)

Other instances of diamond in literature operate as metaphors on the basis of diamond’s extreme hardness, refractivity or value:

¹⁵ This definition is a compilation of entries for “diamond” in dictionaries, books, journals and websites.

¹⁶ <http://www.etymonline.com/d3etym.htm>. Retrieved November 14, 2004.

¹⁷ Creel-Duzepere. 1989. The Oxford English Dictionary. Volume IV, Clarendon Press, Oxford, second edition. JA Simpson and Weiner. p. 604.

*What precious drops are those
Which silently each other's track pursue,
Bright as young diamonds in their infant dew?*
The Conquest of Granada III, Act III, Sc I. John Dryden

*As the diamond is the crystalline
Revelator of the achromatic white light of Heaven,
So is a perfect poem the crystalline revelation of the Divine Idea.*
Preface to Eonchs of Ruby (1851). Thomas Holley Chivers

Every tooth in a man's head is more valuable than a diamond.
Don Quixote (1605). Miguel De Cervantes

The contemporary word “diamond” can be traced to the middle English *diamant* or *diamant* as a variation on the Late Latin *diamas*, itself derived from the earlier Latin *adamas* and Greek διαμάντι. διαμάντι referred to a hard mineral substance, though it is far from certain that it meant the clear, hard stone to which it is attached today.¹⁸ “Diamond” also refers to a shape, a baseball field, a suit in cards, or a textile stitch. In each case, the term is used because of a resemblance between that which is being described, for example, the shape of the baseball field as defined by the relationship between the four bases, and the form of diamond crystal. The diamond suit in playing cards follows the same logic.

¹⁸ The term "*Adamas*" may have referred to corundum, more commonly known as sapphire, even though sapphire is a distant second to diamond in hardness. <http://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/diamonds/name.html>



Rough Diamond¹⁹

Diamond Field²⁰

Diamond Suit²¹

Figure 1-1 The shape of diamond

The name “Diamond” for American girls, as in the character “Diamond Williams” of the popular internet soap opera “Ghetto Fabulous”²², can be taken to mean “precious,” “valuable” or “gem like,” reflecting some of the symbolic meanings of the stone promoted in advertising. A kind of sympathetic magic is at play whereby culturally devised qualities ascribed to a mineral substance are, through the naming procedure, hoped or thought to transfer onto the named person. But, the interpretation of the word and the name varies. Diamond, I learned, is associated by consumers with “class,” “romance,” “value,” and “a precious object,” as well as “greed”, “conventionality”,

¹⁹ <http://www.johnbetts-fineminerals.com/jhbnyc/gifs/22984.htm>. Translucent octahedral crystal of natural diamond weighing 1.99 carats. The crystal faces show the typical trigons and striations found in diamonds. The color is gray with minor inclusions, though clearly translucent

²⁰ <http://www.aeroartsphoto.com/gal-field.html> - Baseball Field for City of Lakewood

²¹ <http://www.guntheranderson.com/cards/apr97/eman.htm>. This particular deck came about as the result of a fashion photography feature published in the Italian magazine *Moda*. The image on each card not only mirrors the shape of the suit symbol, but often mirrors the card’s value itself as well.... the eight photographs of the model are arrayed in a diamond on the Eight of Diamonds

²² see <http://www.ghetto-fabulous.com>. Retrieved January 15, 1005. Ghetto Fabulous, is according to the Source dictionary an adjective describing “something good, as in . Living the good life like a gangsta. “Did you see that e-class? Ghetto-fabulous!” (<http://www.thesource4ym.com/teenlingo/index.asp?Letter=G> retrieved July 10, 2005)

“suburbanism” or “pretentiousness”.²³ In each instance, diamond is interpreted by focusing on a selected set of its infinite aspects; the quality or qualities one focuses upon is context driven and individuated.

From Free Rock to Expensive Jewel

In the mid-fifteenth century, defying sumptuary laws prohibiting women from wearing diamonds, King Charles VII of France gave a diamond pendent to his mistress Agnes Sorel. She, in a singular bold and prescient act, accepted and started wearing the diamond. It was partly the radical nature of this that made it so attractive, and she was soon emulated by those around her. Sorel is widely credited with starting a trend in the French courts of women wearing diamonds given to them by men.

Not always having the meanings it has today, the association of diamonds with romance, gender, status and glamour is the result of a particular historical trajectory. The Dravidians of India seemed to have known of diamonds in the 7th or 8th century BC, but even as late as 4BC when Buddhist texts frequently contained references to diamond as a well-known precious stone, there are few clues as to where it was found, mined, or how it may have been worked or used, or what it meant (Dickinson 1965). There are references to diamond in the Bible, but scholars debate whether its authors may have either confused diamond with some other mineral or meant magnetite, corundum or rock crystal quartz in terms that were subsequently translated as diamond. Debates about whether authors

²³ Of course the name “Diamond” may be operating in accordance with diamond’s formal qualities of shimmering and hardness just as well as any combination of symbolic cultural associations such as preciousness, invulnerability, magic, healing, protection, and/or virility. Or none of these. It is not my goal here to provide The meaning of diamond (generic) or Diamond (as a name), but rather to explore the multitude of meanings and to explore the relationship of those meanings to the signifying vehicle of the word “diamond,” or the physical mineral substance.

meant diamond or some other substance abound with respect to other texts, up to and including Pliny's *Natural History*, a source often credited as one of the earliest textual depictions of diamond as an object of material culture.²⁴

Greek, Indian and Chinese legends allude to the value and magical qualities that diamonds were thought to possess. Diamonds were for men, believed to produce strength or power, and used as poisoning or healing agents, as well as lauded for their practical capacity as a cutting or bead-drilling tool. Through a kind of contagious magic, diamond was thought to impute virility to men both on the battlefield and in the bedroom. The fantastical story of how Alexander the Great rescued a stockpile of diamonds from a pit guarded by snakes, as well as a similar tale detailing how Sinbad the Sailor escaped Diamond Valley, are almost universally related in books on the lore and history of diamonds. The repetition of other legends, such as the naming of the large 108.93 carat Indian Koh-i-Noor (Mountain of Light), the discovery of diamond in South Africa by young Erasmus Jacob, and the extraction of famous diamonds like the Cullinan from the ground, are ubiquitously found in authoritative texts which contribute to construction and reproduction of the diamond industry's mythical history as a sequence of wondrous and spectacular incidents. The relating of such events is coupled with a widespread hagiographic tone in biographic depictions of successful magnates such as Cecil Rhodes, Barney Barnato and now, members of the Oppenheimer family (Sir Ernest, Harry, Nicky and Jonathan). These stories in part reflect the significance of diamond in contemporary society, but the presence of such legends may say more about the complex world of

²⁴ See the Museum of Natural History website for discussion of diamonds in Pliny's *Natural History*. <http://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/diamonds/name.html>.

signification in which the authors live than about the evolution of the diamond world, which, in the end, must start with the story itself.

Reading the History of Diamonds

The contours of the commodity chain, including the black market, is, of course, the result of a series of historical events which have been depicted from many perspectives in a variety of genres. Literature on the history of diamond production can be divided into three groups: a) insider accounts, b) popular or journalistic works, and c) scholarly treatments (which contain a very small body of anthropological work specifically concerned with the contemporary diamond industry) which contribute to the overall construction of the diamond industry and shape the landscape of consumption. Post-1880's historical work (after the South African diamond rush began) is complicated, no matter the main focus, by a need to pay heed to the rise of De Beers, which is the primary factor molding industry dynamics, from prospecting to mining to distribution to cutting and polishing to marketing to retail sales. As a 47th street retailer put it when I asked him about the relationship of De Beers to the industry, "*De Beers is the diamond industry.*"

- *Insider accounts*

While recent research, in keeping with trends across the social sciences and humanities, tends to locate the diamond industry within the larger political-economy, older accounts written by "insiders" such miners and travelers in India, as in the journal of the famed French merchant Jean Baptiste Tavernier (Tavernier 1676), and by visitors to Brazil (Burton 1869, Mawe 1812, Pearson 1926) and South Africa (Birch 1899, K. 1872, O'Meara 1926) flamboyantly depict adventures from the early days of the rushes.

Writers discuss their travails in getting to fields, scoundrels and scandals they met with when there and stories of how the various sites were discovered and opened up for mining mainly in South Africa or Brazil. (A singular account by the Arkansas Diamond Company (1908) details the discovery of diamonds in Pike Country, Arkansas.²⁵) More recently, the search for and struggle for control over diamond fields in Canada has received much attention by those involved in prospecting and developing those areas (see Hart 2002, Froelich 19xx). Ex-security agents penned heroic accounts of guarding mine booty, including novels such as “Diamonds are Forever” and a non-fictional account of the De Beers Security Service by former agent Ian Fleming (see du Plessis 1960, Fleming 1956, 1957). The subject of Fleming’s book, Sir Percy Sillitoe, wrote his own autobiography focusing on his stint (as former head of the British MI5) masterminding the De Beers International Diamond Security Organization that was charged with halting African IDB (illicit diamond buying) (Sillitoe 1955). There are even a few autobiographies by diamantaires involved with, and deeply embittered by, their relationship to De Beers (Joris 1986, Wharton-Tiger 1987).

Taken together, these personal accounts portray an exciting and fabulous world of intrigue and secrecy. Today’s industry (in discourse) is a little more businesslike, transparent and can be tracked, at least on a superficial level, by the public since some aspects are visible in weekly reports and newsletters. Print and web-based publications such as Jewelers' Circular-Keystone, The Mining Journal, Rapaport’s Diamonds.net, IDEX.Com, National Jeweler, and InfoMine Diamond Digest deal exclusively with the

²⁵ The Arkansas diamond mine would become a point of controversy when Harry Oppenheimer via Anglo controlled it and sabotaged it etc etc see Epstein for story so that the US would have to keep buying bort from him during WWII.

machinations of diamond production. Most notable is the Rapaport Report, or the “Rap,” put out by Martin Rapaport, which is a central source of industry and mining news, technological advances, rough and polished availability, market demand and sales, advertising trends, retail events, tradeshow announcements, and price information. The Rap is used in diamond markets world-wide as the basis for establishing inter-dealer prices. Editorials by Martin Rapaport himself often deal with political and economic matters, as well as with changes in the organization of the industry.



Figure 1-2 Martin Rapaport, Chairman of The Rapaport Group

- *Popular, journalistic literature*

Books for general readership on the history and contemporary workings of the industry such as Epstein’s multiple publications about De Beers (Epstein 1982a, 1982b), serve as good introductions to the workings of the industry. Harlow’s edited edition of *The History of Diamonds* (Harlow 1998), published in conjunction with the 1998 exhibit at New York’s Museum of Natural History, contains detailed entries on everything from diamond formation, to famous jewels, to synthetic stones to the history of jewelry.

Journalists have explored the intersection of the industry with global political economy

²⁶ http://www.diamants-infos.com/en/polished/index.php?rub=calculate_diamond_prices. January 11, 2005. Rapaport trained in Antwerp, and then in 1975 moved to NY where he worked as a broker of rough and polished diamond. He started the Rapaport Diamond Price List, called “Rap” or “the List,” available by subscription only to professions, in 1978.

and violence, some walking a thin line between criticizing and mythologizing the De Beers empire (Kanfer 1993), while others are extremely derogatory (Roberts 2003). The emergence of campaigns in the form of TV ads, a print notices, and a boycott threat against “conflict” or “blood diamonds” by the NGOs Partnership Canada Africa and Global Witness²⁷ beginning in the late 1990’s provoked journalistic and governmental interest in the black market for gems and weapons, particularly as related to “terrorist” organizations such as Al Qaeda.²⁸

“Blood diamonds” or “conflict diamond” are gems from which proceeds resulting from sale on the black market are used to buy weapons and to fund violence. As defined by the UN, conflict diamonds are those that “originate from areas controlled by forces or factions opposed to legitimate and internationally recognized governments, and are used to fund military action in opposition to those governments, or in contravention of the decisions of the Security Council²⁹.” The term “blood diamonds” is particularly associated with late 1990’s Sierra Leonean rough traded on black and grey markets in Liberia and were at one time thought to make up anywhere from 3-15% of gems sold on the retail market³⁰ (see Campbell 2002, Hart 2001, Levy 2003, Hirsch 2001).

Regardless of the NGO campaign and press coverage, consumers I spoke with had uneven awareness of “blood diamonds.” For example, during an interview with

²⁷ See Ian Smillie 2000, and copious articles and pamphlets published by Partnership Canada Africa and Global Witness, and in mainstream newspapers and news magazines.

²⁸ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks, known as the 9/11 Commission, found that blood diamonds played no role in financing al Qaeda. This finding is disputed by Global Witness.

²⁹ <http://www.un.org/peace/africa/Diamond.html>. March 05. 2005.

³⁰ Rough from Sierra Leone is highly coveted due to its excellent color and quality.

Melissa, a clothing and shoe designer, she explained why she now actively refuses to buy or to wear diamonds as a result of their association with war, which she had first learned about from media coverage and then from a neighbor who is a Sierra Leonean refugee. Others I talked with had never heard of blood diamonds, or had just a very faint idea about them. I asked wall-streeter Tim, who said he had done extensive research prior to buying his fiancée an engagement diamond, what he thought about it. He said, “*Conflict diamonds? Blood diamonds? Never heard of ‘em. Oh wait, I think I saw something at the jewelry store...but hhhmmm, wait! Oh, no, I don’t know what that is. Oh hold on, I think it’s something illegal or something, something about an embargo or something in west Africa? I have no idea...*”³¹ Lots of people reported having seen the TV program “Diamonds of War”³², and were dismayed to discover the dark side of the trade.

Some who wear diamonds, maintain attitudes complicated by knowledge of the realities of blood diamonds’ role in civil war. For example, Deborah, a park ranger, wears a diamond but told me that, “*personally I don’t want to support the exploitation involved and also the myth. I wish everyone would find about what those people do in Sierra Leone and then the diamond would mean something different.....something real – what they really stand for is exploitation. But people don’t care – they don’t value that.*”³³ Even for industry insiders, however, confirming that diamonds come from conflict-free hands is not a simple matter.

³¹ Excerpts from consumer narratives are marked by the use of italics.

³² Diamonds Of War is a National Geographic documentary by journalist Dominic Cunningham-Reid which airs with some regularity in New York. The documentary details the channels and dangers of diamond trafficking in Sierra Leone.

³³ This narrative is again discussed in Chapter 6, in the context of a semiotic analysis.

Journalist and NGO attention to blood diamonds brought about the coagulation of an international organization, the Kimberley Process, consisting of governmental, NGO and industry representatives. The goal of the Kimberley Process has been to stymie the flow of “conflict stones” whose monetary value piggybacks upon market conditions created by the architecture of the global industry. The Kimberley Process, which is supposed to work through self-regulation by countries that have signed on, mandates that every stone be certified as to origin and through whose possession they have traveled. Additionally, the U.S. Congress held hearings before drafting laws such as the “Clean Diamonds Trade Act” prohibit importing uncertified diamonds (see United States 2001). As an extension of this posture, the Patriot Act includes a provision for the prohibition of diamonds that have been involved with “terrorist” activity. As civil war in Sierra Leone, the region most actively associated with “blood diamonds” has been suppressed, both conflict stones and blood diamonds once linked with African civil war or territorial disputes have been re-named “development diamonds” by De Beers.

- *Scholarly books and articles*

Scholarly work on the diamond industry, based on research from fields outside of anthropology such as economics, history, literary criticism and political science survey vast tracts of time and space, or concentrate on the history of production either within a specific locale or during a narrow slice of time. Much attention, for example, has been directed to the study of capital and labor on the early South African diamond fields (Josiah 1998, Krause 1986, Martins 1980, Turrell 1987, Worger 1987). Historians place the emergence of the diamond industry within larger social and political contexts, but the actions of a few individuals with unusual vision, business acumen, charisma, and maybe

a little bit of luck, have often been cast as monolithically responsible for the formation of the largest and most successful commodity monopoly in the world. Taken together, these texts suggest that the trajectory of industry development was directed by a few lucky and well-connected individuals.

Recent works on contemporary diamond production contain detailed considerations of local and global politics, economic strategies, labor practices, constructions of race and ethnicity, personal biography, specific corporate histories and the impact of technologies upon the overall industry (see representative work by Arnold 1997, Bergenstock 2001, Carstens 2001, Cockburn 2000, Gregory 1977, Harlow 1998, le Billion 2001, Pointon 1999, Psomiades 1999, Stringer 1984, Szenberg 1973, Worger 1987). Anthropologists also consider these issues, but add ethnographic methods to connect large scale dynamics to local experiences.

Anthropological work dealing directly with the trade and/or the consumption of diamonds is limited, but existing materials are both inventive and instructive. Anthropologists have situated the diamond trade, both legal and by black market, in local and national African contexts, particularly with respect the growing body of work on the political economy of violence (Richards 1996, Mbabazi et al 2002) or on identity and class / group formation. For example, William Crane's research with Congolese évolués, or "evolved ones," places the emergence of a class of people whose lifestyles imitated those of Europeans in the context of burgeoning industries such as that founded upon the alluvial diamond fields of the Kasai (Crane 1965). More recent work relates the impact of diamond traffic on cultural meanings, commodities, money and identities in southwestern Congo-Zaire: focusing on the emergence of new social groups, De Beock's research

deals pointedly with the widespread phenomenon of the *bana Lunda*' (the children of Lunda'), young Congolese urbanites who travel from all over southwestern Zaire to the Angolan province of Lunda Norte in order to dig or dive for diamonds in UNITA-controlled territories (De Beock 1998). These two articles, spanning over 35 years, demonstrate how Western demand for diamonds has exerted continuing influence over local cultural activities, social formations and economies in areas of Africa where rough diamonds are mined. As a result, efforts to educate Africans involved in mining or other aspects of the diamond industry as to what happens to these products once they reach American consumers is ongoing.

The diamond trade was once run largely by Jewish men. Though this is changing, the trade remains, heavily gendered and ethnicized. Work on polished diamond production and trade has focused on issues of ethnicity and gender, such as Indian discourses in the male dominated Jain trade (Westwood 2000), payment and employment trends related to kinship and ethnicity in *hara karigars* (diamond laborers) working in the polishing industry in Surat (Engelshoven 1999), and kinship capitalism and the role of women in New York's Hasidic and Orthodox 47th street trade (Shields 2002).

Westwood has written on both diamond production and marketing; most germane to my project on diamond consumerism is her analysis of De Beers marketing strategy. She argues that time is a key component in how consumers are interpolated by ads. Westwood defines and brings to the fore contrasts and disconnects between several types of temporal constructions, such as sentimentalist "diamond time" which encapsulates romance versus capitalist "labor time", required for the production of diamond commodities (Westwood 2002). How diamonds are understood by people located at

various sites in the production chain can vastly differ; many people I interviewed in New York have little or no knowledge of the realities of diamond production and so the “labor time” that Westwood identifies does not figure into their diamond purchasing or consumption. In looking more closely at this “politics of disconnection” from the perspective of the consumer, a recent study found no statistically significant relationship between knowledge about the history and impact of the diamond industry in Africa and the purchase intentions and behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes of in a sample of African American diamond consumers (Bratton 2001). My own work echoes Bratton’s conclusions, finding variable the impact of knowledge about diamonds origins and production on interpretations of specific gems.

Anthropologists have also examined the relationship between diamond consuming and status. Grounded in evolutionarily bent sexual selection literature, a positive relationship between the price of diamonds in engagement rings to income has been posited: “If a man can afford to dress as well as a peacock, he is probably not poor. If he gives you a very large diamond, he is likely to be rich. The more they can spend, the more they must have” (Miller 2000:123). The idea that engagement diamond ring cost correlates with male income has been, however, thoroughly undermined by the demonstration that “ring costs vary much less than male income, with many males from all over the wealth spectrum buying rings that cost roughly the same amount despite wide variations in their incomes” (Cronk and Dunham 2003: 10).³⁴ This is not to say that

³⁴ Cronk and Dunham (Cronk and Dunham 2003) discovered that for their Franklin County, Ohio mail survey sample, the mean diamond engagement ring cost was \$3,857.55, which was calculated at a mean of 11% of the man’s salary, hardly the 2-3 months that the diamond industry suggests one spend. Interestingly, the study found that ring costs were positively correlated with courtship lengths.

people do not at times try to read or use diamond engagement rings as wealth indicators, but it does suggest that they are very poor indicators of income. Though diamonds are sometimes heralded as luxury items par excellence, my research also found that consumers tend to only warily read others' diamonds as straight indicators of status.

The story of the industry is in many ways the story of the contemporary global political and economic landscape: imperialism; industrialization; World Wars, and civil wars; finance, depression, tax and privatization; technological advances; and consumerism/marketing techniques are key factors shaping the diamond industry, diamond consumerism and the world in which they take place. The presence of polished, graded diamonds in the possession over 70% of American women was a long time in coming, and the result of contingencies far flung in both time and space.

The Rise of Diamonds

Most gem quality diamonds today come from highly mechanized mines in Africa, Russia, Australia, and Canada and are largely under the control of a single corporate empire. Diamonds were occasionally found in Borneo before they were discovered in Goa, India around the 7th or 8th century BC (Spencer et. al. 1988). Indian finds were alluvial, the original source of the diamonds having never been located. As a result, diamond mining never became a high production industry there (though there was a cutting industry, the remnants of which have now been successfully revived). Even during its peak in the late 1600's, India produced only about 50 - 100,000 carats per year, only a small percentage of which were gem quality. At the time, there existed no need for "industrial" diamonds so the remainder were used as abrasives for drilling beads or just

discarded (Levinson 1998, see also Gorelick and Gwinnet 1988). The significance of India as a diamond center was eclipsed when they were discovered in South America.

Primarily of Brazilian origin, but also from Venezuela and Guyana, South America is still producing diamonds. Around 1730, diamonds were discovered in Minas Gerais, Brazil when, coincidentally, Indian diamond production seemed to be drying up. Brazilian *garimpiros* (miners) recognized the small, greasy-looking stones that gold miners were discarding were not worthless bits of quartz, but diamonds.

At the time, the Brazilian state was controlled by Portugal. The Portuguese crown took control of the growing diamond industry by enacting a license and head taxation over miners and their slaves before creating, in 1739, a closed contract system in which only designated companies could acquire diamonds. Diamonds could only be sold to the king (either directly or through a credit contractor in Lisbon). A decade later, the Crown canceled all of the contracts and got into production itself, making royal cashiers (*caixas*) responsible for counting and grading diamonds sent to be sorted for distribution in Lisbon.³⁵ The Crown even built a “fence” around the diamond district in an attempt to stymie the movement of people and diamonds within and in and out of the region (see Bernstein 1986). Augmenting its role as owner of all diamonds, the Crown added to its powers control over all sales of diamonds in Lisbon. It was through control over both production and distribution that the Crown was able to regulate prices to its English, French and Dutch buyers.

³⁵ The Portuguese crown achieved this by executing a series of extreme regulations through its representative, the Super-Intendant Marquis of Pombal, that were codified in the infamous “Book with the Green Cover.”

Over time, more effective diamond production was developed and other Brazilian diamond bearing sites were located. The small size, high value and easy portability of diamonds made them among the most easily smuggled and most attractive reservoirs of finance around. Much as it is today, because of profit appeal, serious “leakages” to the rigid system of production and distribution developed and a healthy contraband market, operating “outside” of the licit Portuguese-controlled channel emerged. Workers sometimes sold rough diamonds to smugglers going to Europe who could sell them on the black market there. Of course, there really are no reliable figures outlining the extent of the contraband trade and there were attempts to stop the hemorrhage of diamonds out of Brazil through illegal channels, but the operations of the legitimate crown industry was so lucrative that the existence of the illegal trade remained a relatively minor issue.

Following independence from Portugal, Brazil created less stringent regulations in an effort to step up production, though all diamonds remained the property of the state. By 1850, laws encouraged freer enterprise by miners, that while decreasing contraband trade, also lessened governmental ability to fix prices, set leases, and determine site rental. Eventually, as a result of regulations and increasing scarcity of stone, production in Brazil decreased dramatically, even as demand was on the rise (Bernstein 1986).

Portugal’s general approach to control mining, human activity within and around diamondiferous fields, rough distribution, polish and sales would eventually be replicated by De Beers. It is interesting to note a similarity in the process by which the Portuguese slowly integrated backwards, and then forwards, their control over diamonds and the structures and plans De Beers currently has in place. The up-and-coming De Beers

branding strategy is just the latest of their moves towards total control in production, distribution and sales. The democratization of the diamond had begun.

There were two important consequences of the discovery and subsequent influx of diamonds into Europe as a result of the Brazilian rush. When diamonds were coming out of India, they were few and highly prized, remaining the reserve of the elite. With increased availability, diamonds became accessible to far greater numbers, and due to the flooding of the market by oversupply, lower prices made them affordable. European royalty became unable or unwilling to absorb all the available gems, and an emerging bourgeois class started buying the stones (and other “luxury” items).

When Brazilian finds began drying up, the supply to European and American consumers was severely diminished. Cutting and polishing industries that had developed in Antwerp and Amsterdam, and even France, were experiencing shortages in rough. How would the industry survive? But as in 1730 when Indian diamond mining was winding down and diamond was fortuitously discovered in Brazil, diamonds were found in South Africa just in time to take over production from the dying Brazilian industry.

Legend has it that in 1867, a game hunter was handed a large and conspicuously glittering stone by the Boer farmer Schalk van Neikerk that had been found by his 15 year old neighbor, Erasmus Jacobs, among the pebbles in the Orange River near the settlement of Hopetown. Variations on this story are found in dozens of publications, but what seems certain is that the 21.25 ct. stone, now known as the “Eureka,” was eventually identified by government officials as diamond and displayed at the Paris World Exhibition that year.

Oddly enough, not much happened next. There were rumors that the stone, and a few others from the same area, had been planted there (a fraud technique known as “salting,” which deigns to create the impression of diamoniferous land that is then sold to top bid), so no one rushed the site. Soon afterwards, another diamondiferous area was identified nearby, but also virtually ignored. These alluvial sites, like those in Brazil, were “river diggings”: water, it was understood later, had over the years eroded diamond deposits and carried the stones downstream. In 1870, a primary deposit, a kimberlite pipe, was discovered between the Vaal and Modder rivers in the Orange Free State: the rush was on! This site became the Kimberley Mine.³⁶ Another diamond pipe was then found on the estate of brothers D.A. and J.N. De Beer. When other primary deposit discoveries soon followed, major changes in the nature of the industry were underway.

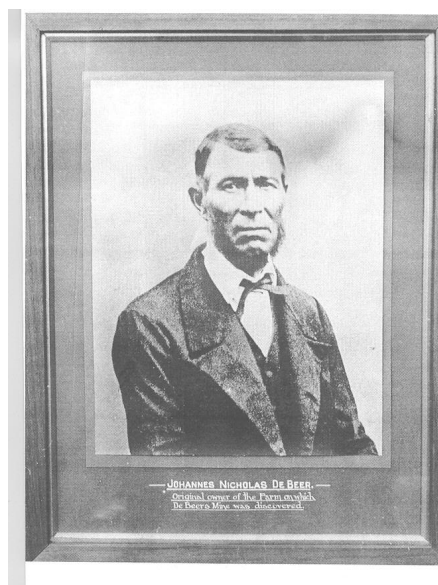


Figure 1-3 Johannes Nicholas De Beer. From the J. Walter Thompson De Beers Archives at Duke.

³⁶ This site would eventually become the “Big Hole” of Kimberley.

Because diamond bearing pipes had never been located prior to the South African finds, workers were at first unaware that the crumbly yellow and then bluish rock in which the diamonds were ensconced was actually the matrix within which they had been brought to the earth's surface. Miners worked claims down to the blue and then sold out, not knowing that the prospects for diamond was actually enhanced, not diminished, by digging downwards. By all accounts, the early years of the rush in the remote and desolate South African lands were wild and woolly. Access to fields required long and difficult travel, though thousands came from Great Britain and elsewhere to strike it rich. Diggers formed committees, creating rules and regulations in an attempt to prevent centralized control, while local governments tried to develop and enforce laws. In 1871, the British declared Griqualand West a British Crown Colony and instead of taking all ownership and control of the diamonds as the Portugese and Brazilians had done, digger committees, and their rules, such as in keeping with alluvial digging practices limited claim size to 31 x 31 feet and prohibited corporate groupings, were legitimized. As it became clear, however, that diamonds were not just on the surface but also under the ground in the carrot shaped pipes, individuals struggled to mine their claims, and eventually limitations on claim size and corporate groupings fell into disuse.³⁷

³⁷ The discovery of the volcanic tuff or pipes by a German geologist in 1872 was the first step in rationalizing the search for diamonds by looking for geological markers, a process which has turned out to be extremely productive.

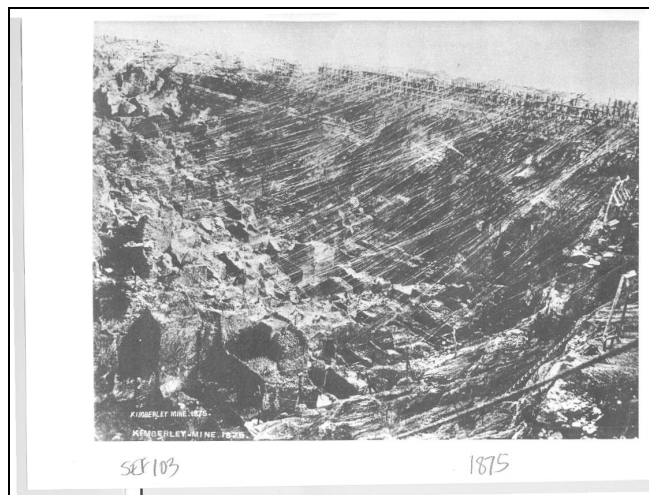


Figure 1-4 The Kimberley Mine, 1875. (From J. Walter Thompson De Beers archives at Duke University)

The Kimberley Mine would turn out to be crucial in defining the contemporary industry. As diggers began to move downwards and across a large area of 38,000 square feet, eventually to a depth of 122 meters, at uneven rates, the mine became more and more unmanageable. Thin dirt walls separating claims collapsed, debris from one level fell into the next, and rain and ground water created mud and pools that had to be pumped out. Thousands of ropes were installed to haul the miners and buckets of earth and water to and from the claims, so that eventually the entire area was crisscrossed in a huge spider web of rigging and heavy machinery. As it became increasingly dangerous and expensive to move men, water and diamonds in and out of the mine, business opportunities developed.

Rhodes and Barnato

The conditions that reigned during the initial formation of the South African mining industry, including the rise of De Beers, has been documented in detail (Carstens 2001, Chilvers 1939, Kanfer 1993, Newbury 1989, Robertson 1974, Turrell 1987,

Wheatcroft 1987, Worger 1987). It is helpful to have a general idea about the rise of De Beers, the singular monopoly that makes possible diamond consumption in the U.S.

Water was one of the biggest problems at Kimberley. Clean drinking water was scarce, and dirty water filling up the claims was abundant, with few effective methods of removing it. John Cecil Rhodes, future head of De Beers Consolidated Mining, seized upon the water problem, investing in and renting out steam pumps at huge profits. Rhodes' claims and pump business were very prosperous, and with his monies he began purchasing mining sites and designing a company.

While Rhodes was busy buying up claims at the De Beers pipe and incorporating the De Beers Mining Company during the 1880's, consolidation of companies at the nearby Kimberley mine was underway. There were then only two major shareholding corporations at Kimberley: Kimberley Central, owned by the Barnato Brothers, and The Compagnie Française des Mines de Diamante du Cap, known as "The French Company." The French Company owned the largest portion of the Kimberley pipe.

By 1888, Rhodes' company had succeeded in taking over all production at the De Beers pipe, in accord with his early pronouncements indicating that he wanted "nothing less than the adaptation of the supply of rough diamonds to the market-dependent world demand by means of centralizing the control of production" (Lenzen 1965:155). As demand fluctuated, supply would be adjusted: it was Rhodes' aim to obtain, through price-fixing at a level maximally above production costs effected through a collective monopolization, a "stabilizing fund" that could cover normal costs in the event of a drop in demand created by economic recession (*ibid.*). This basic premise is a feature which has defined the De Beers enterprise to this day.

A capitalist and an imperialist, Rhodes hoped to use revenue generated by manipulation of diamond pricing to re-colonize the whole of Africa and beyond for Great Britain. Unlike many diamantiars who have a romantic affection for the stones themselves, Rhodes was strictly practical: profits from the diamond industry were to be used in advancing the grandeur of England. Once Rhodes acquired a controlling interest in De Beers, he applied and was granted a powerful charter from the South African Colonial Office that gave him power not only to build mines, but to develop railroads, lay telegraph wires, annex territories, raise armies and install governments.

Cecil Rhodes is depicted in most accounts, most unflatteringly, as a hard working visionary but also as deeply misogynistic, stiff, and calculating. Writers often remark on his unattractive personality and his high, squeaky voice that irritated those around him. This depiction stands in stark contrast to that of his main rival, Barney Barnato.

Barnett Isaacs a.k.a., Barney Barnato, son of a London rabbi, had followed his brother Harry to South Africa in hopes of making his fortune. He arrived in 1873 with a load of defective cigars which he sold to diggers in the fields. A Barnumesque spirit was manifest in his various money-making schemes, such as setting up boxing matches in which men paid him to have a go with him. He performed in a cabaret, sold liquor, and invested the money he made in imaginative trading plots. Practically every biographical account of Barnato illustrates a scrappy, creative and brash risk-taker, whose charismatic personality simultaneously elicited suspicion and friendship, allowing him to sell wares for big profits and convincing others to follow his lead. Eventually Barnato learned how to deal diamonds, and bought a claim in the Kimberley pit. Almost immediately, the claim began to produce. With the money he made from dealing, he acquired more claims,

taking chances on spots others had given up on. His strategy worked. He was eventually able to, through a series of deals and promises, amass enough capital and position to take over the Kimberley Central Company, a miners conglomerate at the Kimberley mine.

Rhodes and Barnato despised one another. Rhodes viewed the inventive Barnato as a talented hoodlum, whereas Barnato thought Rhodes an overeducated and snobbish prig. In 1888, the two magnates came to heads. Rhodes, with his monopoly strategy in mind, cast his eye upon Kimberley. He was well connected in the banking world and was able to secure enough backing to bring about a merger/takeover of the French Company. Barnato, upon hearing about the bid, attempted to mount a counter offer. This led to talks between Rhodes and Barnato during which Rhodes convinced Barnato that competitive bidding would only benefit the French Company. Rhodes persuaded Barnato to sign a deal which would allow Rhodes to buy out the French Company's section of Kimberley for his lower bid of £ 1,400,000, which he would then sell to Barnato in exchange for £ 300,000 plus 20% of the Barnato Brothers' Kimberley holdings. Barnato agreed, and believed he was safe from Rhodes' advances, but Rhodes, with the help of financiers in London and the dumping of diamonds from the De Beers field onto the market to lower prices, started buying up shares of Barnato's company. Rhodes eventually positioned himself to take over the entire Kimberley mine. Barnato resisted, but eventually had no choice but to acquiesce. A second deal gave Barnato a lifetime appointment in the newly formed De Beers Consolidated Mines.

Rhodes' De Beers then took over the rest of the companies mining in South African mines. By 1889, Rhodes controlled 90% of the entire world output of diamonds, but took lessons of the past one step further. Although production had been managed

through centralized authorities in both India and Brazil to good end, Rhodes' basic principals were aimed towards central control, not just of production, but also of marketing and sales. This would take some time: in 1889 the Diamond Pool Committee, or "syndicate," was established by about 10 dealer firms in London, 3 of which were major shareholders in De Beers and held a combined interest of 58% in the marketing group (De Beers eventually took over the syndicate). The group's job was to make up boxes of assorted quality goods for sale at fixed prices and check them against offers from other buyers. There are striking similarities between the operations of the Diamond Pool Committee and those of the contemporary Diamond Trading Company that grew out of it (see Chapter 4); the latter now holds London "sights" where about 60% of available global rough is distributed to invited clients.

De Beers survived Rhodes' death in 1920. Ernest Oppenheimer was the next to head up the syndicate. It was through a number of clever property acquisitions and cross-holding arrangements that Oppenheimer's Anglo-American Corporation was able to acquire major interest in De Beers and then, in 1929, with the help of personal friendships, Oppenheimer had himself appointed Chairman. Sir Ernest hired the N.W. Ayer Company in 1938 to take control of the marketing of diamonds to Americans.

De Beers Today

The successful Oppenheimer legacy persists: Sir Ernest died in 1957 and was succeeded by his son Harry Oppenheimer. Harry Oppenheimer became chairman of Anglo American Corporation and of De Beers Consolidated Mines until he retired from those positions in 1982 and 1984 respectively. His son, Nicky Oppenheimer, became

Deputy Chairman of Anglo in 1983 and Chairman of De Beers in 1998.³⁸ Grandson Jonathan serves managing director and holds other executive positions in the empire. The apparent nepotism in De Beers' upper echelons is reiterated at every level of the industry; families and networks of friends employ one another in a business where employee trust is an absolute necessity. Loyalties and commonality of goal have kept the syndicate together for over a century, though changes in rough production, the global political economy, and the efforts of a few enterprising individuals outside of De Beers are creating strains in the monopoly. The growth of the polishing industry in India, discovery of diamonds in Australia and Canada, loss of control over some Russian goods, threat of damage to the industry by public relations campaigns against "conflict diamonds," in addition to more minor threats against the industry caused by the Clean Diamonds Act and the Patriot Act have lead to the development of new strategies by De Beers such as enacting privatization, new "supplier of choice" (SOC) sight protocols, brand name marketing, and entering into a retail partnership with LVMH.

The architecture of the privately held, globally dimensioned De Beers/Anglo American empire is complex, with numerous subsidiaries and cross-owned companies making the untangling of the syndicate a major undertaking. Having said that, it remains clear that De Beers operates in every node of the commodity chain from mine production, to rough diamond distribution, to preparation and cutting to marketing and retail sales.

³⁸ Nicky Oppenheimer (and family) of De Beers is ranked # 72 on Forbes Magazine's list of billionaires, with a net worth of \$6 billion. But Oppenheimer isn't the only diamond industry executive listed in the top 691 of the world's wealthiest. [Reflecting the loosening of De Beers' stranglehold on the industry,] competing diamond mogul Lev Leviev, along with 14 others, has been ranked at # 228 with a net worth of \$2.6 billion in Forbes' annual survey. (Rapaport News rapmaillist@sendmail.diamonds.net 3/18/2005)

Some informants had little or no knowledge about where diamond is mined or how it is produced since as with most other commodities, people have neither the time nor the inclination to seek this information, but others used what they did know about it to inform interpretations of their diamonds.

Conclusion

How consumers configure diamonds as a commodity is affected by the use of the term “diamond” in discursive domains a seemingly distant from one another as poetry, sports and soap operas. This chapter has traced the serendipitous path diamonds took as objects of magic, to male associated amulets, to jewelry for women as well as the construction of the industry and its magnates from a variety of perspectives within which De Beers is the epicenter. And now, whether suspicious or laudatory, consumers sometimes draw upon their understanding of De Beers, as the preeminent corporation in the industry, and the history of diamond gemstones to inform overall semioses. Although the landscape within which consumerism takes place is shaped by narratives of its deep history, more influential on individuals is the impact of advertising and marketing and local context. In order to develop a lens through which to engage with narratives of diamond consumerism touching as they do upon history, corporatism, advertising and otherwise, the following chapter develops a theoretical frame concerned with how paying attention to the ways in which consumers encounter diamonds as meaningful commodities, as signs, will elucidate diamonds’ role in the everyday.

CHAPTER 2 THE MEANING OF OBJECTS: FRAMING DIAMOND CONSUMPTION THROUGH EXAMINING WHAT KINDS OF SIGNS CONSUMERS TAKE DIAMONDS TO BE

What kinds of signs do consumers take diamonds to be?

A sign is a meaning-carrying entity. Signs can be linguistic, imagistic or material; words, photographs and commodities are examples of signs. Signs can carry single or multiple meanings. There are various ways that signs can carry the meaning or meanings that they have. Through signs, people make and understand their world and place themselves and others within it. Diamonds are signs, and that which applies to signs in general applies to diamonds as such.

We know that diamonds, as signs, have meaning, but what are these meanings? Relatedly, how do diamonds acquire those meaning, and how do consumers use diamonds to mean themselves, to impute themselves, into the world? How do people bring their own experiences to bear upon making meaning of diamonds? Most Americans are familiar with the “diamonds are forever” campaign, but interviews revealed a surprising extent to which consumers bring local context and contingency to bear upon interpretation. I did not expect, for example, for people to talk about diamonds’ molecular structures, the use of them as props in fantasies, or as metaphors for others’ personalities. Some resort to standard, socially circulated tropes, in saying things such as “*oh, diamonds just mean love.*” I wondered, how might such disparate meanings containing memory, imagination, metaphorical rhetoric, considerations of the formal, even geological, characteristics of diamond and its production chain, in addition marketing discourse, all be contained under a single rubric of analysis. This chapter explores how

diamond consumerism can be understood through existing scholarship before turning to a semiotic approach for examining consumer experience through analysis of semiotic strategies. Understanding how consumers go about interpreting diamonds as signs ultimately contributes to our understanding of consumers themselves as creative subjects.

In interviews, consumers reported treating diamonds through at least four modalities of meaning-making, or “semiosis.”³⁹ In addition to lessons learned by examining social, symbolic or political facets of consumerism as others have done, this chapter will discuss how attention to commodities as signs enhances the ability to discern complexities of individual consumerism. I identified 4 modes consumers use in treating diamonds as signs, and this chapter defines what is meant by each of these four modes: symbolic (or referential) meaning, plus motivated, poetic and performative meaning (3 non-referential modalities). How these modes play out in narratives is detailed in Chapters Five, Six, Seven and Eight, which each focus upon one these meaning types. Analysis of narratives using an open semiotic approach allows us to understand signing consumers in all of their subjective fullness as agents ensconced in social landscapes rife with discursive formations.

Anthropology and the Study of the Commodity

Various anthropological approaches to consumerism contain general their own aims and suppositions, strengths and contributions. Following these approaches, diamond consumption can be analyzed as exemplary of globalized capitalism by locating the industry in the political-economy, or as a meaningful good within the context of analytic

³⁹ I am aware of the fact there may be other modes of semioses that consumers are using: I have chosen to focus on the four most apparent in my interviews.

categories such as “gift” versus “commodity,” or “need” versus “want,” and “consumer sovereignty.” Research on branding as a retail strategy and on identity politics via brand-name consumerism sheds light on developments in the industry that impact how consumers are taught to wield commodities through marketing. This section examines how each approaches contributes to our understanding of diamond consumerism.

- *Locating diamonds in a wider political economy*

Marxist-inspired consumption studies by scholars representing the Frankfurt School (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944, Benjamin 1969, Krakauer 1924), the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (especially as led by Hall and Jefferson 1975), and the “commodity chain approach” (as initially laid out by Hopkins and Wallerstein 1986) highlight capitalism and the political economy, accentuating commodities as manifestations of an architecture of production in which commodity meanings are linked to exploitative class relations. This approach has been used to examine commodities, for example, clothing, in the context of the global economic circuit and unequal relations between actors within it (see Hansen 2004: 369, 370). Diamonds, as both material objects and ideological constructs, are also embedded as commodities in a system of global capitalism, and as such, the consumption of diamonds is implicated in the reproduction of such relations.

Chapter 4 details the commodity chain that creates diamond gemstones, depicting a landscape within which commodity meaning is produced by consumers. But, meanings that people associate with their own diamonds may or may not have a relationship to knowledge of the production context, and may instead prioritize local considerations not germane to projects focused on explication of political economy. Understanding the

history and architecture of diamond production is crucial to appreciating how they are integrated into larger structural systems, such as labor networks or political relationships, and how they have come to presence in the U.S., but this approach cannot predict what diamonds mean to people “on-the-ground”.

- *Gifts and Commodity*

Diamonds are often acquired within the context of gift-giving, but this does not relieve them of their status as commodities, as entities mass produced by a capitalist system that are sold for profit on the open market in exchange for cash. The notion that there are mutually exclusionary differences between the gift and the commodity can be traced to the *The Gift*, in which Mauss delineates the social construction of objects, including what they mean, by virtue of their context of acquisition (Mauss 1925). Efforts to develop more sensitive approaches to understanding the nature of commodity objects have resulted in pointed attention to the movement and social constructedness of commodities, commodity-hood and commodity-hood’s relationship to alienability (Appadurai 1986, Kopytoff 1986, Gell 1992, Thomas 1991). This present study takes into consideration the trajectory of diamonds from mineral to meaningful objects in everyday lives, but concurs with Dant’s assertion that the context of acquisition (for example, as a gift or as a purchase) does not automatically predict, confer or constrain meaning (Dant 2000). The concept of “inalienability,” in which the exchange and meaning of gifted objects are embedded in social history and relationships (Weiner 1992), helps us to focus on diamonds in terms of their local histories and contingencies as many consumers do, but maintains the notion of a gift/commodity distinction, a factor which may or may not

be a relevant consideration to consumers. Meaning can, as demonstrated in further chapters, emerge from other considerations.

Rather than engage directly with the refinement of theorizing “gifting” versus “commodity” exchange, my contention is that commodities can simply be defined by virtue of manufacture and marketability within a capitalist production framework, and that once commoditized, remain as commodities. Granted, partial commodification (see Radin 1996), or the commodification of “natural” objects might present challenges to this definition, and diamonds, even though they are “natural” resources, are not such a case. To label diamond, a “commodity” highlights the fact that it has been produced, marketed, and cash-exchanged in a capitalist environment. In as much as diamonds are produced in a commodity chain within which consumer interpretation is the terminal stage, their presence as non-marketable items in people’s lives does not vitiate their commodity status. Although diamonds do move in and out of “commodity-hood” in the sense envisioned by Kopytoff (see Kopytoff 1996⁴⁰), the movement of objects in and out of alienability does not erase the fact that they are material and ideological entities produced by a particular political economy. Furthermore, narratives illustrate the fact that while a diamond is a gifted, found, inherited or purchased “commodity,” acquisition context does not necessarily imply anything in particular about the way that people will interpret it.

⁴⁰ Kopytoff argues that commodity-hood is a state, rather than a thing. Commodity status is, then, not a permanent state for most objects. The term “commodity” applies only to certain phases of an objects total trajectory. A commodity is not the object itself, but calling something a commodity points out particular relationships and attitudes that surround the object. As objects become embedded in lives, they may cease to be commodities. In this sense alienability is an aspect of commodity-hood. Once inalienable, an object ceases to be a commodity. Objects thus move in and out of commodity-hood.

- *Needs and wants*

Discussions about social relations, commodityhood and meaning are found throughout the sometimes morally charged consumption debates about what counts as “need” as opposed to “want.” The distinction is predicated upon assumptions about subjectivity with regard to concepts such as consumer “rationality” (Appelbaum 1998, Doyal 1991), the construction of desire and its naturalization via metaphor (Belk 1996), consumer imagination and consumption as an aesthetic reflex (DeNora 2000) and the persistence of aesthetic judgement versus “need” concepts over time (Lehonten 1999). Luxury goods are often understood as status symbols for the wealthy, or those who aspire to be seen as wealthy. “Want” and a kind of hedonistic notion of “need” or “desire” are often associated with “luxury”⁴¹, where luxury items are implicated in the spectacular and performative constitution of social markers such as gender and class (Pointon 1999). Luxury commodities can be analyzed to decipher normative values of society (Berry 1994). But the designation of “luxury” as a labeling practice can suggest more about the values held by social scientists (Hugh-Jones 19xx) than the meanings held by consumers who may or may not subscribe an association between goods, luxury, and status

Diamonds are routinely linked with luxury in American society, and the idea that diamonds are frivolous expenses rather than objects meeting a legitimate need is a view expressed by some consumers. But even if we accept a delineation between need versus want, and the related association of luxury with desire, it is unclear whether diamonds are truly “luxury” goods when we consider the fact that diamonds come in every price range and the majority of American women own at least one diamond. The diamond industry

⁴¹ The term “luxury” is derived from the Latin *luxuria*, meaning “lust,” “frolicsomeness,” “frivolous”.

has tried to insert them into American ideals about courtship rituals as a must, as a “need,” while simultaneously fostering the idea that diamonds are luxurious. Interviews with consumers suggest that this strategy has been fairly successful as diamonds are viewed paradoxically as both necessary and luxurious (un-necessary). Some see diamonds “*requirement*” that they actually resent. The delineation between need versus want as held by consumers and as constructed by the industry, reflects more about American society and how people judge one another, in terms such as conformity or aspiration, than it does about the objective possibility of assigning such a distinction to diamonds themselves.

- *Consumer sovereignty*

Clearly, saying things like “*diamonds are for rich people*” or “*nothing says money like a diamond*” illustrates that consumers do draw upon industry-engineered associations between diamonds and luxury, but for most people, the story does not end there. That consumers passively absorb industry-sponsored ideology has been argued by those who take up criticism against capitalistic industry (Ewen 1988, Freidan 1963, Gailbraith 2000), while others analyze the “magical” semiotic imagery of advertising (Williams 1961, see also Berger 2000, Williamson 1978). The diamond campaign has been one of the most successful in advertising (approximately 85% of the US population know the tag phrase “diamonds are forever” and many I talked with remarked upon the scarcity and status value of diamonds promoted in ads) and people draw upon, or at least are aware of (even as they reject it) ad discourse for interpretation.

Investigating consumerism from an oppositional angle, scholars have argued that consumers are independent, calculating, self-actualized agents of their own destiny (Colin

1998, Lichtenberg 1996, and Twitchell 1999). My research suggests that degree to which diamond consumers are ensnared by discourse is variable; narratives contained overt claims of sovereignty and resistance to discourse, suggesting that consumers enjoy a certain degree of agency, even though they are, without question, operating within a social universe fraught with marketing.

- *Branding diamonds*

Within our contemporary time of the sign, branding is widespread. Goldson and Papson assert that one result of globalization and its cultural counterpart, “postmodernity,” is the super-enhanced importance of sign-value where a number of commodities that are essentially equal otherwise gain “value” by virtue of symbolic loads constituted through advertising “sign-wars” (e.g., Pepsi versus Coke) (Goldson and Papson 19xx). Branding is similarly treated in Klein’s critique of globalization (Klein 2000), and in Skoggard’s examination of Nike swoosh (Skoggard 1998), while others have explored the impact of branding practices on everyday activities such as being a sports fan (Bishop 19xx) and as a basis of emergent “post-modern” social organizations called “brand communities” (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). In keeping with emergent retail trends in which companies are pressured to “add value” to products through differentiation strategies such as branding, the diamond industry has entered into such practices. The recent development of the De Beers Forever Mark (a logo) and laser imprinting of retail names onto polished gems illustrates diamonds’ place among other commodities subject to globally dimensioned economic dynamics. Consumers’ use of branded diamonds to communicate anything about themselves is complicated by the fact

that the logo is literally microscopic, while one's knowledge of a logos' presence can still be at play, as is reported in consumers' narratives (see Chapter 4).

Recent work on understanding the role of commodities in the construction, maintenance and communication of identity through consumption through the use of brands (Friedman 1991,1994; Wilska 2002; Lunt and Livingstone 1992), and in the expression of cultural politics in terms of generation, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity and race has refined the anthropological lens on how commodities operate as symbols in specific social processes within or as a result of capitalism.⁴² These studies investigate how commodities are used to communicate to both known and unknown others purported membership in one or more large-scale social categories, but tend to be thin on ethnographic data evidencing the subjective aspect of consumer experience.

Foster, for example, explores the instrumental role of commodity marketing and mass consumption in producing nationality in Papua New Guinea, arguing, through a close reading of Coke, Pepsi and Shell gasoline ads, that in as far as consuming these products is an everyday experience, that consumption is inserted, through ads, into a "micropolitics of belonging" (Foster 1999). In this sense, commodity consumption serves as basis for development of an imagined national PNG community. But, however compelling Foster's analysis, the article suffers from a lack of people. Granted, marketers may try to use nationalism as a selling point, but Foster provides no evidence regarding how the people of PNG actually respond to or interpret the ads or how they understand their own consumption of Coke, Pepsi or Shell in relationship to the nationalism that is

⁴² See representative work in Chin 1999, Fiske 1994, Foster 1999, Green 1999, Halle 1993, Hansen 2000, Keuntz 1993, Mort 1996, Qureshi and Moore 1999, Radway 1984, Weston 1993.

being promoted. The extent to which consumers feel themselves part of PNG nation as a result of drinking Coke and Pepsi as well as the ways in which consumers may internalize, reject, ignore or play off of ad discourse are unknowns. In shifting away from the trend of deconstructing ads without examining what consumers say while recognizing that a close reading of ads can reveal how the industry wishes consumers to think about diamonds, my analysis revealed that some consumers explicitly distance themselves, play with or reject identification with subjects, themes and attitudes featured in ads.

Considering diamond consumerism through these lenses is crucial to an overall contextualization of the practice (see especially Chapters 3, 4, and 5), but a pointed semiotic approach reveals how these objects operate as carriers of meaning in individual lives at the micro-level. “Semiotic” in this sense refers to the ways in which meaning is attributed. In interviews, I found that consumers, in taking diamonds as signs, drew upon experiences, memories, fantasies and their knowledge about diamond’s chemistry or production chain in discussing what they mean. These meanings were not always congruent with industry sponsored significations. People drew upon ad discourse or logo promotion, but augmented it, or sometimes replaced it entirely, with alternative ideas. It is in this way that the meaning of a particular diamond can be said to go beyond that sponsored by industry. More technically speaking, the attachment of meanings to diamonds as promoted in ads can be effectively understood through a Saussurean paradigm of the sign, in which a signifier (diamond) is arbitrarily and conventionally attached to some signified (e.g., love, glamour, and status). However, consumers also make meanings that do not comfortably follow this (referential) model of the sign.

Consumers treat diamonds as both referential and non-referential signs: the next section explores these sign types.

Linguistic Ideology, Referential and Non-Referential Signs

The use of a culture as text metaphor has led researchers to treat commodities as words, as entities carrying socially coded meanings. This strategy is based on a conception of meaning in language in the reference based paradigm theorized by Saussure. But, becoming more sensitive to both referential and non-referential, context bound aspects of language has widened our ability to see how language functions. In trying to locate a paradigm for understanding the range of meanings imputed to diamonds by consumers, it occurred to me that theoretical developments meant to capture non-referential aspects of language might be mobilized to understand semioses with commodities. I also considered the idea that because diamonds as signs are ontologically distinct (in their materiality, their historical embeddedness, and persistence in unique contexts) from the more ephemeral and coded units of linguistic communication (e.g., referential words) that are taken as their analogical equivalents in culture as text approaches, the types of meanings diamonds carry might be congruent with, but also exceed, the Saussurean semiotic that a referential ideology of language relies upon.

* * *

“Linguistic ideology” is broadly defined as “shared bodies of commonsense notions about the nature of language in the world” (Rumsey 1990: 346). What we think language is and how it works informs our “ideology of language,” and is one of the factors that shape meta-theories of language. Ideologies of language include some ideology of meaning, or a theory of how meaning through signs works. A referential

theory of language is predicated on a referential theory of meaning and is one in which language is thought to refer to, point to, call out, entities or events in our experience, real or imaginary, with proper names being the most easily understood. A referential theory of meaning, traced to the sign concept as defined by Saussure, posits that words have meaning purely by virtue of their naming—or directly referring to—some entity. The linguistic term “Jorge Luis Borges” refers to a specific writer of some renown and wit. The term “Easter Bunny” refers to a more imaginary entity, but one that inhabits our experience nonetheless. But, there other theories of meaning positing alternative paradigms for understanding the traffic of meaning that account for both linguistic and non linguistic signs that do not fit very well within a Saussurean model.

Silverstein, in his work on the “ideology of language,” expressed concerns over the tendency to view propositionality as the essence of language and to confuse its indexical functions with referential ones (Silverstein 1976, 1995; see also Rumsey 1990, Schieffelin and Wollard 1994). Webb Keane has illustrated that language is not generally abstractable from context and cultural presupposition, having in addition to reference, indexical, performative and poetic dimensions that help make interaction richly meaningful (Keane 2003). While some language is plainly referential, notions of how language works as a social process, and to what purposes, are culturally variable and need to be discovered rather than simply assumed (Bauman 1983:16), and as some linguistic utterances are not comfortably contained under conception of linguistic referentiality, for example in Standard American English words such as articles (“the” and “an”), imperatives and declaratives (“Go!,” “Mam” or “I promise”), or indexes (pronouns, “this,” “that”), it has been necessary for linguistics to cast theoretical nets towards the

capture of non-referential functions of language (see Lee 1997 Gal 19xx, Irving 19xx). Because of its code-like character, the referential paradigm suffers from a kind of literalism, eclipsing adequate space for the combination of literal information with desire, struggle, critique, humor, and play that characterize natural discourse. And while material culture, like language, can be representational at times, it, also like language can mediate, enhance and produce social realities. This theoretical movement focuses on the relationship between language and social dynamics, both within and between social groups, where language is taken an important mediator of identity formation and social relationships. In such work, language is seen to have practical consequences that cannot be explained by reference alone.

Linguistic paradigms are sometimes mobilized for cultural analysis. At the level of theory, some of the limitations of structuralist and other Saussurean-based approaches to meaning (both linguistic and non-linguistic) have been remedied. For example, to address prominent aspects of diamond consumer narratives such as history and changing meanings, a post-structuralist approach would identify power dynamics and be helpful in revealing the mechanics of marketing in setting the meaning of diamonds as symbols. But, to think through diamond consumption as told by consumers, an even more tantalizing idea stems from problematizing the basic structuralist premise of meaning, where the meaning of signs, which must be learned by each individual, exists in an overarching code of signs at the supra-individual plane and are "referential". As in language where the need for revisiting this theory of meaning is cast into sharpest relief by aspects of language that cannot be explained by reference alone, so it is with meaning carrying commodities. Meaning types such as these include, but are not limited to, motivated,

poetic and performative (see below), which might best be subsumed under a rubric called “non-referential.”

Consumer narratives suggest that people treat diamonds as signs of several types, both referential and non-referential in nature. The kinds of meanings that emerged in narratives of diamond interpretation included what could be considered referential signification amenable to a Saussurean notion of the sign whereby a signifier (diamond) is arbitrarily attached to a signified (e.g. glamour and romance).⁴³ But consideration of memory, of idiosyncrasy, of everyday lives, of context and other non-referential significations such as performance or poetic were also present. Analyzing consumer narratives, I identified four modes of interpretation: one referential type, symbolic, and 3 contextual types, motivated, poetic and performative (each is discussed below). This finding provokes a revisitation of how we think about the role of commodities, such as diamonds, as carriers of meaning through the various ways that people communicate, act and anchor their experiences through material culture.

Unmotivated and Motivated Meanings:

Signs, by definition, are meaningful. There are a number of ways that signs can acquire or be said to have meaning. Meanings can be ascribed by convention. Signs may have material or “formal” aspects such as color, shape, texture, age, that are perceived sensually and used as the basis for meaning-making. Signs can be embedded in history and in the environment in ways that allow them to serve as evidence of events.

⁴³ See Appendix I for more extended discussion of the Saussurean sign.

Examination of signs' meanings provokes several questions, among them, what is the nature of the relationship between a sign and its meaning, as investigated by Peirce.

Peircean semiotic is based upon, is an iteration of, a larger philosophical system in which a sign (or representamen) is broadly defined as "something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (see Peirce 1955). Signs are tokens that give rise to precepts in the mind of an interpreter. Signs can be analyzed in a number of ways, for example according to the nature of the relation between a sign and its object. Peirce identified three sign types based such relations: the symbol, the icon, and the index.⁴⁴ The degree to which the form of the sign is somehow influenced by, linked to, or caused by that to which it stands determines how motivated it is said to be. Symbols are unmotivated signs whereas icons and indexes are motivated signs.

- *Symbol as Unmotivated Sign*

Symbols designate by virtue of the conventional and arbitrary association of ideas. Symbols operate by tokens which are instances, such as the instance of the word "happy" in a particular context. A red octagon and the word "stop" are both symbols. Language operates largely on a symbolic levels, although there are exceptions in terms of such classes of language as demonstratives ("this" and "that"), cries, for example, of "Help!," and imperatives, such as the military command "Call to arms" (which *indexes* the will of a sergeant) (examples from Peirce, 1955). Of the three sign types, the Peircian symbol is most like the referential Saussurean sign (see Appendix I, and Saussure 1910) where a given signifier has a totally arbitrary relationship to its signified. Diamonds are

⁴⁴ The sign types were all subdivided and subdivided many times over in effort to capture various empirical instances.

sometimes interpreted as symbols of love. The relationship between “diamond” and “love” is arbitrary and conventional. There is of course a history that has led to and upholds the association of diamonds with romance, but there is nothing about the diamond per se that links it to this meaning.

- *Icons and Indexes as Motivated Signs*

Peirce identified two types of signs whose forms are to some degree motivated by, influenced by, that which they designate: Icons and Indexes.

An Icon is a sign which works through the principle of similitude. An icon refers to the “object that it denotes merely by virtue of characters of its own, and which it possesses, just the same, whether any such object actually exists or not” (Peirce, 1955). In other words, icons have an independent ontological status from that which they designate, and the nature of such designation is “resemblance.” The, real or imaginary, existence of the object is necessary for the icon to function as a sign. Maps, drawings and metaphors are iconic signs. One could interpret a diamonds’ clarity, for example, in an iconic, metaphorical way to mean “*purity*”, as one consumer I spoke with did.

An Index is a sign which refers to the object it denotes by virtue of being directly affected by that object. An index lacks the ontological independence enjoyed by icons and what makes it a sign is not resemblance to the Object, but causal dependence upon it. Insofar as an index is necessarily affected by an object, it necessarily has some quality in common with that object and it is with respect to *these* similarities that it refers to the object. An index may indeed involve an iconic, or even symbolic, mechanism to some extent, but of a peculiar kind and far from being a signaling by resemblance, or by convention, the index has actually been modified by its object. Indexes are symptomatic,

having been caused by and evidence their objects: a weathervane that points the way the wind blows is an example of an indexical sign. Diamonds can be read as indexes of geological processes, or as evidence that someone has access to material resources. One consumer interpreted having a diamond as an index of the fact that “*someone cared enough to save the money to buy it*” for her.⁴⁵

Peirce struggled with the triadic scheme (it underwent a myriad of reconfigurations), in an effort to deal with exceptions and incomplete articulations of the semiotic with his larger philosophical positions. In attempting to test the theory empirically and in exploring the ramifications of the whole program, Peirce recognized the impossibility of finding a pure icon or index, and even communication through symbols must be executed along with iconic and indexical signs if it is to be made intelligible. Signs can, nonetheless be identified on the basis of this ideal type system which highlights a sign’s qualities, articulation in an environment, and/or within a given symbolic universe with respect to what it means to some interpreter. Paying attention to the way people treat diamonds as indexes and icons in addition to symbols gives us heightened awareness elements of interpretation such as creativity and context that characterize consumption.

The narratives presented in Chapter 6 were assembled because they exemplify “motivated” interpretations, where meaning is suggested to consumers either by the formal aspects of the diamond (as icons) or by some materially causal circumstance (as

⁴⁵ This is in some ways a meta-level interpretation of the exchange, where the boundaries of the sign under interpretation are unclear as the entire context and the diamond itself are bound together. This goes to the suggestion apparent by this research that signs such as diamond commodities are embedded in contexts from which they cannot be very cleanly extricated. Diamonds in ads, however, are relatively context-free since they act only as prototypes for the actual bodied stones that operate in full personal contexts.

indexes) and demonstrate the utility of using Peircian sign theory in exploring such interpretations. In identifying symbolic, iconic and indexical meaning-making modalities in narratives, I am building on the work of scholars who have used a Peircian semiotic in investigating cultural phenomena, for example ritual, violence and the construction of history and selves (see Daniel 1984, 1996; Parmentier 1987; Singer 1984; Tambiah 1985); cultural texts such as advertisements (Gottdeiner 1985, 1995; see also Riggins 1994); archaeological artifacts (Bauer 2001); and even music (Turino 1999). The Peircian semiotic is a comprehensive theory, encapsulating the array of considerations people use in attributing meaning (such as memory or formal characteristics, in addition to the symbolic) and embraces the impact of context, contingency and subjectivity on semioses.

Poetics:

Referential theories of language cannot easily account for poetic devices such as irony, parody or *ostrananie*. *Ostrananie* a term developed by Russian Formalist Victor Shklovsky, is a device of defamiliarization or “making-strange” and is a lens through which to understand diamond consumption. Chapter 7 illustrates how Bling! (the wearing of big, flashy diamonds in sometimes unusual settings in ways that cut against gender and style as promoted in De Beers ads) operates partly as a symbol of glamour and status, but also in calling attention to itself and its signmanship, can incite a critical, questioning, less naturalized hermeneutic engagement as compared to more normative diamond display. In this sense bling acts as a poetic device, as a provocateur, and instead of only reflecting, or pretending to reflect, a pre-existing circumstance, it has the potential to create a new knowledges or relationships.

- *Russian Formalism and Readerliness*

Influenced by Saussure and two leading nineteenth-century literary and linguistic theoreticians, Alexander Veselovsky and Alexander Potebnya, Russian Formalism emerged during the second decade of the 20th century, remaining active until about 1930.⁴⁶ Formalists adopted a delineation of practical versus poetic language and an emphasis on investigating *how* words are used, that is to say, they focused upon the mechanics of poetics (i.e. metaphor or parody) and meaning.⁴⁷

Recognition that poetic language operates differently from practical, representational language was key in so far as the existence of subjectivity, creativity, and the critical facilities of the reader are implicit in such a theory, whereas representational or referential ideologies of language do not mandate such considerations. The understanding of metaphor, for example, is a process of transitive thinking (where if $a=b$, and $b=c$, then $a=c$) which requires the reader's active, creative engagement to identify the relevant, sometimes contextual, criteria for understanding. In Potebnya's "practical" language and in a structuralist conception of language, the reader need not be

⁴⁶ The Russian Formalist circle was comprised of two groups: the Moscow Linguistic Circle, founded by Roman Jakobson, and the Petersburg Opojaz, or Society for the Study of Poetic Language, which included Victor Shklovsky, Yuri Tynyanov, Boris Eichenbaum, Boris Tomashevsky, and Victor Vinogradov. Formalists tried to do for literary theory what Saussure had done for linguistics: re-define the object of study, emphasize synchrony, and identify internal relationships. Veselovsky argued that literary study should be bracketed from scholarship in other disciplines, arguing that, for example, the literary device of 'motif' could be understood as a crypt through which the structure of literary works is revealed. This marking-off was ployed by Formalists in excluding of socio-historical considerations from "literariness" to identify operations of device as they contribute to meaning. Interviews with consumers, however, illustrate that social and historical contexts, are brought to bear, sometimes intensely, by individuals in their "reading" of diamonds, and so I share with the Formalists, their eventual (re-) consideration of historicity and context into theorizing signification practices when considering bling as ostranenie.

⁴⁷ Potebnya distinguished between poetry and prose (aesthetic and non-aesthetic language) as "separate approaches to the understanding of reality linked by their dependence upon language," so that the study of literature must be a study of language and furthermore that the object of study, poetry (as aesthetic language) must be defined against prose or "practical-scientific" language (Lemon and Reis, 1965: xi).

creative, engaged, intuitive or critical but is instead a passive recipient of sounds that are matched correlatively to an overarching lexicon or code. This comparison is simplified, but drawing the distinction brings into relief implications for the respective logical requirements inherent in these two ideologies of language for the construction of the (interpreting) subject, particularly with respect to idiosyncrasy, play, and agency.

In attempting to isolate and theorize literature and literary device, Formalists implicitly recognized that a straight reference theory of signification was too narrow, failing to adequately explain layered, sometimes playful or critical, meanings that are the basis of good literature. A reference theory of meaning might function for communicative utterances such as “the window is open,” it does not account for the more complex operations of metaphor, parody, irony, insinuation and the like, such as “the window is open” read poetically (for example, as a metaphor). The interpretive strategy, and kind of subject required, for a literal, practical versus a poetic reading of the phrase differ markedly, at least at first glance, and result in different interpretations.⁴⁸

- *Dehabitualization: Disrupting Habits of Perception*

Shklovsky’s general point about the perception, or interpretation, of non-poetic language is crucial to his overall treatise: “If we start to examine the general laws of perception, we see that as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic” (Lemon and Reis 1965: 11). The interpretation becomes habitual, so habitual in fact that attention to the form of the signifier is eroded. A passage exploring habituation is worth quoting at length: “...we apprehend objects only as shapes with imprecise extensions; we do not see

⁴⁸ I would argue that almost all linguistic communication potentially requires some element of poetic engagement, and that the practical//poetic split is difficult to sustain outside of a literary context.

them in their entirety but rather recognize them by their main characteristics. We see them as if they were enveloped in a sack. We know what it is by its configuration, but we see only its silhouette. The object, perceived thus in the manner of prose perception, fades and does not even leave a first impression; ultimately even the essence of what was is forgotten...” (*ibid*: 11-12).

When a particular meaning becomes habitually attached to an object, we barely pay attention to the object itself, and “skip” straight to what it means. In “practical” language, we do not pay attention to the form of the words – for example when reading, if one pays attention to the shapes of letters, it makes reading for comprehension, a practice predicated on habituation, difficult. In “practical” language, the form of the words should not draw notice. In poetic language, conversely, the form of the language is blatant and we are invited to linger, to take notice of, to savor, to ruminate in and about the linguistic form: “Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war. If the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been. And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception ...the range of poetic (artistic) extends from the sensory to the cognitive, from poetry to prose, from the concrete to the abstract” (*ibid*: 12). Ostranenie rescues readers from the deadening effects of habit.

“Art” and artfulness moves us away from unconscious, habitualized hermeneutic strategies, and naturalized readings, regardless of medium. In so far as “art is a way of

experiencing the artfulness of an object, the object is not important” (*ibid*: 12 *sic*), words, actions, diamonds can all be artful in the sense that they can be taken, regardless of our access to the intentionality of the producer, as de-habitualizing. Through *ostranenie*, art removes signs from habit-driven perceptions and thus has a destabilizing potential through the making strange of the familiar or the making familiar of the strange.⁴⁹ So as Jameson wrote, art “is a way of restoring conscious experience, of breaking through deadening and mechanical habits of conduct...and allowing us to be reborn to the world in its existential freshness and horror” (Jameson 1971: 51).

- *Ostranenie: signs that make strange*

As a poetic device, *ostranenie* denaturalizes the “normal” way that we understand language by calling attention to itself as “poetic,” and generates a mode of interpretation having a creative, reformist, if not revolutionary, potential for the re-articulation of sign to meaning.⁵⁰ *Ostranenie* is, in this sense, not representational, but playful, metaphorical and evocative. While *ostranenie* is part of a theory of art developed for literary criticism, it can also be deployed for understanding how consumers interpret bling.

⁴⁹ The political potential inherent in this conceptualization of “art” therefore is striking, even though it is delivered via an aesthetic device. Seen in this light, it is unclear why a Marxist state interested in awaking the proletariat from slumbering consciousness would complain about the aesthetic, though potentially enlightening, thrust of Formalist literary criticism. The Marxist party promoted the idea that the proletariat should have their own “proletariat literature” to reflect the dilemmas of their predicament but since Formalism was focused more upon architectonics than content, their platform was censured. Trotsky bitterly chastised the Formalist movement as grossly incomplete in its failure to address the social causes and effects of art – later this concern with technique was deemed decadent in its supposed promotion of art for art’s sake. It is true that Formalists were concerned with the identification of literary mechanics but I would maintain that the latent revolutionary implications could have been attractive to the Marxists had they chosen to read it that way.

⁵⁰ Victor Schlovsky’s book *Theory Of Prose* and the essay “Art as Technique” provide essays in understanding how *ostranenie* can be deployed to investigate device.

Diamond consumers discussed rappers' bling, as example, "*ironic*," or "*witty*." Because *ostranenie* is operating as part of a larger theory of artfulness defined as a mode of readerly engagement, we are not required to take the intention of the diamond industry or even the wearer of diamonds as the final authority on meaning. Meaning exists as the product of an artful relationship between (art/literary/poetic) sign and reader –in this case between another's diamond and a consumer. As part of a larger exploration of non-referentiality in commodity meanings, the concept of *ostranenie* can help us understand diamond consumption (see Chapter 7). Rather than taking diamonds solely as signs for deployment in claims of identity or socio-economic status, diamonds are taken as unfamiliar carriers of the emotive, the political, the ironic, as provocateurs of feeling, of desire, of the aesthetic. Commodity meanings must be understood as more than containers of conventionally agreed upon information (loosely translated as symbols in Peircian semiotics, or signs in Saussurean semiology). Working with an openness towards sign types people take diamonds to be, and finding poesy, I detected this mode of meaning-making that might have been underappreciated had I looked only for symbols.

Performance and Idiosyncrasy:

The study of linguistics was for a time hobbled by an inability to recognize and capture non-referential aspects of language (Silverstein 1976), although the efforts of Silverstein and others looking at non-referentiality have made major inroads to redress this problem, partly by drawing on Peircean semiotic. Representing a related line of linguistic analysis, J.L. Austin's *How To Do Things With Words*, explores a third type of non-referential language: the performative (Austin 1962). Austin shows how language is not just a representative faculty, but that it "does things," such as confer titles, create

relationships, and dissolve obligations. In this sense language is productive. Narratives suggested that material signs such as diamonds, like linguistic utterances, are both in and of the world, and as such, can also be implicated in such production, in doing things.

When analyzing linguistic units or commodities through a reference theory of meaning, the “meaning” of sign vehicle is located in a “code”. In keeping with this, consumers routinely told me that diamonds are associated with power, status and wealth for “*your average joe*”, but tend to see this as part of a social code that they themselves are not necessarily bound to follow. Many consumers reported that their own diamonds have a different, more personalized meaning, and that they neither read nor use their own diamonds in accordance with a social code they view as a combined product of advertising and “*the Hollywood thing.*”⁵¹

In structural linguistics, individuals come to know the “code” in a more or less “competent” way, but the focus of study is on the code itself, not individuals or variations between individuals. Instead, there is an imagined ideal speaker who perfectly embodies the code. This vocabulary of competence, and the consequential methodological step to take no notice of either the individual or variations between individuals in favor of the underlying or “generative” grammar comes out of Chomsky’s work on linguistics. That the underlying grammar or code of meaning which is the supposed object of study has been abstracted from a compendium of individual utterances, none of which are in and of themselves representative or ideal, is a paradox. And, while there is a tacit acknowledgement that differences between individuals exist, variation has been most insistently trivialized, although investigations of variation and change is an area that is

⁵¹ When asked about reading others’ diamonds, consumers do often resort to those codes.

currently benefiting from the supplementation of the “linguistics of systems” with a “linguistics of speakers” (Johnstone 2000). Currently, more linguists are paying attention to the individual and idiolects, and attendant relationships between individual variation and idiosyncrasy to overarching abstracted systems in attempts to understanding how language works in various contexts. As is the case for the use of language, individuals use diamonds to do things in ways that are often idiosyncratic, often in concert with performativity, and this idiosyncratic performativity, through diamond signing, is not trivial when considering the significant role these objects can take on in creating, mediating and maintaining social realities.

Chapter 8 details the interweaving of social discourses and idiosyncratically devised performatives reflected in consumer narratives. Diamonds can be used as performatives, either reflexively, in the enactment of a drama by and for the self, or for others. In this sense diamond consumption can be said to be highly interlocutory. This approach recognizes the potential of diamonds to reference wealth, glamour and status but highlights agency, response and variation.

Combining Referential & Non-referential Strategies in Interpretation

Peircian signs work together, but within diamond interpretation, indexicality looms large. Poetics and performatives are heavily fraught with an indexical dimension, but are embedded in a discursive universe in which industry sponsored symbolism reigns, and within a material universe in which iconic imitation of diamonds and styles of wielding them is mundane. Consumption, and the talk about consumption, take place in and as part of a social milieu that is always threaded through with multiply layered social indexicals, where objects and words are read, and perhaps intended to be read, as

informational markers of both the vague and the concrete. In fact, during interviews, statements about diamonds can themselves be taken as indexical signs about a persons' (real or imagined) identity, class, educational level, interests, values, or attitudes in general. Diamond narratives, like other species of conversation, communicate at multiple levels.

For example, as seen in Chapter 7, use of disparaging terms and tones like "those guys from the ghetto" contains a semantic message that refers to African American rappers but also oppose a speaker against them. The phrase flags a verboten racialized discourse. This kind of talk is also an indexical process that marks the speaker's identification with, and to some extent reproduces, a certain middle-class whiteness. Other narratives indexed social positionality, attitudes about aesthetics and style, cosmopolitanism and/or views about ethnicity. I am aware of the fact that each interview contained semantic messages about how people interpreted diamonds which made up the core material of my analysis, but information about consumers themselves ferried at this meta-level informed my readings of their narratives, and I have tried to provide some of this information where it seemed necessary.

I can now see the possibility of a meta-level analysis of consumer narratives more directed at discovering what these talks imply about the individual speakers, about American culture and about how (for example, racial or ethnic) categories and relations are constructed and maintained through both commodity usage and talk about consumption. A more pointed examination of narratives combining an analysis of meta-level communication with semantic content is one possible direction this research can next be taken. My project, however, has focused on a more fundamental step: discovering

how consumers take diamonds as signs, looking at what those sign types are, and thinking about what this might reveal about consumers and consumerism.

While it appears to be the case that social discourse provides a backdrop, and at times a rationale, for the desire, purchase and use of diamonds, analysis of narratives demonstrates that marketing, such as that produced by De Beers and related entities, is not unproblematically embodied or embraced by the public. So while marketing has been successful in promoting diamond sales and meanings, and were it not for this campaign, the landscape of diamond consumerism would surely be different, if it existed at all, it is not overdetermining in terms of how these objects are parlayed in everyday lives. Some consumers do absorb in wholesale fashion the ideas and themes associated with diamonds promoted in marketing, while others are very critical, creative and reflexive in their interpretive strategies. This suggests that to gain a more nuanced understanding of how diamonds operate as signs “on the ground,” research needs a broadly conceived theory of meaning, one that includes space for consumers’ non-referential semioses combined with a serious consideration of global political economic realities and at-large social discourse. Far from merely reflecting the narrow set of themes promoted by the industry, interpretations of diamonds operate in excess of those themes, and are characterized instead by a high degree of variability and personalized by historically situated subjects.

Chapter 3 The Diamond Commodity Chain: The Transformation of Diamonds from Rock to Gem

The articulation of people with the overall industry affects how they understand what diamonds are and what they mean. What a diamond “means” remains tangled within a subject’s interests and locus, partly defined by placement vis-a-vis the commodity chain – as geologist, as miner, as manager, as polisher, as merchant, as copy editor, or as consumer. There are even special sets of jargon associated with different positions within the commodity chain which tend to reflect the production of knowledge and use at each site. The language of the geologist, that of the rough dealer or retailer and the consumer differ, but vocabularies sometimes overlap. While some consumers never introduced anything about diamond as a material substance or as a commodity, others wielded language more typically associated with retailers or geologists. Examination of diamond’s formal aspects clarifies it’s transformation from rock to gem and is necessary since people draw upon these factors in interpretation.

This chapter describes a geological perspective on diamonds, and their global distribution, tracing the architecture of the production pipeline. Perspectives from science and industry are interwoven with those of consumers, who at times base interpretations upon understandings of diamond as a mineral substance or as partial indexes of relations of production.

In keeping with an overall emphasis on semiotics, diamonds within scientific, commercial and ethnographic contexts are categorized as symbols, as icons and indexes. The rationale for this layering is straightforward: as the application of Peircian concepts

of icon, index and symbol may not be familiar to the reader, and as the practice of analyzing signs as such is advanced through practice, I call attention to semiotic aspects of various interpretations (for example, in scientific diagrams meant to represent atomic structures) while providing content required for understanding the context of diamond consumption. Particular semiotic ascriptions may be challenged, but the practice of thinking about meaning through the relationship of sign to significance illuminates mechanics of interpretation that will, I hope, help the reader engage more readily with the ethnographic analyses this background is intended to complement.

Pure Carbon

“...Diamonds are some kind of crystallized mineral, something that is black ... which is weird because they are clear!” Dana, Diamond consumer

Understanding the chemistry underlying diamonds’ appearance is helpful as its physical properties inform how people think about them. Diamond is a mineral⁵² comprised of pure carbon.⁵³ So is graphite, the soft opaque substance used in pencil leads, and lonsdaleite, a rare configuration of microscopic carbon crystals associated with meteor impacts. But what makes diamond unlike its pure carbon cognates is its unique molecular configuration.

Diamond crystal (or any crystalline material) is comprised of regularly repeating atomic units. Crystals “grow” by the addition of layer upon layer of atoms. In diamonds,

⁵² Minerals are naturally occurring inorganic elements or compounds that have an orderly internal structure.

⁵³ Grease tends to adhere to surfaces devoid of oxygen. Since the surface of diamond is pure carbon, grease readily binds with it, a characteristic first exploited by diamond miners in the 1890’s. Wet diamondiferous gravels are to this day spread over or sluiced over a greased surface to which the diamonds literally stick while the rest of the material is simply flushed away. This quality also causes polished diamonds to become oily and dirty if worn regularly, though they can easily be cleansed with a little ammonia or mild detergent.

these atoms are, of course, carbon atoms, so its chemical formula is: C. The same is true for graphite, also comprised of carbon atoms layered one upon another. Although these substances have the same chemical formula, their respective properties differ markedly as illustrated by the briefest comparison of a chunk of soft, gray pencil lead to a diamond. Differences in the formal qualities of diamond versus graphite, such as color and durability, result from the arrangement and articulation of carbon atoms.⁵⁴

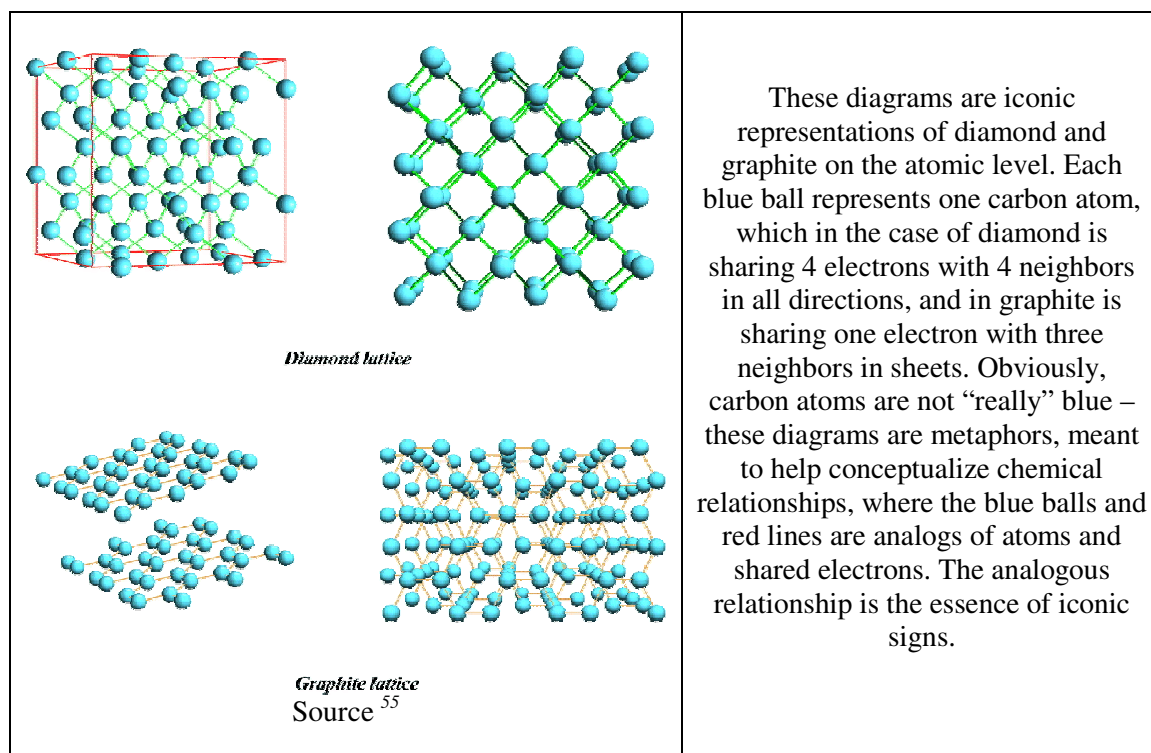


Figure 3-1 Diamond vs. Graphite

⁵⁴ Graphite has a chemical arrangement in which each atom shares only one valence electron (rather than four), and it shares its one valence electron with only three of its closet neighbors (rather than four) in sheets (rather than in all directions). The single valence electron skips from one neighbor to the next to the next in cycles, in essence time sharing with each of its three neighbors. Though each sheet is very strong, there are no strong chemical attachments between the sheets. When writing with a pencil, thin sheets of graphite slide off one by one as pressure is applied. Under extreme heat and pressure this configuration can be changed and graphite can be transformed into diamond (and vice versa).

⁵⁵ Source: <http://phycomp.technion.ac.il/~anastasy/teza/teza/node5.html>. Retrieved July, 2004.

The atomic number in the Periodic Chart for Carbon is 6. This means that there are 6 protons and 6 electrons in each carbon atom. Protons in the nucleus of the atoms provide a charge that keeps electrons in orbit, but also allows them to interact with other atoms. Four of carbon's 6 electrons follow an orbit that allows them to be chemically interactive, while the remaining two are chemically inactive. Electrons in a position to interact with other atoms are called "valence electrons": carbon has 4 valence electrons. The shell of the carbon atom's orbit is ideally balanced with 10 electrons, so that each atom has "space" for 4 additional electrons in addition to the 6 that it already has. In diamond, all 4 of each carbon atoms' valence electrons are active with neighboring atoms such that the nucleus in every atom is surrounded by a full complement of 10 electrons: 2 inactive electrons and 8 valence electrons (4 of its own, plus 4 shared from neighboring atoms). The sharing of electrons between adjacent atoms is a "shared-electron bond," or "co-valent bond," the strongest possible form of attachment between chemical substances. This bonding architecture makes diamond extremely durable, a feature routinely mentioned by consumers.

I was surprised to learn that a few consumers were not only familiar with diamond's atomic structure, but that this knowledge was implicated in interpretations. Ian is a well educated writer in his 30's and when asked about giving a diamond to his girlfriend, he began discussing individualized creativity and spontaneity as essential ingredients in personal expressions, such as love or caring, as inconsistent with the unbending regularity of the carbon atoms. He remarked, "*Diamonds are impersonal. They are about as impersonal as you can get! I mean you go and give some Hasidic Jew guy up on 47th street like thousands of dollars to justify an idea of emotional permanence.*"

But seriously, what can be more impersonal than carbon atoms lined up just exactly so and totally standardized like stiff little soldiers? And it's all so cold and rational. I value poems and personal creativity much more. Like having people over to play music or sing or just entertain yourself based on your own merit and imagination – this to me is more personal – that's what I mean by personal I guess – I think it's a lot more gratifying.”

It is not just the arrangement of carbon that is striking. That carbon is the fundamental element of life makes it an attractive candidate for metaphoric readings about reproduction. Some consumers discussed the notion of recycling carbon as recycling of building blocks of life and this became key in interpreting stones handed down through generations, the idea being that carbon is recycled in a way that mirrors kinship cycles. Margalit, a married woman in her 30's who wears a family diamond, explained that, *“Diamonds are made from carbon, I know that, and carbon is everywhere, so the carbon is recycledjust like life is recycled and so it's like when my husband gave me his grandmother's ring... we had it reset, but still it's like a continuation in the family. I mean I am not really that into diamonds, but I am into my husband and I love being a part of his family so this is like making a chain. You know it's all ashes to ashes”*.⁵⁶

In general, consumers did not consider atomic chemistry, but some connected the meaning of diamond with its visible features. Everyone knows diamonds are durable and transparent and so forth, and sometimes those qualities are used in the production of meaning. For example, in treating diamond as an icon, the idea of “*stability*” may be

⁵⁶ This “ashes to ashes” concept is exploited by Life Gem, a company that manufactures diamonds out of carbon-rich cremation remains. See Chapter 4 discussion of synthetic (lab made) diamonds.

attached to diamond as a metaphor, building off of diamonds' durability. The most apparent properties of diamond are hardness, durability, transparency, color, ability to refract light, luminescence and conductivity.

Hardness

Diamond is extremely hard, and historically, this was key to identifying them and informing how they were used as signs. For example, worn as iconic talismans by warriors, they were believed to transmit hardness and strength. A scale from 1-10⁵⁷ assesses relative hardness based on a mineral's ability to scratch another. Graphite rates about .5, talc rates at 1, apatite at 5, window glass at about 5.5, corundum (ruby and sapphire) at 9, and then diamond at 10. The scale increases in a linear fashion until 8 (topaz), where it takes an abrupt logorhythmic shift. Diamond is about 4 times harder than corundum (9), whereas talc (1) is twice as hard as graphite (.5). That diamond can scratch glass is a feature still recognized as a way to authenticate it.⁵⁸

For obvious practical reasons, a good gemstone should be relatively hard.⁵⁹ It should also be durable, capable of withstanding knocks and pressures. Some minerals are hard, but not very durable, such as Hiddenite or Kunzite, two varieties of Spodumene which have a certain aesthetic appeal but are challenging to prepare as gemstones

⁵⁷ The Mohs mineral hardness scale, from 1-10, was developed by Friedrich Mohs in 1822.

⁵⁸ Diamond is also authenticated by its extreme density: diamond weighs 3.51 grams per cubic centimeter (g/cc), heavy compared to most other minerals. By comparison, graphite weighs only 2.2 g/cc. Diggers and extraction machines take advantage of diamond's heaviness by using centrifugal force to separate diamond from unwanted substrate, and jewelers can weigh stones purporting to be diamond as most simulations are light by comparison.

⁵⁹ Hardness is not necessarily a good indication of durability. Minerals can fracture along cleavage planes; diamonds are cleavable in 4 directions and cutters preparing gemstones take advantage of these planes and in this sense they are brittle

because they splinter easily. Other minerals are durable but not hard, as in the case of Moonstone.⁶⁰ Opal has a Mohs rating of 6 but has poor durability; using opal for dinner jewelry or other occasional wear is consistent with its more vulnerable status. When diamond is used in hand jewelry, and worn everyday over a lifetime, it will likely suffer slight damage, but nothing compared to what would happen to an everyday opal or hematite ring. From the perspective of hardness and durability, the co-valently bonded diamond is perfect for everyday use, as are other hard, highly durable minerals like ruby, sapphire, and emerald.

Kirsten is a 37 year old massage therapist and Iyengar Yoga teacher I met at a workshop on Yoga. In an excerpt from an interview with Kirsten (see more extended treatment in Chapter 6), we see how she partly interprets her diamond by privileging the twinned aspects of pure carbon and hardness to represent simplicity and the stability of marriage, explaining that, *“...a diamond is like the essence of something and this essence is reflected in the context...Simplicity is part of the whole transaction of meaning because a diamond is pithy essence, it is beautiful and long lasting. It endures anything. Like marriage is supposed to. Of course I know that diamonds can become chipped or crack, but they are so hard and they basically endure. They can scratch glass, and this hardness is communicated in the stone and it means essence, it means endurance.”* And this “*endurance*” is part of what makes the stone a sign of her relationship to her husband, Charles. Kirsten’s reading is metaphorical, and in this sense aligns with Peirce’s notion of an icon.

⁶⁰ Spudomene has a Mohs scale rating of 7, while Moonstone has a rating of 6.

The play of light

Consumers often commented on how diamonds reflect light, how they “twinkle” and “shimmer,” which from the perspective of science, is due to its “refractive index.” Refractive index is based on the extent to which light is slowed, and bent, when entering and passing through some substance. The greater the refraction, the greater the ability for a gem to throw light back out. Transparent, dense structures, like diamonds, have high refractive indices (Harlow 1998).⁶¹ Cut diamond is very splendid as light bounces around inside the stone, where the facets act like mirrors, before flickering and blinking out of the top.⁶²

Refractive indices vary depending upon the wavelength of light used to measure them. The co-efficient of dispersion is the difference in refraction at the two extreme poles of visible light (red and violet). A high co-efficient of dispersion, such as has diamond, shows a separation of light, a “prism” effect.⁶³ Well cut diamonds yield a strong separation of light, emitting tiny colorful rainbows, an effect known as “fire,” particularly under halogen light (which explains why jewelry stores up and down 47th street use display cases lit with tiny halogen bulbs).

The aim of diamond cutting is to maximize the refraction/brilliance (keeping the light bouncing around inside of the stone) and dispersion/fire (creating a prism effect)

⁶¹The refractive index (n) of a substance is defined as: $n = V_v / V$, Where V_v is the velocity of light in a vacuum (1), and V is the velocity of light in the substance.

⁶² Most minerals have refractive indices between 1.3 and 2.4, while that of diamond is 2.42, which is why it flickers and blinks. Like its density, diamonds’ refractive index is not easily mimicked.

⁶³ The co-efficient of dispersion for diamond is a high 0.044. There are minerals with a co-efficient of dispersion even higher than that of diamond, but they are colored stones. In terms of colorless minerals, diamond is by far the most dispersive. Clear quartz by comparison has a low dispersion co-efficient of only 0.013.

while maintaining as much size as possible. In fact, the most typical cut, the “brilliant”, is a 58-faceted round shape designed with just these factors in mind. The terms “brilliance” and “fire” are part of a catalog of industry jargon, and used at the point of sale by retailers. I did not find consumers using this vocabulary, though they routinely referred to sparkle and light-play. Katherine, a 34 yr. old former stockbroker turned housewife serves as an example when she explains that for her, *“diamonds are the best out of all the gems, of all the precious stones, because they are the most sparkly. None of the other gems catch the light the way that diamonds do. I think that I like the pizzazz, the ‘hey look at me’ factor because they really draw the eye. Diamonds cry out!”*

Imitation or “simulated” diamonds, such as glass, Moissanite and cubic zirconium⁶⁴, can have higher dispersion co-efficients than diamond and be recognized as fakes on this basis. Regarding clarity and the play of light, Moissanite and cubic zirconium “gems” are iconic representations of diamonds. They share with diamond some formal similarities (e.g. transparency and co-efficient of dispersion) in much the same way that a drawing, map or model is an iconic representation of its subject. By contrast, synthetic diamond, diamond made in a laboratory, *is* diamond from the perspective of chemistry, although it also tends to have coloration and atomic regularity

⁶⁴ Diamond simulants have the appearance of diamonds but do not possess the characteristics, atomic structure, chemical composition or physical properties of natural diamond. Simulants commonly include Moissanite, Cubic Zirconia, colourless synthetic Corundum (sapphire), spinel, Strontium Titanate, Yttrium Aluminium Garnet, Gadolinium Gallium Garnet, and Glass. Moissanite is a mineral, silicon carbide, that was first discovered in fragments of the meteorite at Diablo Canyon. It is also the trade name of lab grown crystals used as a diamond substitute. It is very difficult to discern between Moissanite and diamond, as Moissanite is hard and has a high refractive index and is thermally conductive, However, a cut Moissanite’s edges look doubled, its color tends towards the green and rather than containing the small inclusions that most natural diamonds have, its interiority can have milky ribboning that results from the growth process. Moissanite is far more “real” looking than some of the cheaper cubic zirconium or other substances. A 1 carat Moissanite costs about \$350, compared to a cost of about \$4,500 for a brilliant cut, VVS2, Color G diamond.

not represented in a random sampling of “natural” diamond. The range of fire in simulated diamonds appears neon, with lime greens, lavenders and pinks rather than hard greens, violets and reds; synthetic diamond *is* diamond and will behave accordingly (and the use of synthetics for industrial purposes reflects this).

Even though many find diamonds beautiful, and judge their beauty by sparkle or glittery-ness, aesthetic appeal based on physical appearance is far from universal. Diamonds’ “glitter” is seen both positively as “festive,” “flirty,” “attractive,” “pretty,” “exciting,” that “calls attention to itself,” or negatively, in terms of calling “too much attention to itself”, in being a “tease,” or being “too showy.”

“Sparkle” is exciting and attractive to many people, but Penny, a visiting nurse in her late 40’s, who was talking with me about one of her diamonds, detests “sparkling”. She inherited a large, very brilliant, fiery stone from her mother, but she really does not like it. “Diamonds tease – they twinkle at you, they call you, they seduce you...but then there is nothing there – to me that is one of the fascinating things about diamonds.....you know my mother gave me this stone – its almost 3 carats – I don’t know what the quality is or anything but I would never wear something like this – its gaudy ..and diamonds are just not me – I don’t like the way that they wink and twinkle and call you, and then they are empty – I mean you look in there and its like a well that could suck you in, and you would never come back....that teasing seductive quality is what comes to my mind – I ask people about them sometimes – you know I am a nurse and so I handle peoples’ hands and stuff – Man, they never take them off – and so it’s a way to relax them and pass the time – I’ll say, ‘oh that s a real pretty ring’ or, ‘that’s a real nice necklace,’ and they usually talk about who gave it to ‘em or when they got it or something, some people get more

technical I guess but the main thing I notice is that people are really into these things...not me though, like I said, they remind me of a black hole. Diamonds are all talk.” Penny’s views are balanced by Laura’s: “Diamonds are just so so beautiful, with their clean lines. So bright. So glittery. I just look at them and I am like ‘Wow! I want that!’” Diamonds shine, and flash and twinkle in ways that other gemstones do not because of their high refractive index.

Some were surprised to learn that although diamond gemstones usually look clear (clear stones are almost always shown in ads), they can also be colored.⁶⁵ But in reality, “clear” diamond is the exception, not the rule. An exhibit at the Museum of Natural History in New York displays diamonds of every conceivable shade: diamonds are red, orange, pink, green, blue, yellow, grey and even black and white. Most diamonds are somewhere between yellow and brown while relatively few are truly colorless since diamond is only theoretically pure; most diamonds include color making impurities and/or structural irregularities.⁶⁶ Semiotically speaking, coloration is an index of impurities or structural irregularity.

Another feature affecting diamond’s play of light is the fact that they luminesce (see Fritsch 1998). Luminescence is the emission of visible light by a material subjected

⁶⁵ Some diamonds are transparent to the visible spectrum of light, meaning they do not absorb the energy in that spectrum, so they appear colorless. “Colorless” (transparent) stones are the retail standard. When asked to describe diamond, “clear” was one of the most common adjectives consumers used. People refer to clear diamonds as white, though there also are actual white diamonds that look like little crystals of frozen milk.

⁶⁶ Impurities are elements which are captured within the crystal as it forms. In the case of diamonds, crystal impurity is most commonly nitrogen, although other substances such as boron are occasionally present. Impurities absorb certain wavelengths of light, giving diamonds a particular shade. Nitrogen, for example, will provoke the absorption of violet, blue and green wavelengths, causing the diamond to look yellow. The presence of boron results in green, yellow, orange and red absorption, producing a blue tint. The mechanics of some diamonds coloration remains poorly understood, such as for white, red, pink, pure orange and some shades of green.

to some form of energy excitation, such as black “ultraviolet” light. Fluorescence occurs when the emission of light ceases when the exciting source is removed, such as when teeth or a white t-shirt glows brightly under a black light. About a third of diamonds fluoresce under ultraviolet light, and this can take on different colors. Phosphorescence is when an object emits light under an exciting source and continues to emit light after the exciting source is removed, such as the case with “glow-in-the-dark” stars excited by exposure to light, continuing to be visible without the presence of any light source (the stars are themselves emitting the light with which they can be seen). Diamonds are also known to phosphoresce. These features (fluorescence nor phosphorescence) are not really implicated in coloration, but either, or both, can influence the *appearance* of a stone, possibly “brightening” a yellowish gem under certain conditions or causing a clear stone to look greasy.

“Ice”

Diamond is an excellent thermal conductor and a poor electrical conductor, making it amenable to high-tech applications such as in computers and spacecraft.⁶⁷ Conductivity, in addition to durability and hardness, make diamond an industrial tool unequalled by any other. Conductivity causes diamond to actually feel cold if touched to the lips: could this, in addition to its resemblance to a tiny chunk of frozen water, explain why it is sometimes known, iconically, as “ice”? Whether or not it is because of this conductivity, some consumers used “*cold*,” or “*frigid*” to describe diamond.

* * *

⁶⁷ Machines that detect thermal conductivity can be used to detect diamond simulants.

Interpreting consumers draw upon diamonds' features related to hardness, the play of light, and conductivity. The phrase "diamonds are forever" from ads contains symbolic meanings that people also use: love, like diamonds, is supposed to be everlasting, and some believe diamond to be indestructible. The term "diamond" originally meant unbreakable mineral, but they can be chipped, broken, cleaved in half, or cracked into thousands of tiny splinters. Diamond can be burned, and at 4,289 degree C., diamond evaporates, leaving nothing but gas behind. Deep underground and during their voyage to the surface, diamonds can be damaged, melted into oblivion, or transformed into graphite by volcanic processes. Seen in this light, the miracle of any single diamond making it to the surface is an event worth celebrating.

"Squished Dinosaurs": The Process of Diamond Formation

Most people didn't mention diamond formation per se, but generally have some idea that carbon, heat and pressure are involved and said things like, "*diamonds are made from carbon that has been subjected to extreme heat under great pressure over long periods of time*", and believe diamonds to be "*thousands*" or "*millions*" of years old. Ann P., a real estate broker, who had an elaborate interpretation of her diamonds, said: "*Well, I know that diamonds are formed in faults and it's some kind of process having to do with layers of the earth in South America. I know that there are not many diamonds here, but my perception is that they come from South America in vitamin rich soil.*" Rosetta explained: "*Well, this is probably wrong, but I think it's compressed carbon that has been under weight for a long time. I don't know if it needs heat or not but I know its way down there and I, well, I think somehow it gets really hot or something. Um something about crystals. I have no idea!*"

Apart from having little familiarity with how diamonds are formed, mined, or produced, most did not indicate a need or an interest in acquiring such knowledge. Those who did discuss these processes (both geological or cultural) sometimes used that information within interpretations. Kirsten's diamond was given to her by her husband, and part of its significance for her is generated by, *“the intense forces that formed it, so I mean, all that heat and pressure and energy and the live things of the earth like the trees are compressed by nature miles and miles under the ground into this one beautiful sparkling diamond. So I mean it's (the diamond) all about me and Charles being a part of the whole natural process, part of the whole intense, amazing cosmic cycle of existence.”*

When I asked Katherine what she knew about diamond formation she laughed and said, *“Well, I know that they are made of squished dinosaurs....”* While most diamond is dated at about 3 billion years old, much older than even the oldest of dinosaurs⁶⁸, the idea that they are built with the same material that constitutes life is correct. And actually, some geologists study diamond formation to develop an understanding of ancient conditions under the surface of the earth.

Diamond as evidence of conditions and events within the Earth

In Peircian terms, indexes are signs that result from real, material relations. For example, smoke is an index of fire. Diamond can be thought of an index of particular

⁶⁸ The oldest dinosaurs, the Argentinean Eoraptor and the prosauropods of Madagascar, are currently dated at around 228 to 230 million years old, so most diamonds are substantially older than the oldest of dinosaurs, but it is possible that the dinosaurs contained carbon molecules that were once diamond.

conditions and events within the Earth. While the processes that ferry carbon down from the Earth's surface to the magma, and the volcanic eruptions that brought the stones to the surface took place millions of years ago, diamonds that eruptions carried forth appear to have been pre-existing. Diamonds are mined from bluish, carrot-shaped rock deposits called kimberlite, which are the hardened results of volcanic eruptions. These pipes are deep, but narrow; the surface area of the Orapa diamond pipe in South Africa, one of the largest in the world, covers only 262 acres.

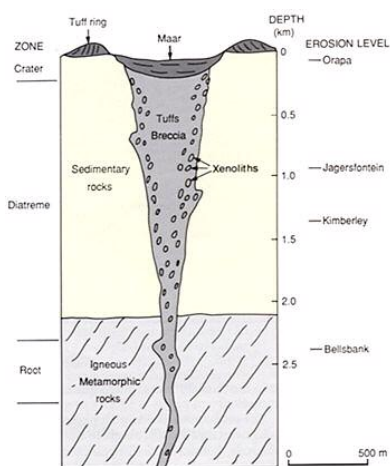


Figure 3-2 Kimberlite Pipe⁶⁹

Kimberlite deposits are relatively rare, and only a few are diamondiferous.⁷⁰

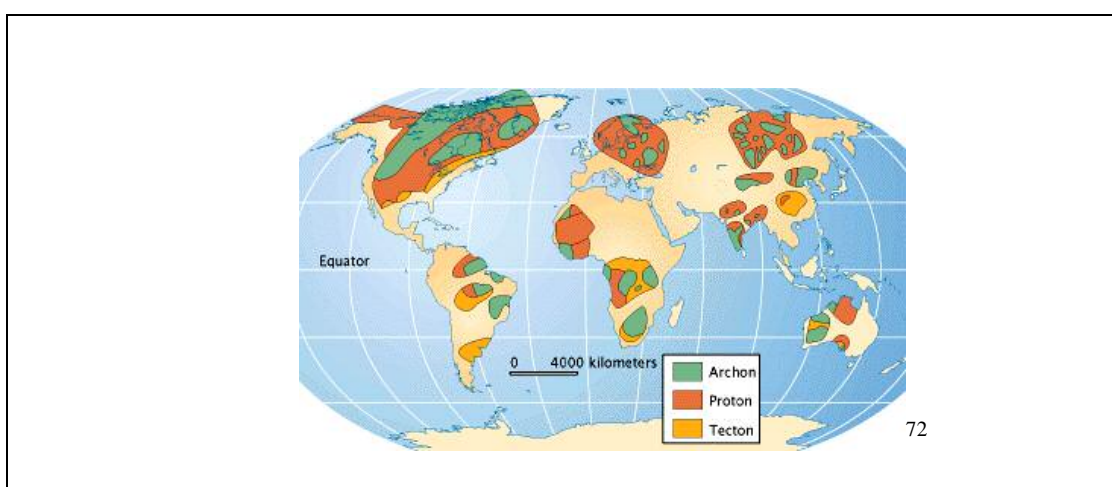
Kimberlitic eruptions occur only on very old, thick continental plates called archons.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Source: http://www.canadianrockhound.ca/2002/01/diamonds_fig_05.jpg. April 26, 2005

⁷⁰ Not all kimberlitic pipes contain diamonds – first of all there must be diamonds to bring up to the surface, but secondly, the diamond can be destroyed in the volcanic process.

⁷¹ The Earth is comprised of concentric layers of material: the inner core, the mantle and the crust. The core consists of iron-nickel alloy and is dense, hot, and stable. The mantle, made of magnesium and iron silicate minerals, lies between the crust and the core. The mantle is convecting, i.e. circulating very slowly. It is this movement that contributes to plate tectonics. The moving plates are mineral-rich and less dense than the underlying mantle. The thickest areas of the crust hosts the continents, while thinner layers form ocean beds. The crust is continually being reinvented as plates slide one upon the other: as one plate is subsumed under another (in a process known as “subduction”), plate material is forced downwards to eventually become re-integrated into the magma. On the ocean floor, melted magma squeezes up through vents, thickening ocean floors, as other plates are subducting. The thickest, oldest plates that form the continents

Kimberlitic magma originates from more than 150 km down, whereas most volcanic source material comes from depths of less than 60km. In addition to other rocks and minerals sampled by the volcano, diamonds are sometimes brought to the surface. As explained to me by geologists, volcanoes act as elevators, bringing the diamonds from the magma to the earth's surface. It seems probable that magma conditions underneath archons contribute to diamond formation in the first place. To prospect for diamonds, then, one should locate diamond friendly geology: an archon.



High yield diamond pipes are mined in areas with Archons such as Southern Africa, Russia, and Canada. Protons, dated at 1.6-2.5 billion years are unlikely to contain kimberlite pipes, but may have diamondiferous lamproite pipes, as in the Australian Argyle pipe. Tectons, dated at 800 million-1.6 billion years, are unlikely to contain kimberlite or lamproite pipes.

Figure 3-3 Archon /Diamond Mine Distribution Map

Diamonds form in the mantle, at high temperature and pressure. Below a certain threshold, carbon will form graphite, and above this threshold, diamonds melt.⁷³ The

have a particular shape – the thickest areas form a kind of keel, known as cratons, and it is within diamondiferous kimberlite pipes found on archons, the oldest type of craton (cratons are at least 2.5 billion years old), where gem quality diamonds can be found.

⁷² Source: <http://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/diamonds/images/1world.gif>. April 26, 2005.

⁷³ There do appear to be rare cases of minuscule diamonds being produced either on the crust as a result of tectonic movement, such as in Kazakhstan, or as the result of catastrophic collisions of meteorites with the earth. Microscopic specimens of lonsdaleite, which appears to be a relatively unstable formation halfway

range within which diamonds can be formed and sustained is known as the diamond stability field: ideal conditions for formation is at a depth of about 200km at temperatures of about 1000 degrees Celsius where pressure is at about 50 kilobars.⁷⁴ There are various types of mantle rock, but two are potentially diamond forming: harzburgite⁷⁵ and eclogite⁷⁶. Kimberlitic volcanoes sample mantle materials, so finding “indicator minerals” on the surface, such as chromium rich garnets associated with harzburgite or eclogite, can help locate a diamond pipe. Semiotically, as the term “indicator mineral” suggests, chromium rich garnets, are indexes of diamondiferous mantle material.

Diamonds are used by scientists, by industry, and by consumers, all to different ends, but first they must be mined, or collected from alluvial fields. When a pipe reaches the surface, material explodes outward, but can slide back towards the top of the pipe (eluvial deposits) or away from it (colluvial deposits) through processes of erosion. Erosive forces carry the diamonds down rivers and streams, spreading the material over large expanses (see Kirkley 1998). Though efforts are made to find original sources for

between diamond and graphite, have been found only around the meteor impact zones such as the Canyon Diablo impact site in Arizona, while tiny diamond aggregates (up to 1cm) have been detected at the Popirari impact crater in Siberia (See Harlow, Shatsky, Sololev 1998).

⁷⁴ Outside of ideal conditions, diamond can form at temperatures of 1800 degrees under pressure of 65 kilobars and at temperatures of 400 degrees where pressure is about 25 kilobars. These conditions can be created in a lab to make diamond (see Hazen 1999 for an excellent account of the history of the development of synthetic diamond).

⁷⁵ Diamondiferous harzburgite typically contains chromium and magnesium rich garnets, and is known as garnet harzburgite. The inclusions made of harzburgitic minerals within diamond can be dated to determine the diamond's age. Diamonds emergent from harzburgitic rock were created during the early formation of the earth's crust (3 billion yrs and greater).

⁷⁶ Diamondiferous eclogite can yield a higher concentration of diamond, but is usually associated with processes related to subduction of crust plates or to seafloor spreading in which carbon debris is reabsorbed into the mantle, becoming available for crystallization into diamond. Dated at 3 billion years or younger, eclogitic diamond is younger than the harzburgitic type.

alluvial fields, sometimes the pipes cannot be located (as is the case with the Brazilian and Indian alluvial finds). Diamonds can eventually be carried out to sea, resulting in rich high-quality offshore marine deposits (such as that off the shore of Namibia).

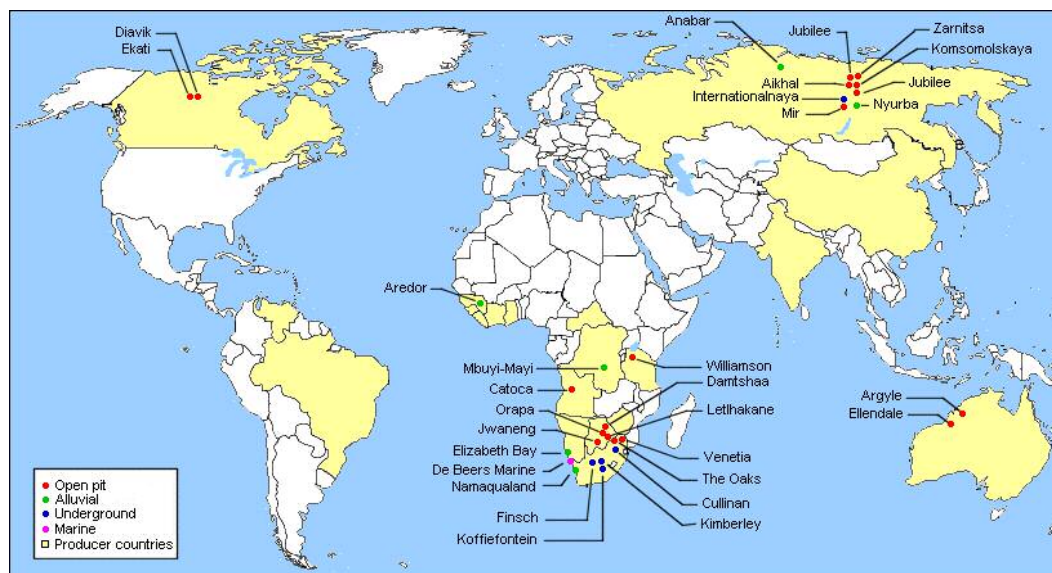


Figure 3-4 Map of Global Rough Production. Diamonds are mined in African countries, Australia, Russia, Brazil, China, and, most recently, Canada.⁷⁷

As Figure 3:4 illustrates, mining coincides with archon locations, but rough diamond must be transfigured into gem before it reaches 47th Street retail counters and consumers. The following section traces this transfiguration.

Rough

Diamonds are produced in about 20 countries. Consumers have varying degrees of knowledge about where diamonds are mined. Some knew they are found in Africa; fewer could name specific countries of origin. Rosetta, an educated 30 something, said, “diamonds are from Africa, but I don’t know which countries, maybe like Congo or South

⁷⁷ Source: http://www.diamants-infos.com/en/rough/index.php?rub=world_production, April 26, 2005

Africa, or maybe just in South Africa where the market is, and maybe some other places but I have no idea.” Sandya, who I found to be extremely well-informed about polished gems knew less about rough, said, “diamonds come from the Earth, I mean they are rocks, right? I think they come from Africa and India, but mainly Africa and California.”



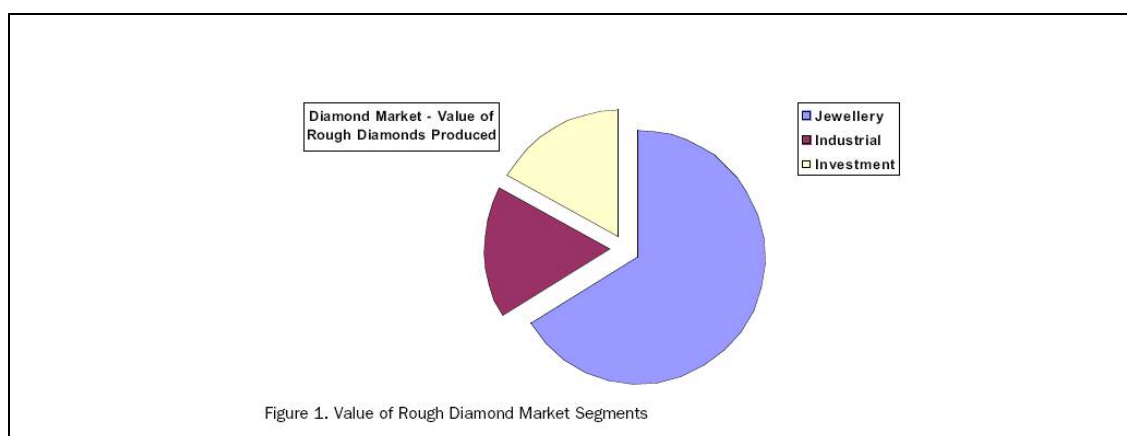
Figure 3-5 Map of global rough production ⁷⁸

The industry’s attempt to promote an ideology of scarcity has been successful (though the presence of diamonds in the possession of over 70% of American women undermines this idea). Consumers routinely stated that diamonds are “*very rare*,” sometimes in conjunction with explaining why diamonds are expensive. Acquiring accurate statistics of diamond production at any stage is difficult due to a combination of industry secrecy, inconsistent reporting techniques practiced by each country, and underreporting of the amount of rough circulated on the black market or outside the De Beers pipeline. Some underreportage results from a desire to avoid taxation, and the ease with which stones can be smuggled across borders facilitates the practice, while optimistic reportage encourages investment and creates an impression of mine viability.

⁷⁸ Source: <http://www.cnn.com/interactive/specials/0009/yourbusiness/diamond.popup/content.html>

Nevertheless, the idea that diamonds are “scarce” is challenged by the fact that current annual world diamond output is on the order of 150 million carats valued at \$10,068 billion (Even-Zohar, 2005).

The amount of diamond in economically profitable mines consists of just under 1 to 6 carats of rough diamonds per ton of overburden (ground extracted), while the cost of removing and processing the ore can, not surprisingly, be substantial, with an average per carat value of about 67\$ (*ibid*). Mine viability, however, is contingent upon the type and value of the stones it produces: a mine producing few but large, good quality gems may be deemed more viable than a pipe, such as the Australian Argyle pipe, regularly producing lots of poor quality small gems.⁷⁹ And, the vast majority, upwards of about 80%, of rough is “bort,” industrial grade diamond, selling for as low as a few dollars per carat. Total world caratage might consist of as many as 800 million separate stones, which is not to say that they are not hard to find and that it is not expensive to mine them (Hart 2001), but the idea that diamonds are truly rare is hard to maintain in the face of such figures.



⁷⁹ The ratio of diamonds recovered to sheer earth moved must be high enough to make the mine profitable, otherwise the mine is closed. There are several known diamond yielding pipes which are currently not being mined due to economic unfeasibility, including one in Arkansas.

*Figure 3-6 Diamond Market Monetary Values: Rough is classified as industrial, jewelry or investment grade. The monetary worth of diamonds from jewelry and investment grade stones far exceeds that of bort, which makes mining diamonds economically feasible.*⁸⁰

De Beers controls most of the rough trade, acquiring and distributing it through its Diamond Trading Company (DTC⁸¹) at selling events called “sights” in London. Rough is acquired through various means – the company itself owns a number of mines, especially in Africa, and maintains agreements with, or has partial ownership in, other mining companies and government-run outfits. Rough that comes through De Beers, now about 60% of the total market, comes through the Diamond Trading Company (DTC) while the remaining 40% moves through “outside” (non-De Beers) channels.

Diamonds come from Botswana, Australia, Russia, Angola, South Africa Congo, and Namibia (see Appendix II). There are varying estimates as to the exact contribution that each country makes, but Botswana, through a joint venture with De Beers, is the largest producer, making up about 30% of total global production through the Debswana mining company.⁸²

According to estimates published by De Beers and the World Diamond Council, almost 25 million carats come from Botswana per annum. Money generated from diamonds is by far the largest source of revenue for Botswana and therefore any fluctuations in the market may have severe consequences for the country, which despite its diamond exports, remains extremely impoverished. Besides starvation, the people of

⁸⁰ Source: http://www-1.gsb.columbia.edu/journals/files/chazen/Global_Diamond_Industry.pdf. April 26, 2005.

⁸¹ The DTC is the part of the De Beers Group responsible for sorting the rough into some 16,000 categories based on shape, size, quality and color; and pricing it. The DTC is also in charge of marketing and sales of rough to sight holders.

⁸² Even though it faced technical problems and a two week strike in 2004, Debswana produced caratage valued at \$2.32 billion via 31.1 million carats (Even-Zohar, 2005)

Botswana suffer from record rates of AIDS (over a third of the population is infected by HIV, the highest rate anywhere in the world (UNDP 2001)). Unfortunately, indigenous Botswanans have been compulsorily removed from diamond rich lands by the government, which has instigated calls for boycott by NGO's opposing forcible relocation and the circulation of blood diamonds (see Suzman 2003 for coverage from multiple perspectives). Debswana, however, appears to profit De Beers as well as the Botswanan government and people, and a serious global boycott on diamonds could eventually have deleterious consequences on the lives of ordinary Botswanans.

The next two largest producing states, Russia and Canada, are not dependent on diamond production for crucial revenue, and are therefore not nearly as dependent on De Beers for knowledge and rough sales. Their governments and mining outfits are not imbricated in the De Beers empire (although the Russian mining outfit, Alrosa, and the cutting company, Kristall, are both government owned and operated) and consequently, are better able to leverage their products "outside" of the De Beers pipeline. It is estimated that of Alrosa's 2004 production of 31.71 million carats valued at \$1,988.8 million, 700 million was marketed through De Beers' DTC (Evan-Zohar, 2005). But there are viable "outside" markets: one of the few to quit and speak out publicly against De Beers, former employee Robert Wake-Walker started his own trading company, WWW International Diamond Consultants, which trades in both Russian and Canadian rough (Hart 2001).

Another major player in outside sales is former De Beers sightholder, Uzbeki-born Israeli diamondiare Lev Leviev, whose strong political connections and business partnerships in Russia, the Middle East and Africa allow him to successfully trade rough.

Leviev is implicated in numerous industry-changing events in the 1990s, such as the selling off of Soviet reserves and rough mined out of Angola. Leviev, like other moguls in the world of diamond trading, is very rich, very connected and depicted as unusual, charismatic and mysterious.⁸³

Rough from RioTinto's Argyle mine in Australia is also sold, largely to polishers and dealers in India and Antwerp, without "help" from De Beers. The yield is low quality, small and brownish, though Argyle also occasionally produces extremely valuable pink diamonds. Due to growth of the cutting industry in India, Argyle is able to remain profitable as low-paid cutters take small near-gem rough that was once considered industrial grade and transform it into gemstone.

Diamond Mining

Consumers' discussion of rough and mining was variable, though some described how they imagined it. I was talking to Roger, a film critic in his early 40's, and asked if he knew where diamonds came from. Roger, being visually inclined, answered, *"diamond is a lot like other rocks, granite or cobalt or even chalk and limestone, so you mine it. I can picture it, like gold or coal miners, like those photographs of Sebastião Salgado – he has these photographs of miners in Africa or wherever and its heavy chiaroscuro, all black and white, massive pits filled with workers, so many workers that it is like an abstract painting, very odd and they take place in various African nations. Diamond mining, it's like that."*

⁸³ Diamondaires like Leviev, both inside and outside of De Beers, are often portrayed by media as heroic, larger-than-life gamblers, whose canny and vision have catapulted them, and those closest to them, into positions of fortune and power.



Figure 3-7 Photographs by Sebastião Salgado. The Serra Pelada gold mine (Detail on Left), Brazil, 1986⁸⁴. Roger imagines diamond mining as similar to these images.

Others also described a coal mining scenario when asked about their knowledge of diamond mining. Actually there are several types of diamond mining, none of which are particularly reminiscent of a coal mine: open pit and block mining, alluvial and river diggings, and marine extraction (both from the sea floor as well as from on-shore terraces or beach front). Although the early days of the South African rush were characterized by thousands of workers mobbing the mine and hauling diamond, ground, and each other in and out of the pit with ropes and pulleys and ladders, diamond miners today almost never come into direct contact with diamondiferous material. Today's mines are heavily automated.

⁸⁴ Source: http://www.masters-of-photography.com/S/salgado/salgado_serra_pelada_full.html

Block mining, takes place when open pit mines become deep and unwieldy and is similar to coal mining in that it is underground. But diamonds are randomly scattered throughout the kimberlite, not in veins, and the “tunnels” are huge theaters where tons of overburden are removed by trucks.⁸⁵ However, the exploitative working conditions that plague other mining industries occur in diamond mining.⁸⁶

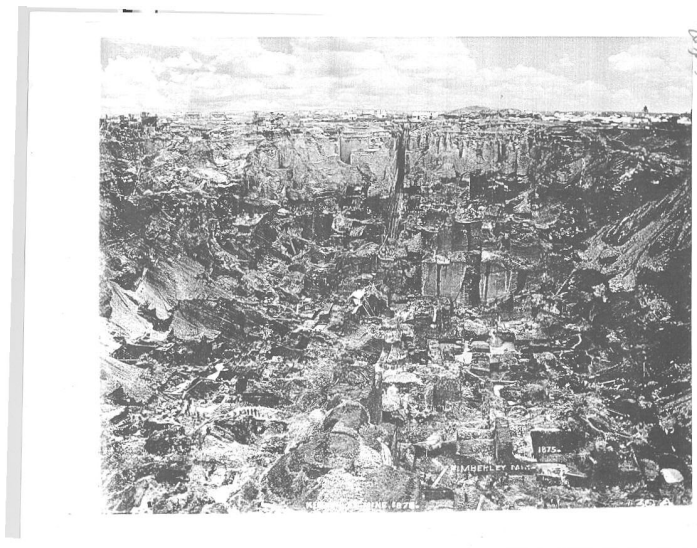


Figure 3-8 Kimberley Mine 1874 does look a little like Salgado's images of the Serre Pelada gold mine.

Tom (quoted at the beginning of the Introduction) is in his early 30's and works in publishing. He spoke of the labor, race and ethnic politics involved in the industry and

⁸⁵ When open pits become too deep to profitably manage, some companies resort to a block cut method in which long shafts are sunk parallel to the mine and then horizontal shafts dug under the exposed pipe. Workers dynamite the roof and let the debris fall, collecting it and ferrying it to the surface for crushing. Enormous amounts of ground, “overburden,” has to be processed just to recover a few grams of diamond.

⁸⁶ According to Maclean's, BHP Billiton's diamond mine in Vancouver has been touted as an excellent physical workplace. The Canadian Ekati mine workers have a recreation centre, Internet access, golf simulators, saunas, and yoga classes and gourmet meals (Maclean's, 10/11/2004-10/18/2004). This article is balanced by numerous reports of racism, exploitation, miner deaths and injuries in the diamond industry at large. Janine Roberts, in *Glitter and Greed* (2003), although focused on Africa, alleges among other things, that there is substantial asbestos poisoning and lung problems associated with diamond mining.

overall has a cynical attitude about diamond consumption. He went as far as to say, somewhat provocatively, when we were discussing the wearing of diamonds by men that, *“well, the only men, or people, that should wear diamonds are the black South Africans. They work to get them out of the ground so they deserve to wear them. I mean they might get one for their birthday or maybe never and I don’t know if they ever keep a few or not – but they should.”*

Luke, a computer technician in his early 30’s, alluded to worker exploitation when he criticized the consumption of diamonds by rappers. He views the political messages in rap as *“very inconsistent, in terms of race, in terms of violence, in terms of the objectification of women and things like that, they are all over the place, and I mean how can you talk about progressive politics and then wear those obscene diamonds and still have the gall to be confronted with the realities of the South African diamond trade? It just doesn’t make any sense.”* Luke and Tom are explicitly in favor of purchasing diamonds for women and of women wearing them, but feel that consumers have some responsibility to be aware of the realities of diamond production. In keeping with the basic apparent inconsistency of human behavior with stated “norms,” “knowledge” and “values,” an awareness of exploitation or of poor working conditions does not necessarily translate into a boycott of goods.

Open pit or “open cast” mines expose deposits at the surface. When a pipe is identified, kimberlite is dynamited into huge chunks, which are crushed into smaller, more controllable pieces from which the diamonds are extracted. Botswana’s Jwaneng

open pit is the most valuable mine in the world (in terms of revenue generated) with a recovery ratio of 140 carats per metric ton of overburden.⁸⁷



Figure 3-9 Jwaneng (Botswana) Open Pit Mine⁸⁸

Marine mining is done from large tankers that literally suck the diamond studded sands from the ocean floor. Diamonds taken to the sea have passed the tests of erosion and tend to be of very high quality. In marine mining, as with other types of corporate-directed diamond mining, workers almost never come into direct contact with diamonds or diamondiferous overburden.

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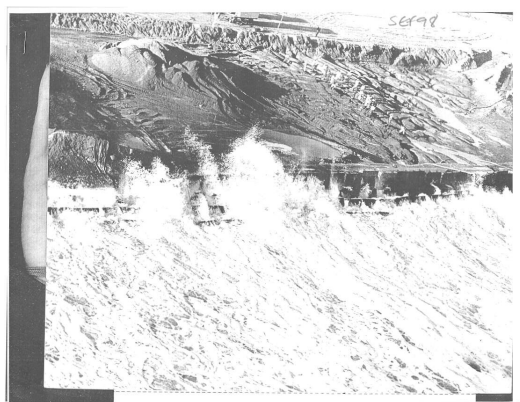


Figure 3-10 Marine Mining, Namibia (in off shore barge, and “holding back the sea. (Right image from JWT De Beers archives at Duke University)

⁸⁷ Source: <http://www.mbendi.co.za/indy/ming/dmnd/af/bo/p0005.htm> (figures are for 1988)

⁸⁸ Source: www.amnh.org/exhibitions/diamonds/other.html

⁸⁹ Source: <http://www.namdeb.com/operations/opsDebmarineNam.asp>. July 2004.

Distribution “Sights”

After rough is acid cleaned and sorted into literally thousands of categories based on color, size, quality and cutability⁹⁰, DTC sights take place (10 times a year). Prior to each event, “sightholders”, invited clients, through their brokers, advise the DTC as to what goods they want. The DTC prepares and prices client “boxes.” When clients arrive, they, along with their broker, are escorted into a room where the boxes are opened and the contents examined. Boxes can be accepted or rejected, but if rejected, the client may lose his sight invite. Because the quality and price of gems varies tremendously, clients try to acquire as many good quality stones that will lose the least amount of volume upon cutting as possible. Conversely, De Beers must sell off all its rough, not just the desirable pieces, so boxes contain diamonds of all qualities. Clients can be rewarded for “good behavior” with the inclusion of “specials,” or large gems at deep discount, while others might receive “junk,” small or poor quality stones that are hard to polish or will lose significant weight in cutting if they are not in keeping with De Beers expectations (see Epstein 1982).

Because of pressure on De Beers, partly resulting from transformations in rough channels, there have been changes to the sight system, now under the appellation Supplier of Choice, as part of a broader strategy to maintain control.⁹¹ De Beers recently

⁹⁰ After stones have been conflated, it becomes extremely difficult to discern where any one diamond may have originated since they all virtually have the same molecular composition. There are efforts being made to develop technology capable of definitively identifying origin.

⁹¹ The colors and sizes that come onto the market are controlled by the DTC, but recent changes in the global industry have caused De Beers to lose some of its power over trade in rough. The discovery of diamond in Australia and Canada in the 80’s and 90’s, transformations in the cutting industry, emergent outside diamond sourcing, to name a few significant factors, caused De Beers to adjust its strategy. De Beers privatized, introduced new site rules under the name “Supplier of Choice” (SoC), and began pushing its clients to begin taking a more active role in marketing in exchange for being given a sight. De Beers’s

decreased the numbers of sightholders to about 85, amidst much grumbling by those who were “cut off.” There are now less than 10 American sightholders. The role that sightholders fulfill in marketing has been increased; clients are expected to “add value” to the industry through tactics like branding. According to De Beers, companies’ financial standing, market position, distribution abilities, marketing strength, technical and manufacturing ability and compliance with the DTC’s Best Practice Principles (maintaining consumer and trade confidence in the context of the increasing threat of synthetics and treatments through proper disclosure) determine who is allotted a sight.

Only diamond can cut diamond

“Diamonds are cut with strong machines. I know they are really hard so I guess some they are cut with some steel machines or something.” - Dana, consumer

There are major cutting centers in Antwerp, India, New York, Thailand, and Tel Aviv, though smaller cutting outfits have opened in countries where rough is extracted such as Namibia and Russia. In general, small goods are processed in India, middle size goods, or meles, go to Israel, and larger, finer goods are sent to Antwerp. Big, pricey stones are often sent for cutting to New York. As reflected by the emergence of Chinese diamond factories, the price of labor, as well as historical geo-politics, determine the architecture of the cutting industry.

Supplier of Choice strategy involves selecting rough clients on criteria, including their willingness to boost the promotion of diamonds through advertising, branding and marketing (Rapaport Trade Wire, June 17), which has the effect of both increasing the net promotion of diamonds while passing off some of the marketing costs to retailers. De Beer is no longer willing to foot the bill for the majority of diamond marketing that is of benefit to all.



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Figure 3-11 A piece of rough diamond. Rough is not much to look at, but in the hands of a skilled artisan, it is transformed into, for some, a most appealing gemstone.

During the early years of diamond wear, diamond was simply cleaned and worn in rings or as amulets. Diamond was thought to transfer its invincibility to the wearer, where the hardness of the stone was privileged in terms of significance. Diamond interpreted in this way is operating as an icon: diamond was understood as a metaphor for strength, courage and prowess for warriors who sought to absorb the qualities of the stone through wearing it in a move that contains hints of the kind of both sympathetic and contagious magical thinking that swirls throughout diamond usage today. For example, people told me that diamonds (magically) absorb the character and emotions of the wearer, so one “*should to be careful about wearing used diamonds...you don’t know where it’s been!*”

The early use of diamond in men’s accoutrements in India and in Greece was accompanied by an unexplained “taboo” against the polishing even though rough diamonds look much like a lump of quartz, with little luster. As they found their way through trade and conquest to Europe, the taboo was lifted and by the 14th century, a

⁹² Source: <http://www.powow.com/samihossaily/ptr39p106g.jpg>. April 26, 2005

cutting center had emerged in Antwerp. At the time, diamonds were scarce, under sumptuary law, and used only to complement to other gems and semiprecious stones.

As the taboo dissipated, cutters found that shearing off a natural facet, using a technique called cleaving, opened the diamond to light. Cleavers make a narrow wedge, or a “kerf,” in the diamond by rubbing one against another. The wedge must be placed exactly parallel to the grain.⁹³ A flat edged knife is inserted into the wedge and then gently tapped. If all goes well, the diamond splits, but a minuscule error can cause the stone to be reduced to chards: cleaving diamonds that contain a “gletz” (or fracture), “knot” (a small diamond within a diamond), or “cloud” (area with tiny bubble-like inclusions) is dicey because stones can shatter when tapped. Cleaving requires skill and patience, and is the most expedient way to open up a diamond, but cleaving is a dying art (replaced by sawing).

As faceting became more advanced with Lodewyk van Berken’s invention of the scaif in the late 15th century, diamonds began to appear more frequently in European regalia. The scaif is a polishing wheel impregnated with a mixture of oil and diamond dust. Stones were cemented in a little cup-like “dop” and then held against the spinning wheel until the desired amount was ground away. This changed jewelry as facets were reflecting light in new ways. Cutters flocked to Antwerp to learn scaifing, enhancing Antwerp’s status as the preeminent cutting center.

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⁹³ Each diamond has within it a cleavage plane and must be considered carefully, sometimes for weeks or even months, to determine how it will split along the plane.

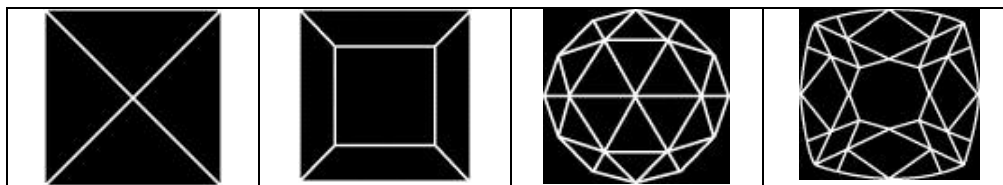


Figure 3-12 Early forms of the fashioned shapes -- called "cuts" -- of diamond start with the point, which emulates the point of a natural octahedron, and evolve through the table, rose, and early brilliant cuts. The amount of light reflected by diamond depends upon the number, angle and placement of facets.⁹⁴

It was not until the twentieth century that the saw, a circular blade coated with diamond dust and oil, was invented and cutters were freed from the constraint of shaping stones only along naturally occurring cleavage lines. In sawing, the stone is again cemented in a dop and placed against the rotary saw. Sawing a stone is in many respects more expensive than cleaving (about 1/10th of a carat of dust is required to saw through a carat of diamond) and time consuming (it can take days to saw through a moderately sized stone), but it allows cutters to lop off bulges and to salvage misshapen or twisted stones that perhaps could not have been cleaved, or only cleaved with very great talent. Diamond sawing requires far less skill than cleaving, and moved the cutting industry towards a semi-mechanized process. In the 1960's a De Beers subsidiary developed the Pieromatic diamond cutting machine and though it could only be operated by skilled labor, it greatly reduced the need for long apprenticeships. A worker could be trained to use the machine in a few months. The development of automated machines also heralded the mass-production of diamonds.

An owner of a diamond business must trust his employees and as a result, almost every aspect of the industry is organized in accord with kinship or close friendships. Cutting has sustained families for generations, and cutting families such as the

⁹⁴ Source: <http://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/diamonds/royal.html>. September 20, 2004.

Tolkowskys are well-known in the diamond world. Maurice Tolkowsky arrived in Antwerp in 1880 and worked a thriving factory where cutters relied on experience, intuition and luck to polish facets. With the technology for cleaving, bruting (also known as girdling or rounding, this process forms a belt around the widest diameter of the stone), polishing, and sawing, Tolkowsky's grandson, Marcel Tolkowsky, a mathematician and cutter, developed in 1919, through a combination of theory and experience, the 58 faceted "brilliant" cut which remains the standard round cut today.

Rough goes out to cutting centers around the world through various bourses for preparation. About 60% of diamond in the US moves through the NY market and there is still a cutting industry there. However as explained by a cutter just before he was forced to move his shop uptown from the Bowery, "*cutting is a dying art in New York. It takes years and years of apprenticing and these kids today don't want to do that, so I don't know what's gonna happen, you can get a setting that looks OK but the real craftsmanship is dying out. We are a dying breed!*" It is difficult to acquire valid statistics on just how much rough is going to which location for cutting. The Indian cutting industry, now employing hundreds of thousands of people in Gujarat, specializes in production of small, cheap goods. Brownish and tiny (sometimes as little as half a "point," or two hundredths, of a carat), these stones can only carry a few facets, although amazingly, the "larger" Indian goods of even 1 point are polished with the full 58 facets. As the Indian industry gains momentum, factories are trying to get as much larger rough as possible. The development of the small gem industry has meant that mines producing

low quality rough can be run economically. Though the cuts are of inferior quality and the stones are “cheap,” making millions of these per year generates enormous profits.⁹⁵

Technological advances in cutting, in conjunction with labor costs, taxation schedules, the emergence of Indian corporations, geopolitical events such as war, serendipitous entrepreneurship by moguls like Leviev and the discovery of diamonds in Australia, Russia, and Canada have impacted the architecture of contemporary production. Stones are materially transfigured from rocks to gems, but diamonds are produced as symbols of glamour, romance and status by heavy-handed advertising and marketing schemes underwritten by De Beers (as discussed in Chapter 5).

Un-Cut Stones

Most diamonds in jewelry have been cut and polished. But in the expansion of styles and new forms of products, the use of un-cut diamonds, which are difficult to recognize as diamonds and to price, has become de rigeur. Cartier’s “Paris Nouvelle Vague” collection exemplifies this movement towards a kind of rough diamond insiderism. Popular media has detailed both cut and rough diamonds worn by celebrities such as Nicole Kidman’s 240 carat yellow and white diamond necklace designed for her by Bulgari at the 2002 Oscars (Becker 2003). Echoing the 1960s French film genre,

⁹⁵ Remnants of the India cutting industry still operational from the old Indian mines were in place after Independence: a few cutters in Surat had survived as a cottage industry polishing semiprecious stones and whatever little rough was available. The Indian government encouraged diamond cutting as a way to generate export revenue, but no one was willing to send quality goods because labor was insufficiently skilled to cut large, high grade goods. Indian dealers in Antwerp whose business had been to export polished goods to India hit upon the idea of sending home the junk rough to Surat; even though the grade would be bad and the goods would sell for very little, there would be a small profit. This move turned out to be extremely prescient. Rosy Blue, one of the largest Indian companies, now employs 25,000 people in nine countries, is a vertically integrated enterprise, cutting and dealing in rough and polished goods, patenting their own special cuts such as the “Aster,” and has acquired a DTC sight.

Nouvelle Vague (New Wave) best exemplified in films such as *Jules and Jim*, *The 400 Blows*, *Breathless* and *Day for Night*, and by in its emphasis on the director as auteur, thinking of film as art, use of innovative device, and the rewriting of film grammar and narratives rules (Rawlings 2004), Cartier and rough diamond wear designers have applied the name “Nouvelle Vague.”

The title suggests a break with tradition and interpolates film buffs while casting rough diamonds in the role of rebel, as a material alternative to the “traditional” polished stones ubiquitous in the retail trade. Ironically, in very un-nouvelle vague form, the individual designer of Cartier’s Nouvelle Vague has been totally erased, and the “narrative” of diamond jewelry as status has not only not been challenged, but the intent is to actually enhance the narrative through a classic capitalistic strategy of appropriating and marketing signs of rebellion.



*Figure 3-13 Ring from Cartier’s “Paris Nouvelle Vague” collection*⁹⁶

The appropriation of this title for Cartier’s collection suggests consumers might expect a greater aesthetic departure in reflecting the spirit of Nouvelle Vague as exemplified by the most famous quote of Nouvelle Vague era, attributed to Godard: “Yes, a film should have a Beginning, a Middle, and an End. But not necessarily in *that* order” (in Rawlings 2004). Diamond wearing by rappers in their rejection of traditional settings

⁹⁶ Source: www.fp1.com/.../hotsummer/images/pict4sm.jpg (April 26, 2005)

by donning personalized jewelry such as diamond eye patches or name plates, the use of diamonds in innovative contexts (e.g. in “fronts” – platinum and diamond teeth frames), and resetting the gender value of diamonds from feminine to masculine (and not just masculine but macho), as well as the use of jumbo size diamonds that call attention to themselves in what can be interpreted as much as critique of, as an apotheosis of, the diamond as status symbol narrative, is in some ways much more in the spirit of Nouvelle Vague than is the Cartier campaign.

Rocks cum gems

Diamond production currently takes place in about 25 countries, tending to originate and then undergo transformation in economically underdeveloped areas. Most of these rocks cum gems are purchased and consumed in the U.S.. There are varying degrees of consumer knowledge about diamonds’ materiality and production: some know virtually nothing about the industry while others are well-informed and entertain a developed critique. Material and production knowledges, in combination with other discourses, such as those promoted by advertising and by diamond grading, can play a role in how people interpret diamonds. The next chapter examines how GIA provides jargon and an evaluatory scheme consumers use as an additional resource for interpretation.

CHAPTER 4 THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF DIAMONDS: HOW DISCRIMINATIONS IN THE MARKET VALUE OF DIAMONDS ARE CONSTRUCTED AND MAINTAINED

Diamonds are in a sense just rocks, but in American society they are especially prized rocks, implicated in social rituals and relationships, economic organizations, and industrial production. How are differences in market value produced and maintained? The organization of the industry contributes to diamonds' meanings and price discriminations. Building on the previous chapter which explores the articulation, or more commonly the dis-articulation, of the commodity chain to consumer knowledge, this chapter explores how grading contributes to ideas about pricing and price differences, carat size, cut and color that are threaded into narratives of meaning.

Diamond grading is a highly contrived system of value, upheld by the industry, and only partially revealed to consumers. The industry retains a monopoly on the construction of value variables, and the methods by which variables are evaluated. The use of jargon, specialized tools, and knowledge is carefully leaked to customers in effort to guide perceptions. Though the differences between one diamond and the next may, literally, lie at the microscopic level, consumers are "educated" to see and buy into the price discriminations related to such differences. In this way, virtually identical items are choreographed into a hierarchy of prices. The value scale upholds the industry, including the distal node of the commodity chain where consumers interpret diamonds.

* * *

The obscurity of the formal features of polished diamond to the average person are overridden at the point of sale by "grading" based on the 4 C's (Carat, Color, Clarity

and Cut). Stringent specifications were developed and institutionalized in the 1950's by the Gemological Institute of America (GIA), the hegemonic diamond grading body. Without the GIA system, or some system like it, it would be much more difficult for retailers to justify price differences to consumers.

As part of this research, I attended GIA's Diamond Grading course and received a certification of successful completion, which does not qualify me as a professional grader, but did teach me how intricate the process of diamond grading has become and the extent to which market valuation remains hidden under the dual veil of virtual invisibility and "expert" knowledge. The average consumer cannot discern gradations in value, nor do they have the requisite knowledge to evaluate diamonds would they have the equipment to examine them. Most diamonds, however, that come through the retail market are subjected to these standards which play a role in interpretations.

Gemological Institute of America

The Gemological Institute of America (GIA) is located at the corner of 5th Avenue and 47th streets in Midtown Manhattan. This corner building houses the Diamond Dealers Club, is full of diamond merchants and others involved in the trade, and is under high security and full surveillance at all times. At the front desk, guards scrutinize visitors and require them to show a ID for Xeroxing before they pass through metal detectors, sign their name and list specifically what floors will be visited. Guards closely monitor visitor's movements, and the first day, when I accidentally got off the elevator on the wrong floor, almost instantly a sentry was at my side asking, "Hey what are you doing on this floor?" To further enhance security, businesses there employ double buzz doors:

people are buzzed through one door into a tiny cubicle with a security camera, and only buzzed through the second door when the first door locks shut.

The Diamond Grading class I attended met in the lab classroom, equipped with microscopes, special fluorescent lights, master's stones, diamond grading tools. The floor is carpeted in bright blue: if a student drops and loses a diamond, he must pay for it, but the blue rug makes finding the stones, that too easily pop out of tweezers and go flying, much easier. There were approximately 15 others in my class, all of whom were already involved in the trade in some capacity or another. I explained that I was there as part of my doctoral research. The other students were suspicious at first since I had no business interest, but tolerated my presence and were willing to talk with me about their experience during breaks. The classes were led by two instructors, Avi and Rebecca. "Every diamond is beautiful..." Avi introduced the course, "but some diamonds are more beautiful than others!" This got a lot of chuckles. "Of course, you never tell a customer that!" Avi continued, saying something to the effect of: "Now, in this course you will learn to grade polished stones. We don't price diamonds here, but the grade is what is used to determine price, according to market fluctuations. And the grading is what the certificate reflects...."

Geography

Diamond grading is modeled on Tolkowsky's brilliant cut, so we started the class by learning the basic geography of the polished diamond:

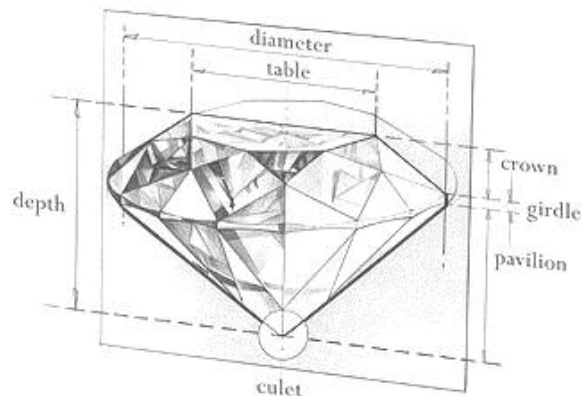


Figure 3-141 The geography of a Brilliant Cut (round) diamond⁹⁷

During the first class, Avi handed us each a diamond, in exchange for our ID or a credit card (!) and showed us how to pick up the stone at the girdle with tweezers. This seemingly simple task is not as easy as it looked as diamonds are small and the girdle is thin: hold it too loose and it drops, hold it too tight and the stone flies out, hopefully not too far away. We put the stones under a microscope with a bright light. Like looking at anything under zoom, the magnified diamond is a whole world, and I was amazed by how specific and complex the facets appeared and by all of the nicks and chips I could suddenly see quite clearly. Avi asked us to concentrate, and to locate all of the potential internal and surface imperfections and facet irregularities. Later we turned the diamond on its side to view it from another angle and to scrutinize the girdle. I had no idea, prior to this, that there were so many details to appreciate and during the next several weeks I was drawn into a vortex of specialized knowledge production instrumental in the manipulation of “value” by the industry.

⁹⁷ http://www.bluenile.com/diamond_cut.asp. July 12, 2005.

I learned at GIA how the grading of polished stone determines market value. The existence of such a system assures that there is a wide range of prices, such that almost everyone can afford to buy a diamond (see Zapata 1998). I found that diamonds having a GIA certificate are often believed to have especial authenticity and prestige by those who have them (and in fact, several GIA instructors told me that certification is rapidly becoming the fifth “C”). I was told more than once by consumers in prideful tones that “*my diamonds is certified*”. Consumers who have a GIA certificate are however, often unable to interpret it, other than reading off the basic factors such as the carat weight and the clarity grade, but the certificate contains a great deal of information if you know what the abbreviations stand for, what the target numbers are, and how diamond pricing works.

The diamond may seem minute relative to other commodities, but there is a universe of features and characteristics observed in and on a diamond with the aid of a microscope or loupe.⁹⁸ Two diamonds may appear identical to the untrained eye, the eye of most consumers, and certainly to the casual observer who merely glances at diamond jewelry on the bodies of friends and strangers. But to the grader, with her loupe and probe and tweezers and tiny ruler and crown angle measurer and color stones and fluorescence chart and calculator and diamond thermal tester, there may be differences that significantly impact stone’s market value. Measurement of table size, crown angle, total depth, girdle thickness, pavilion angle and depth, culet size, degree of symmetry between the facets, and the centeredness of table and culet, as well as a careful analysis of the polish itself can all significantly affect appearance and value. The pavilion angle, for

⁹⁸ A “loupe” is a high-powered magnifying glass used to examine diamonds. Many diamond dealers carry a loupe on their person, or on a string around their necks.

example, is important because it determines how light will flash back out of the crown and should be between the narrow range of 42 and 44 degrees. Deviations can cause a stone to look dark and dull, severely lowering its “beauty” and ultimately, its price.

Grading

GIA certificates map the geography of a single diamond and details features in terms of the 4 C's. The certificate does not include an estimate of market value but the information on it would be used to generate its price. GIA certificates are usually reserved for diamonds that are valued at over \$1000, greater than 1 carat, color of I or above, and have a clarity grade higher than SI2, but theoretically any diamond can be graded.⁹⁹ The industry has spent millions of dollars to educate the public about the main factors of the grading system, otherwise known as the 4 C's: carat, clarity, color, and cut.

⁹⁹ The grading of a standard stone costs about \$150.

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GIA
GEM TRADE LABORATORY

DIAMOND GRADING REPORT

GIA REPORT 11997005

May 07, 2002

Shape and Cutting Style ROUND BRILLIANT

Measurements 6.72 - 6.75 x 4.12 mm

Weight 1.13 carat

Proportions

Depth 61.2 %

Table 57 %

Girdle MEDIUM TO SLIGHTLY THICK, FACETED

Culet NONE

Finish

Polish EXCELLENT

Symmetry EXCELLENT

Clarity Grade SI1

Color Grade G

Fluorescence NONE

Comments:
Additional clouds are not shown.
Surface graining is not shown.

99043301

This Report is not a guarantee, valuation or appraisal. This Report contains only the characteristics of the diamond described herein after it has been graded, tested, examined and analyzed by GIA Gem Trade Laboratory under 10X magnification, and/or has been recorded using the techniques and equipment available to GIA Gem Trade Laboratory at the time of the examination and/or at the time of being insured, including fully corrected bright light and binocular microscope, master color comparison diamonds, standardized viewing environment and light source, electronic carat balance, synthetic diamond screening device, high intensity short wave fluorescence imaging system, short wave ultraviolet transmission detector system, optical measuring device, micro laser scanning device, ProportionScope[®], ultraviolet lamps, millimeter gauge, and ancillary instruments as necessary. Red symbols denote internal characteristics (inclusions). Green or black symbols denote external characteristics (blemishes). Diagram is an approximate representation of the diamond, and symbols shown indicate type, position, and approximate size of clarity characteristics. All clarity characteristics may not be shown. Details of finish are not shown. The recipient of this Report may wish to consult a credentialed Jeweler or Gemologist about the importance and interpretation of cut, color, clarity and carat weight.

GIA CLARITY SCALE	GIA COLOR SCALE
FLAWLESS	D
VERY, VERY FLAWLESS	E
VERY FLAWLESS	F
FLAWLESS TO SI1	G
SI1	H
SI2	I
SI3	J
I1	K
I2	L
I3	M
S1	N
S2	O
S3	P
I1	Q
I2	R
I3	S
	T
	U
	V
	W
	X
	Y
	Z

KEY TO SYMBOLS

- Crystal
- Cloud
- Needle

IMPORTANT DOCUMENT, STORE SAFELY

NOTICE: IMPORTANT LIMITATIONS ON BACK

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Figure 3-15 Example of GIA report of SI1 diamond containing 3 clarity characteristics: included crystals, clouds and needles (tiny rod like included crystals). These features might be visible to the eye, but would be very noticeable under 10x magnification.

- Caratage

The weight of diamonds is measured in caratage. The carat (ct.), equal to 0.200 grams, or 200 milligrams, is the standard of measurement.¹⁰⁰ Diamonds are measured to the nearest hundredth of a carat, though American trade laws allow for rounding up at .05 so that a .95ct stone can be listed at 1 ct., whereas GIA standards require for stones to be

¹⁰⁰ The word carat is derived from the Greek word for the pods of the carob, or locust tree, which contain tiny seeds that are remarkably consistent and uniform, making them excellent for use as measures of weight. These seeds were used by early traders to weigh diamonds.

rounded up only at .09. A hundredth of a carat is called a “point.” Thus a .10 carat stone can be called a 10 point diamond (smaller stones are often referred to by their point weight). All things being equal, the more caratage, the more expensive the diamond.

- *Clarity: from F to SI*

Clarity refers to how “clean” the diamond is, that is how free it is of “flaws.” The impact of the clarity grade on market value is directly contingent upon how seriously the flaws impede the play of light. Clarity characteristics are defined as either “inclusions” (characteristics that are either inside the stone or extend inwards from the surface) or “blemishes” (non-penetrating characteristics, that is to say they are only on the surface of the stone). Stones are examined from the top, then from the side and through the crown and pavilion facets – any inclusion or blemish is noted and plotted on a map. Sometimes inclusions and blemishes are euphemized by terms like “*nature’s signature*” at the point of sale. The clarity grade falls somewhere between F and SI, on a scale of “flawless” (F) to severely flawed (SI).

There are about 15 different types of inclusions and 10 blemish types; some flaws are much less serious than others. For example, an included a black mineral crystal is much more deleterious to price than internal grainings, which are just indicators of crystal growth. Akin to stretch marks, internal grainings look like a piece of colorless cellophane floating underwater, but are not serious clarity characteristics because you can barely see them, even with a microscope.

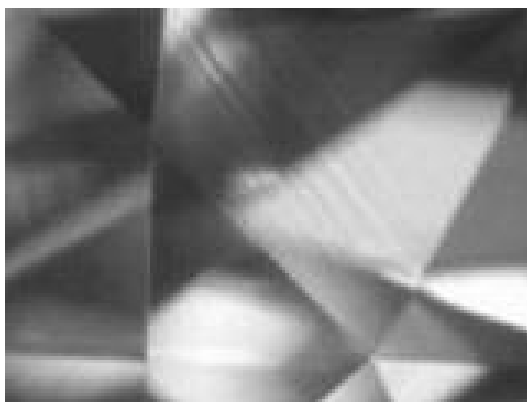


Figure 3-16 Graining lines are created by irregular crystallization that occur as the diamond grows. They appear here of a highly magnified diamond as the diagonally oriented striations. Graining lines can be hard to detect even when you are looking for them.¹⁰¹

Depending on the placement, size, color and the overall effect of inclusions and blemishes, clarity grades differ markedly: The “best” place (having the least impact on light and transparency) for any inclusion is usually somewhere near the girdle. The worst position for an inclusion is near the culet because it will reflect inside the stone: a single inclusion near the culet can look like 3 or more: a large perfectly cut stone with a single dark blob reflecting inside the stone has a low grade, and the price will index that.

Other characteristics include small feathering on the girdle (“bearding”); nicks and chips of all shapes, sizes and depths; hazy or milky areas consisting of a group of tiny inclusions (“clouds”) or twinning planes (“twinning wisps”); internal breaks and fractures (“feathers,” one of the most common problems); included crystals made of diamond (“knots”) or other substances (such as garnet or peridot); dots inside the diamond (“grain centers” and “pinpoints”); or places where the stone is unpolished or has laser holes.

Surface blemishes rarely affect the basic clarity grade. Tiny abraded areas where the facets meet, small extra facets or unpolished areas, nicks near the girdle, miniscule

¹⁰¹ Image from <http://www.jewellerycatalogue.co.uk/diamonds/inclusions.php>. July 2004.

surface pits, polish lines caused by the scaife, unevenness or surface clouding, scratches or surface graining can usually be polished out by a skilled cutter.

Each feature has an abbreviation, color code and iconic figure. Blemishes are drawn in green, inclusions are red, and black is used for extra facets. For example, surface crumble, usually accompanied by tiny feathers on a facet junction, known as a “bruise,” is represented by a red x on the map and listed as “br” (see Certificate in Figure 4:2) The mapping of features is known as “plotting” or “fingerprinting.” All characteristics on the crown surface, that can be seen from the crown, or on the girdle, are mapped onto the crown diagram, but features only seen by looking through the pavilion, or those inclusions that break the surface of the pavilion are plotted on the pavilion map. A grader typically will start mapping with the largest and most obvious characteristics from the crown view and then systematically work through other features, plotting them relative to the position of the main inclusion (which will set the upper limit of the grade). Graders spend hours in the “gem lab” identifying and mapping inclusions and blemishes.

F, or “flawless,” gems show no blemishes or inclusions when viewed under a 10X loupe and are extremely rare. Flawless gems may have “naturals” (unpolished spots) or laser inscriptions on the girdle, internal graining that does not affect transparency, or an extra pavilion facet that is not visible from the crown. All things being equal, “flawless” gems are the most expensive, and are sometimes used as investments. Flawless diamonds are seldom set in jewelry since the slightest blemish on the stone can cause a significant drop in price. IF, or “internally flawless,” samples have no inclusions and only minor surface blemishes that could be removed by a good polisher.

There is a significant price decrease when stones are “very very slightly included,” graded as VVS1 and VVS 2. These stones contain minute inclusions, hard for even a skilled grader to locate under magnification. Inclusions are visible only from the pavilion or are extremely shallow. Stones with pinpoints and minute girdle chips may qualify as VVS1. The truly relative and subjective nature of diamond grading starts to

become apparent with the VVS grade, as the difference between VVS1 and VVS2 is that it is “more” difficult to remove the flaw with polishing in a VVS2 than a VVS1.

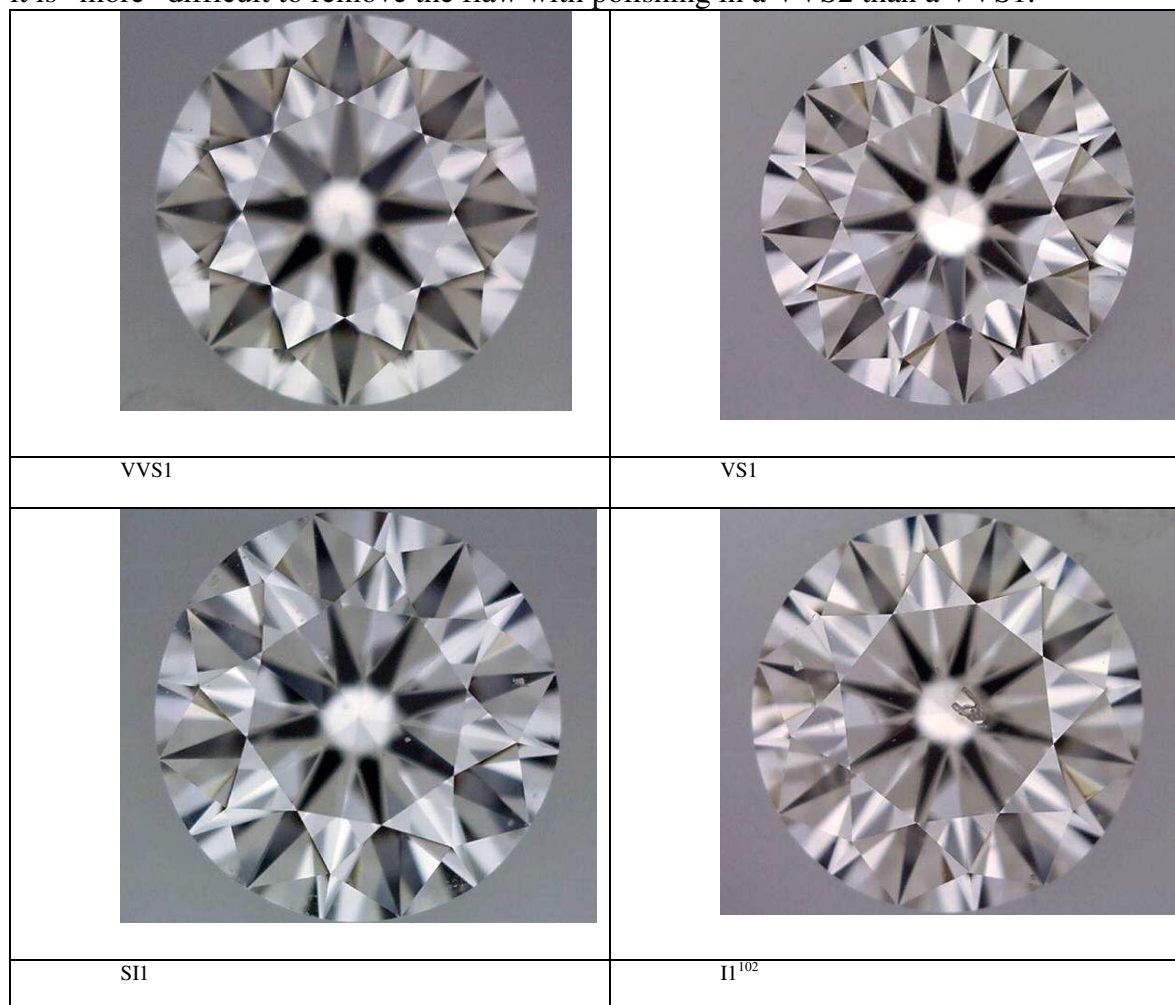


Figure 3-17 These are magnified images of diamonds graded for clarity, variously blemished and included. An untrained eye might struggle to discern the problems, especially in the VVS1 and VS1 samples, though inclusions are more obvious on the SI1 and I1¹⁰² samples.

¹⁰² <http://www.diamants-infos.com/en/polished/index.php?rub=clarity#Observation>. Aug 20, 2004.

“Very slightly included” stones (VS1 and VS2) have minor inclusions that are “difficult to somewhat easy” to see with a loupe, and typically contain pinpoints, feathers hidden near the girdle, small crystals, feathers or clouds. SI, or “slightly included,” stones (SI1 and SI2) contain inclusions that are obvious under magnification and may be seen with the naked eye.¹⁰³ “Included diamonds” (I1, I2, I3) are seriously flawed, and have problems easily seen face up with the unaided eye. I class inclusions, like a large “feather,” which is actually a crack (cracks resemble feathers inside of the diamond), can affect the durability of the stone, making it a poor candidate for jewelry because of susceptibility to breakage. Anything less than SI3 is industrial grade (bort¹⁰⁴). 75% of diamond is bort; of the remaining 25%, only about 5% can be classed as SI or higher. Differences between SI or higher grades are discernable only through pointed examination, and not visible by glance (which is how most diamonds are encountered).

- *Color: From D to N*

Many people think of diamonds as clear, but most are far from it. Diamond is depicted as pure carbon by science, but it rarely, if ever, is it truly pure. Molecular “impurities” are dispersed throughout the atomic structure, and these trace elements, occurring at a ratio of as low as 1:10,000 atoms, give color to diamond, as can structural defects within the carbon bonds. Structural irregularities absorb certain frequencies of light, causing the stone to appear tinted. About 90% of white diamonds have tinges of

¹⁰³ There is also a SI3 grade that some people use, but GIA, the hegemonic, and really the most “official,” grading agency, does not use SI3.

¹⁰⁴ Bort is industrial grade diamond used as an abrasive, or in drills.

yellow, brown, and gray, although these colors are unnoticeable when a diamond is mounted. For every 100,000 carats of diamonds that are cut, only 10,000 carats are colorless, and only 1,000 carats possess fancy color (see Harris 1994).

Diamonds with unusual colors such as purple-red are the most expensive; for example, a .95 ct. deep purple-red specimen was recently sold at Sotheby's for about \$975,000. Purple, red and orange diamonds are relatively expensive, greens and blues less so and then yellows and browns. The grading scale for colored gems is different from that of white diamonds, and is based on hue (color), saturation (intensity) and tone (scale from dark to light). But, not until the 1980's did colored diamonds even appear in general public discourse. Even more recently, marketing geared to capture a greater market share by creating "new" products, promoted colored diamonds, even those that are yellow or brown (now re-framed as "fancy" with names such as "cognac" or "champagne") that might have once been ground into bort.

"White" diamonds (actually clear diamonds) bought by most consumers are assigned a color grade somewhere between D and N. Grades D, E, and F are basically colorless. Grades of G-J, much less expensive than D-F, are *near* colorless stones making up the mainstream trade. When these the stones are turned upwards, they appear color free, but with the table facing down, a slight yellowing is detectable. Grades K-M are increasingly yellow. Stones with a color grade of N or more are obviously yellowish, brownish or grayish. To determine the color grade, a grader compares a specimen against a set of small brilliant cut GIA "master stones."

Sometimes the fluorescence of the stone affects its appearance and price, so after the basic color grade is assigned, the stone is placed under fluorescent light and assigned

a fluorescence grade of none, faint, medium, strong or very strong. Colorless stones can lose about 15-20% of their value as a result of fluorescence. Fluorescence can create a milky or oily appearance, and very strong fluorescence can make the stone actually glow, which is why at a night club with black lights, you often see diamonds glowing brightly across the room. On the other hand, the appearance of a faint yellow stone may be improved by a bit of fluorescence.

- *Cut*

The finish and proportions of a diamond determine the 4th C: its cut or “make.” The finish includes the polish quality and the details of facet placement. Graders examine size and angle relationships between the facets and other parts of the stone, such as the girdle and table. Cutters attempt to maintain as much weight as possible while maximizing optics and integrity. Having, for example, a razor thin girdle or no culet may conserve a few points, but will put the stone in danger of being chipped. A thick girdle may become bearded (especially when the girdle is not faceted), look “clunky” and make the diamond harder to set.¹⁰⁵ Plus, a thick girdle will show dirt and grease which can reflect back into the stone.

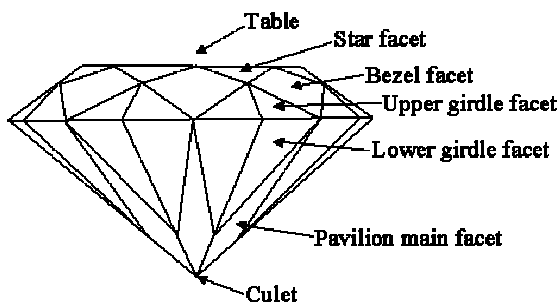


Figure 3-18 Facets of Brilliant Cut

¹⁰⁵ A “bearded” girdle is when the girdle becomes feathered, taking on a roughened appearance.

The Tolkowsky or “Ideal” round brilliant cut, probably the most ubiquitous “make”, or cut, today, is the standard against which round gems are graded. This cut is highly specified with 58 facets. There are 33 facets on the crown, or the upper part of the diamond: the “table” is the large middle facet that is surrounded by triangular “star” facets, “upper girdle facets” and diamond shaped “bezel” facets. There are 25 facets on the pavilion: “lower girdle” and “main pavilion” facets. A tiny flat “culet” is polished onto the bottom of the pavilion.¹⁰⁶ When done correctly, light will refract inside the stone several times before it is dispersed out of the top. If the gem is too deep, where the angles of the crown or pavilion to the horizontal girdle are too steep, the diamond will look dark, or “sleepy,” whereas if the stone is too shallow, light will leak out of the bottom instead of playing inside of the stone and then shimmering outwards. In both cases the gem will lack fire and brilliance. When diamonds are graded, tolerance for deviance from ideal specs is extremely limited.

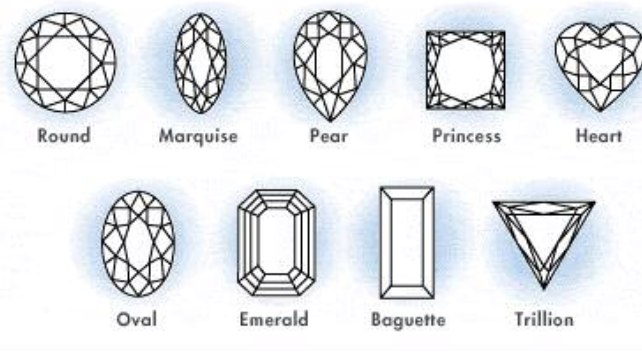


Figure 3-19 Types of Diamond Shapes, many of which are adaptations from the Tolkowsky design.

¹⁰⁶ The relative proportion of the table size to the stone’s maximum diameter, the pavilion depth, the crown height, the width of the girdle, the angle at which the crown and pavilion are cut, the size of the culet and the shape of each facet are highly specified. Sometimes the girdle is left rough. The ideal cut has a “small” to “medium” sized girdle.

GIA instructors explained that the art in cutting lies in the ability of an artisan to “*imagine himself inside of a diamond, as light bouncing from plane to plane and then shimmering through the top.*” Important goals are to minimize the amount of material that must be ground away and to place inclusions in locations that will cause the least amount of interference with the appearance, no matter the final shape. Depending on the shape and condition of the rough, a cutter may use an alternative shape such as the rectangular emerald cut, the pointed oval marquise, the triangular trillion, or the squarish princess. Round diamonds are almost always the most expensive per carat because the consumer ultimately is paying for the 40-60% that has been ground away in addition to what is left. There have been attempts to improve the brilliant cut or to develop alternatives, such as the Eppler or Scandinavian that have larger table proportionalities, looking to the untrained eye exactly like a brilliant, but the Tolkowski cut remains king. Most diamonds on the retail market are round, but round was not always the favorite with consumers.

As we sat at my kitchen table talking, Katherine, who knew a lot about diamonds (e.g., language for the facets, such as “*table*” and how the cut affects appearance), told me that she likes to look at other people’s jewelry and study the setting or the shape for which she attributes personalities and styles. “*There are shapes that I truly cannot stand, like the marquise...ugh, its soooo ugly and redneck looking and I just think it looks really cheap and I am not crazy about baguettes a lot of time, though I will wear that – but I really don’t go for the elongated stones, I like round and square – I don’t know what it is but there is something gross about the other shapes – I prefer the brilliant and princess cuts and I am also not crazy about triangles, but they can be interesting I think. I look and see how it is set and I might think, ‘oh, that looks sort of nice,’ and I have seen*

triangles set in really interesting ways, but I would still not want one for myself. And I look at the size sometimes, and sometimes I try to study it for how big it is, but it's hard to tell sometimes and I know you can have a big table but a shallow cut and then it just looks bigger than it really is."

New Developments: Lasers, Specialty Cuts and Branding

My friend Willa, a retired travel agent, recently became engaged to George, a successful furniture maker. He gave her a diamond engagement ring which she, as is the custom, showed me when I saw her. I inspected the ring and we talked about how beautiful it was and about the setting and so forth as is also the custom. She explained to me that it is a Lucida from Tiffany's and she can go to get the ring cleaned whenever she likes, and, that it moreover, *"is laser-inscripted"* Feigning ignorance, I asked her what that meant. She told me that we could only see it with a microscope but there is a message inside the diamond that was made with a laser. *"I don't know exactly what it says, but I know that it's there. And it means that this diamond is unique."* Lasering, specialty cuts and branding is de la mode in contemporary American diamond retailing.

Tiffany designed a 50 faceted cut-cornered square diamond, the Lucida, and a special setting, that was launched in 1999 amidst much fanfare. Tiffany's markets this cut as a *"modern classic"* and shoppers in New York are given the hard sell at on the second level (the diamond floor) Lucida counter. Other retailers such as Zale's and Hearts of Fire also have their own signature cuts. Zale's, marketing to consumers who want to spend less on diamond jewelry, patented a 128 faceted *"People's Diamond"* (Beres 2002). *"Hearts of Fire"* supposedly glimmer and sparkle with heart-shaped flecks of light.

The use of laser inscriptions to mark diamonds is a relatively new technology used to inscribe “messages” such as logos, corporate names and numbers (which can be used to identify the stone) or personal missives on the girdle. The emergent microscopic differentiation in polished diamonds, in terms of both new cuts and branding, can be explained by the need for companies to make themselves appear unique to consumers or “add value” to the diamond industry, as mandated by De Beers’ Supplier of Choice program. Consumers may be more willing to pay premium prices for branded gems and specialty cuts when persuaded that these elements make their diamonds more precious, and De Beers can reward those who add value downstream with invitations to sights..

Besides the standard round, oval, rectangular, marquise and pear, a slew of new cuts have recently been developed, branded, and patented. New makes have fanciful names such as the “Bagillion,” a brilliant cut baguette, or the “Phoenix,” an 89 faceted brilliant (Modern Jeweler 2002). Others have whimsical shapes, such as the Buddha, the Butterfly, the Lily, or the donut shaped Torus, or a profusion of facets, like the 221 faceted Brilliant Lady. In 2003 alone, at least 8 designs were awarded US patents. New designs include a contribution by Gabi Tolokowsky, great nephew of Marcel Tolokowsky: a patent was granted to his 61 facet cushion cut called the “Asprey.”

Not every consumer is pleased with these developments: I met Carmen at a film screening and after telling her about my dissertation she started explained that she was in the Foreign Service in Israel where she leaned “*all about the industry*”. She told me how she and her mother were recently on 47th street and her mother stepped on something hard. The hard something turned out to be a diamond! It was wrapped in a white paper sheath. They opened the packet, had the stone appraised, “*and its’ over 1 ct., but its an*

old cut, I forget the name....” Carmen went on to say that “*some of these new cuts, well, they have too many facets,*” they are “*too sparkly,*” while the found gem is plain. She said that she likes “*to be able to look down into the stone without all of those facets.....”*

New cuts are often retailer specific and as such become heavily branded, in keeping with a general trend in commodities towards branding in association with the re-configuration of capitalism (see Klein 2001). Tiny lasered logos are invisible to the naked eye, whereas most logos, like the Nike swoop or LaCoste alligator, are visible and serve to differentiate the product from others that are in many ways equivalent. Diamond cuts are similarly “invisible” in the sense that most people are unable to differentiate, much less identify, say a 58 Tolkowsky versus an 89 faceted Phoenix round, brilliant cut. Branding and specialty cuts can be used in sales to orchestrate a perception of greater difference between two outwardly identical stones and can make a substantial difference in price, even though the public sign value of these qualities is limited by invisibility.

New cuts, branding and sales have been enhanced by specialized technology, particularly in the areas of bruting and faceting (cutting phases). Laser saws can create unusual shapes or cut diamonds that are unworkable with conventional saws. Lasers blast out impurities, leaving holes to be filled with molten glass. In the 1970’s, Lev Leviev began utilizing this technique in his trademarked Yehuda diamonds to improve the clarity grade of included gems. He developed computer software, Strela 6, which produces 3-D images of rough and evaluates potential yield. Other manufacturers have followed suit, developing similar yield software. Leviev then came up with another program that maps out potential yields, but also predicts which shape will generate the most profit based on the pricing and demand statistics that are fed into a computer each day (Berman and

Goldberg 2003). Other machines calibrate facet smoothness, while software such as Brilliant 3.1 optimize brilliant cut specifications for any stone. The Octopus-system is an automatic polisher that works out both round and fancy shapes for diamonds up to a finished weight of 5 carats. The use of new retail, marketing and production technologies have contributed to differentiations within the product and purchase experience reflected in consumer narratives to varying degrees.

Simulated and Lab Grown Diamonds

I was sitting with Tom at a coffee shop and I asked him what he thought diamonds say to other people. *“Diamonds say, ‘I have arrived, I am rich, I am valuable,’ but the thing is that diamonds are meant to be worn on the outside, you don’t keep them in a drawer and invite someone over to look in your drawers, I mean you might say come look in my drawers and that would be a different show, but diamonds are to be worn on the outside for the public. And who knows the difference?”* I prompted him to continue. *“I mean if they are real or fake. Crappy, or worth like \$12,000. Only a jeweler can tell the difference. I mean I see stuff on Home Shopping channel or at Macys or whatever and ...is it diamond, zirconium or whatever I can’t tell the difference. So a lot of this has to do with a person’s belief in whether it’s real or not. Like in that story – you know that story The Necklace by Maupassant and she couldn’t tell – someone lent her a necklace to wear and she lost it and then she spent her whole life making enough money to buy another one and then she was ruined. And then she found out that the necklace wasn’t even real – but she thought it was. So maybe the fact that it is easily fake-able plays into the whole thing...I never thought about that but maybe part of it is about convincing people that it is real. And this depends on who is wearing it.”*

Tom highlights the fact that diamonds are relatively easy to fake, that he cannot discern a real from an imitation, and that this knowledge belongs to experts. The average American consumer has neither the tools nor the knowledge to examine a diamond for authenticity, yet many prefer “real” diamonds to fake ones.

Though graders have a techniques for identifying “simulated” gems, it can even be challenging for experts to identify a fake. There are several types of materials used to simulate diamonds, including glass, cubic zirconium and Moissanite. These materials look like diamond to the casual observer, but do not have the same characteristics, such as weight, refractive index and hardness of true diamonds. For example, Moissanite held gem to a flame will turn yellow (which will fade upon cooling), while heating a natural diamond will do no such thing.

Synthetic gem labs such as Gemesis primarily manufacture diamond for industrial and/or technological purposes, but at least one company, Life Gem, makes diamond out of carbon culled from cremation ashes (which are bluish). To date, it is not possible to manufacture colorless diamond, but this technology is right around the corner.

“Nature’s Signature”

The industry is responding to fakes and simulants with marketing centering on the uniqueness of natural diamonds. The concern with which the industry regards synthetic/simulated diamond is reflected in the 2004 Antwerp Diamond Conference’s focus on how gem-quality synthetic diamonds might threaten consumer confidence. The position of the Antwerp Diamond High Council is that banning trade in synthetics on diamond bourses is not effective: “the industry must instead educate the public about the uniqueness and wonder of natural diamonds” (Rapaport Trade Wire – Friday, June 4,

2004). Threats from simulated and/or synthetic diamonds against the “natural” diamond industry will depend upon the degree of difficulty encountered by industry experts in identifying “natural” stones, as well as in successfully convincing the public that natural stones are somehow superior to simulated or synthetic ones.

The availability of synthetic/simulated stones is changing the structure of the industry, but treated stones, diamonds that have had inclusions removed by laser and then filled, or have been radiated, coated or manipulated for color, also pose problems. There are strict regulations regarding treatment disclosure, and a talented grader *might* recognize if a gem has been altered, but the increasing use of enhancement technologies is worrisome to those concerned with maintaining a value hierarchy based on natural gems with natural characteristics.

If people come to believe that a synthetic, simulated, or treated diamond is as acceptable as a natural stone, the industry will find itself in a tenuous position. Retailers are keen to “educate” prospective customers about the valuation system, and a serious inquiry in any of the upscale diamond boutiques on 5th Avenue, the shops on 47th Street, or the lower price range stores like *Zale’s*¹⁰⁷ will usually involve a salesperson explaining the 4 C’s, sometimes providing prospective customers with brochures. The general thrust of the pitch is that all diamonds are beautiful, unique and special, but some are more beautiful, unique and special than others. The salesperson will ask how much the customer wants to spend and then present diamonds starting at that price or just above. Language like “nature’s signature” is used to add value to a low quality gem.

¹⁰⁷ Underscoring the franchise-ness of *Zale’s*, there are at least 10 locations in New York City, in Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island and several in Manhattan.

Though much of De Beers' business is involved with the rough trade, it is the retail market in graded polished gems that pulls rough through the pipeline. It is with respect to the demand and price structures of polished gems that the rough trade is manipulated, the goal being to maintain, and increase where possible, the ultimate price of diamonds at both the rough and retail level so that every node in the commodity chain is profitable. In fact, maintenance of diamond prices is the *raison d'être* of the De Beers monopoly in the first place. Perhaps had it not been for De Beers' manipulation and control over every aspect of the industry, diamond prices would be steeply reduced and the role of diamonds would be more akin to that of other semi-precious stones. This argument is complicated by the fact that the possibility for massive profit has generated industry expansion. Erasing the profit created by consolidation of De Beers in 1888, it is difficult to imagine what the industry might look like today. Though controversial, De Beers takes the position that it is a benevolent monopoly working to benefit everyone involved in the trade, including consumers who they say want to invest in goods that maintain their value (although few people buy diamonds as investments and the resale value of non-investment grade diamonds is extremely poor, a fact about which most consumers I talked with are not particularly cognizant). There is no doubt, however, that the activities of De Beers have resulted in the presence in the U.S. of a relatively expensive stone with a constellation of symbolic associations.

Market Value

What would happen if diamonds suddenly to lose their market value? Business students at Columbia University opine that the De Beers monopolistic control "works out for everyone, including the consumer" who, they argue, desire diamonds as a direct result

of their high price; they posit that consumers want the price of diamonds to stay high to stabilize the value of their outlay and maintain the appeal of being able to have a luxury good (Chang et al 2000). This is certainly an interesting position, but several factors suggested in my research undermine this idea. One, the resale value of diamonds (other than investment grade stones which are very rare and would never be worn as jewelry) is negligible compared to retail cost, so the market value of diamonds once they are purchased is really an imaginary matter. Two, one can buy diamonds that are inexpensive or fake and no one other than the buyer is the wiser, complicating the purchase of diamonds meant to be read by others as a luxury good and status symbol. Thus, the pleasure that may be derived from spending money is not necessarily contingent upon the manipulation of diamond prices by De Beers. And three, many people buy, are given, inherit or otherwise acquire diamonds, despite the fact that they cannot afford them. Some consumers, in fact, deeply resent being made to feel that it is a requirement to make such an expensive purchase and would rather pay substantially less, which is why discount outfits for diamonds are doing a brisk business for people want to pay less. All three factors are related to market pricing in one way or another, but to say that the monopoly “benefits” the consumer, while implying that the entire system is good-naturedly set up for consumer well-being, as De Beers and some business models claim, requires careful qualification.

It is unclear to consumers how or where diamonds accrue value, though many offer a simple demand and supply calculus, where cost is proportional to scarcity. For example, some people stated that diamonds are expensive is because they are “*very rare.*” The financial benefactors are diamond companies, funded by consumption. The DTC

sold 5.5 billion dollars worth of rough in 2003, translating into a retail value of about \$60 billion dollars. Most people that I talked with have a poor idea of the cost of diamonds, but generally believe them to be “*expensive.*” One consumer, Karina, a well-educated wife of a stock-broker, accurately guessed that an extremely fine 1 ct. diamond would cost about \$25,000. Then she went on to say, “*but the real question to me is where it gets its value, I mean does it come out of the ground like that? Or is it just once it gets in the store? I don’t know if that \$25,000 is the price for the raw one or what...*” .

The value of a diamond increases exponentially as it moves through the chain from extraction to consumption (the value chain of a typical 0.5 ct gemstone is shown below (Ariovich 1985 cited in Chang, et al. 2000)). Even though the figures on the chart below are dated, cutters and retailers on 47th Street agreed that mark-up percentages remain approximately the same, though recently the price of rough has increased, cutting into the profit margins of all others downstream. Retail sales, where the largest mark-ups take place, draw diamonds through the pipeline, but to make the pipeline viable, people at each node must be rewarded.

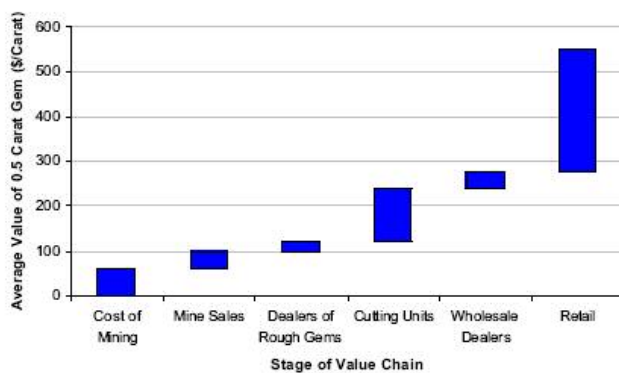


Figure 3. Price of a 0.5 Carat Gemstone along the Value Chain (Ariovich 1985)

Figure 3-20 The Value Chain

Several factors determine final retail pricing. Large stones are more difficult to price and the profits at each node are proportionally enlarged because of the risks with

taking large stones from rough to retail. Prices increase exponentially with size. Two 1 ct. stones may cost substantially less together than a single 2 ct. stone of the same make. Specials, or larger stones, may be sold outside of sight lots as single stones: bids are made on sight without any cuts made to the stone, but it is challenging to predict how a stone will polish. It may literally explode on the cutting wheel, undetected inclusions may become ugly and dangerous, and knots make cutting very laborious, read: expensive. Additional problems arise with colored stones: they command a high price but when cut, the value-giving color may “leak” out, transforming, for example, an expensive dark blue to a cheaper pale shade (conversely, the color may improve).

According to dealers, a 10 ct. stone may cost about 15 dollars a carat to extract. The sightholder may then pay \$50,000 for a colorless, flawless stone (\$5000 per ct.). The stone is cut (usually anywhere from 50-70% of a stone is ground away in the cutting process). A retailer will pay about \$75,000 for the stone which is now about 3.5 carats. About 2 years after the stone is extracted from the ground, a customer will pay about \$125,000 for the diamond, or more if the stone is colored, bears a specially trademarked cut or has been lasered with a brand (Berman and Goldman 2003).

Consumer “Education”

In order to help consumers get on board with diamond grading and pricing, retailers highlight particular aspects of a stone such as its color, branding or specialty cut. Emphasis on grades by retailers has been echoed in increased demand for certificates by consumers, leading to the opening of buyer-beware labs other than GIA. Retailers use new technological accoutrements to convey grade information to the consumer, often in rather spectacular ways. For example, Sarin Technologies developed the “DiaScribe,” a

machine which has a viewer enabling people to see immediately diamond inscriptions on a monitor without a microscope or loupe (usually the branding text, inscribed on the girdle, that they may never actually see again). The Brilliant Eye “S” Series, enables retailers to show images of a stone in an animated display and quickly creates a colorful diamond report (Rapaport TradeWire – Friday, June 4, 2004). There is even computer software that produces “music” by “analyzing” a particular stone. Efforts to enhance purchasing experiences have been well received by retailers where merchants must compete to move goods for profit.

And yet, the advancing of extravagant sales techniques is one of the least crucial areas in which changes are taking place. From the perspective of the consumer, the marketing of the De Beers brand is but one visible aspect of industry change. But other changes, such as strategies for diamond production, transformations of the global political and economic landscape, the discovery of new diamondiferous pipes, and the desire by entrepreneurs to operate outside of the De Beers syndicate have already altered the architecture of the trade.

De Beers’ branding mission has not yet been successful in terms of name recognition with consumers in this research, and the nature of the association of De Beers with the diamond industry was varied. I asked several consumers what, if anything, they knew about De Beers. People said things like, “*De Beers? What’s that?*,” “*De Beers? Oh sure...that’s the big diamond company!*,” “*De Beers is a big outlet store or chain...right?*,” “*It’s a big wholesaler,*” or “*I don’t know...well, I know that De Beers is a quality brand.*” Several consumers, having seen television shows about blood diamonds or read about the monopolistic diamond industry complained that, “*De Beers is evil*” and

that, *“there is something very strange about De Beers...I don’t know what their motivation is because there are ways to make money without being a monopoly, but I think they are trying to hide something.”* Jenny, a secretary in a real estate company, told me that *“I don’t know much about De Beers but I think they are very high quality diamonds and they have a really good commercial that I like to watch, and so I remembered the name....”* People who have heard of De Beers usually know that it is a diamond outfit, but how they came to know it and what they know about it varied. Katherine told me that *“De Beers is a company in South Africa and it’s a monopoly and I think maybe it was publicly traded but now it isn’t. I think I learned about it in a movie, yeah that’s right, it was about some gorillas or apes that were guarding the gems of Africa, I don’t remember the name of it.”* As the De Beers retail stores gain presence, the brand may find greater recognition among consumers, particularly in New York.

Conclusion

This chapter has not covered every mechanisms in place for polished diamond grading, but it is plain that factors used to create price differentials are microscopic, require special knowledge and standardized training even to detect, much less assign, to these variations a meaningful value. The significance of variations in caratage, cut, clarity, and color in stones that are virtually identical to the consumer are upheld by a massive institutional grading body and the industry through discourse and education.

Consumers draw upon their understanding of the geology and production of diamonds, grading, and the symbolic associations promoted by advertising, but, as I show in the following chapters, they are in no way limited to these resources when interpreting their own diamonds. Regardless of what people know about diamond production,

everyone knows the phrase “*a diamond is forever.*” The following chapter explores the relationship of consumer interpretation to diamond advertising.

CHAPTER 5 A DIAMOND IS FOREVER: THE CONSTRUCTION OF DIAMONDS IN ADVERTISING

According to advertisements, diamonds are symbols of many things: romance, and status, glamour just to name a few. These symbolic associations are interwoven within a narrative built upon themes of scarcity, beauty and value. The campaign works: over 70% of all American women own at least one diamond.¹⁰⁸ When it comes to interpretations, consumers draw upon, but are not limited to ad discourse. In other words, ads impact but do not determine how people think about diamonds.

Analysis of narratives illustrates that the symbolic associations promoted by the diamond industry are usually reflected to some extent in interpretations, particularly with respect to others' diamonds, however, local contingency and circumstance tend to determine the meanings of one's own diamonds. Factors that vary by individual such as context of acquisition, the relationship of the consumer to the person from whom the diamond was received (in the case of gift), attitudes about why the stone was purchased, and the specific history of the relationship of wearer to stone are all influential. Most consumer theory constructs consumers as members of large groups, rather than as individuals, but as this chapter show, far from being passive, batch absorbers of ad discourse, consumers are individualized and creative interpreters. To understand

¹⁰⁸ The average amount spent on a new piece of diamond jewelry stands at about 600\$, so they are not prohibitively priced for most people and challenges popular notions about diamonds scarcity and value.

everyday roles commodities fulfill, consumers can be productively constructed at the level of individual, rather than at the level of group.

Though diamonds have been around for centuries, the symbolic significance they have today was manufactured recently. During the last century, as increasingly large amounts of diamond became available, the need to find, or develop a market capable of absorbing mine output emerged. De Beers has consistently worked to improve its ability to manipulate price and demand through a combination of production and distribution strategizing, and by the attachment of symbolic significations to the diamond through marketing.¹⁰⁹

Consumption studies have explored the symbolic potential of commodities, especially in terms of how they are constructed in advertising as discourse that either produces or reproduces some given ideology, or in which people use them to communicate to others information about themselves such as national or ethnic association or identity. Consideration of individual perspectives is not particularly requisite in some of these studies, even when constructions of the subject are present. Persuasive readings of advertisements and/or marketing practices by researchers have helped clarify how social categories or ideologies are developed and maintained through discourse that piggybacks upon the construction and sale of particular commodities within the context of capitalism. For example, Williams traces the rise of advertising, arguing that ads emerged within a context of capitalism where it stands as one of capital's

¹⁰⁹ Today diamonds are readily available in every price range at exclusive boutique stores like Harry Winston where potential customers are scrutinized before even being buzzed in to shop, in mid-level jewelry stores all over town, in discount bulk goods stores such as Cosco or WalMart, as well as in diamond discount outlets and on websites.

most powerful psychological tools and functions to sustain the economy (Williams 1961). Williams notes that advertising is “magical” in the sense that it simultaneously hides the conditions of production while transforming objects into “mere signs” (in a prescient description of an operation akin to Baudrillard’s “sign-value” (Baudrillard 1968)), where to consume is to sign(al) rather than to use (although I would argue that this is a false opposition, and furthermore that signaling *is* using). In this model, consumers precipitate from the overall political economy: subjects are molded by forces of discourse which are epiphenomenal to relations of production. People are “written” by ad discourse, lacking agency, individuality or subjectivity. There is little sense that local context or contingency impact the interpretive encounter between individuals and commodities.

Continuing in the tradition of linking ads and ad discourse to political economy and discursive production of subjects, Friedan was one of the first to link production and the advertising to gendered consumer consciousness (Friedan 1963). Commodities are understood in terms of their symbolic potency to create and to communicate not just status, but also (feminine) gender roles. Friedan reserves especial ire for marketing to housewives, whose consuming habits are vital to upholding the economy. Housewives are made, by ads, to maintain the feeling, installed, that they are indispensable to the running of the house, a job that can be done by any “half-wit” and only requires a “strong enough back and a small enough brain,” which requires familiarity and purchase of household products and appliances (ibid: 33). This patronizing stance towards consumers grows out of a construction of the subject where consumers are cast as vapid sponges, a position untenable in this study of diamond consumerism. However, the potential for the gendering disposition of ads, clearly visible in diamond marketing, is robust and has

received elaborate academic attention (see Chaudhuri 2001, Goffman 1976, Nixon 2003, Mastro and Stern 2004). Most diamond ads contain a portrayal of diamond as strongly gendered (for women). Some consumers I talked to said that “*diamonds are feminine*”, but that men should wear any jewelry at all (other than “traditional” ornaments such as cuff links, watches, or wedding bands), so the idea that the ads are gendering the diamonds themselves, or defining “femininity” with diamonds, must be contextualized within this overarching attitude towards jewelry and gender.

Cultural theorists in the 1960’s and 70’s examined advertising through the lens of structuralism (see Williamson 1978). This work was launched within an overarching Marxist conception of a capitalist political-economy and was sensitive to the role of advertising in the commodity fetishization, where commodities are defined as social things whose meanings are divorced from their trajectories of production. Commodities’ significations eclipse awareness of the productive cradle from whence they emerge, in a value-giving process that converts products into “social hieroglyphs” (see Marx xxxx). To counter this, some scholars working with commodity chains have called for a politics of re-connection, where consumers are educated about production realities.

My research suggests that knowledge of diamond production varies, though those who possess some knowledge of it did not demonstrate a clear tendency either to reject or to desire them. “*I just love diamonds and wearing them makes me feel special and feminine, and well, like someone cares about me! They are sparkly and wonderful, and they go with everything and you can wear them to turn that plain outfit into something really special,*” one woman explained just minutes before she said that she had heard on

the radio a story about, *“how the meanings of diamonds is manufactured by ads and there is a lot of manipulation involved.”*

Conversely, I asked Ray, a fashion photographer in his late 30's, who believes diamonds are *“overrated”* whether there exists a difference between wearing a small diamond and a large one. *“No, no difference – big, small, it's all the same – people are not educated (about the realities of diamond production) – plus its something, its like everything actually, its like politics, the environment, nobody gives a shit, they don't want to know. Even if they did somehow know, people are so cliché in this country they would still want it – they would still want their peanut size diamond ring – everyone wants that.”* Ray's statement is borne out by research illustrating that when people are taught about diamond production in detail, both materially and ideologically, they still want the stones (Bratton 2001). Bratton's study specifically addressed whether knowledge about the history and impact of the diamond industry influences the beliefs, attitudes, and purchase intentions and purchase behaviors of a sample of African American undergraduates. She found that following education, there was no change in attitudes regarding purchase or intention to purchase, suggesting a fundamental lack of concern for the political ramifications of participation in the diamond commodity chain.

Focusing on diamonds as a fetishized commodity, Westwood examines how marketing ruptures a connection between knowledge of relations of production and the consumption. Time is configured in ads through the tag phrase *“a diamond is forever”* to promote *“diamond time”* (predicated on various symbolic associations with diamonds having to do with romance, status and heterosexuality) while concealing *“labor time”* of children, factory workers and gendered gem production in India: she argues that the

erasure of labor time in ads is essential to the success of other time frames, and thus to the continued sale of diamonds (Westwood 2002). Consumers are “complicit knowing subjects” who are “in a fairy tale where we all want to believe that diamonds are forever,” and use diamonds for signing to others messages dictated by the industry and on occasion as suggested by celebrity style gurus (*ibid*: 36).

Westwood’s construction of the symbol is based on Baudrillard’s, in which consuming is implicated in identity-construction and signing-practice. Commodities are used as signs that are intelligible to others (sign-readers), identified on the basis of class. Westwood cites Levi-Straus and even uses the term “semiology” to further highlight her affinity with a sign model based on Saussurean linguistics. While her reading of advertising does point out an apparent disconnect between the pool of potential meanings that diamond ads provide to consumers versus encouraging a ready awareness of how they are produced, the tripartite aspects of agency, historicity and idiosyncrasy of the consuming subject cast as a group member is underestimated.

It is instructive to review the construction of the subject in this line of work. The subject of a structuralist semiology, including both post-structuralism and postmodernism, lacks agency, subjectivity and history. Berger, for example, denies the impact of the particular and local in arguing that since advertising, on television in particular, broadly shapes people’s behavior, it’s effects ought to be studied en mass, not on the level of individuals (Berger 2000). And advertising is a significant social force. It is stunningly clear that as a society we are “ad-burdened”: the total number of advertisements we are exposed to on TV, radio, newspapers and magazines is as high as 400 per day and if we were to add up all the promotional messages, including logos on products, program

promos and ads on billboards to this figure, this number could reach 1600 as typical Americans will spend almost 3 entire years of their lives just watching commercials on television (McCallister 1996). However, exposure to a particular message does not necessarily translate into internalization, and the relationship of each individual to marketing discourse is subject to contingency. The fact that even heavily advertised products fail more often than not is an indication of just this point. Consumers in the real world are historically situated, thinking, feeling beings who are engaged by advertising and the symbolic associations that ads create, but they are not wholly produced or controlled by such discourse. Therefore, focusing on the post-purchase experience at an individual level can help us better understand how commodities work.

Advertising helps to create wants where perhaps none existed, partially through attaching of meanings to commodities. During my research, that diamond consumers internalize and deploy symbolic associations promoted in ads was unmistakable, however ads were far from over determining. Consumers use industry devised symbolic associations as one resource among many to impute significance but say that others are more likely to use them than they are. For example: as Suzanna (a 20-something married fundamentalist Christian) explained regarding her engagement ring, mimicking the message De Beers puts forth, *“It’s a symbol of our love for one another,”* but then went on to say that, *“Some people wear big diamonds, even when they go to the grocery store or to eat at a cheap diner, to show that they have money or whatever, but for me its not about that – its about the celebration. I am religious so to me I see God’s love for us shining in here. And plus I think I am pretty savvy when it comes to what’s on TV so I am not easily drawn into believing what’s in the ads.”*

As in Suzanna's case, there is a semiotic logic underlying the tendency to generalize other diamonds while generating elaborate, situated significations for individual stones. Somewhat akin to the relationship between a noun to a proper noun, an object taken to be an instance of a generic category (diamond) is more readily interpreted symbolically than that same object (my diamond) taken as a unique sign. (In the work of Peirce, this is known as the token/type distinction.) Diamonds, those in general or in principle, can symbolize status and romance, but *this* diamond, the one on her finger, in its material particularity indexes a spectrum of ideas, associations and memories wholly her own, situated within her awareness of symbolic meanings, but more strongly emergent from her individual history and worldview.

Tracing the development of diamond advertising spearheaded by De Beers and highlighting prominent symbolic associations lends context how once acquired and imbricated in actual lives, the power of symbolic associations are often undermined, ignored or refused in favor of other meaning strategies which might be better understood as motivated (indexical or iconic), performative or poetic.

Symbolism

First let us define more clearly what is meant by the term "symbolic." The uneven, unstable use of the term "symbol" in association with commodities has led the theorizing of products, and even people, as "free-floating signifieds" such as in the work Jean Baudrillard. Most consumer theorists use the term "symbol" or "sign" as understood by Saussure. But the Saussurean sign is not well equipped to investigate subjectivity, or the singular, often creative and original, instantiations of language, gesture or material signs that constitute contextualized everyday experience. To understand how commodities

operate, it is precisely at the level of individuated particularity, albeit contextualized within an ad-burdened universe, that focused research is fruitful.

Similar to, but in contradistinction to the Saussurean sign formula, I am using “symbol” in the Peircian sense where signs are those which stand for something to somebody in some respect or capacity. Signs address a person, creating in the mind of that person an equivalent sign (the “interpretant”). Unlike Saussure’s sign concept, the Peircian semiotic mandates an interpreting subject: the association of the sign to its interpretant takes place in some given consciousness, in time, in a particular context, not in an extra-subjective code. Semiosis is, therefore, an event based phenomena.

To review (see Chapter 2), signs can be analyzed according to the relations of a sign to its object. Any sign has the potential to be taken as a symbol, an icon, or an index. A symbol is a sign which refers to its object by virtue of a law or habit. For example, a red octagon is a symbol of the command “stop.” That a rock signifies “love,” or “romance,” is largely to take that rock symbolically, but this requires, as do all symbolic associations, deeming, one of the primary functions of advertising.

Deeming is the establishment of an habitual association of a sign to an object for an interpreter. Deeming through advertising works through a combination of repetition and persuasion. Consumers are exposed to the idea that some given signification can be given to a sign (commodity), and are then persuaded to use it when encountering that sign. Diamonds have been deemed the “*quintessential symbol of eternal romance*,” as explained by one consumer I spoke with, and this acceptance exemplifies De Beers’ aim. That De Beers would not want imaginaries of limb amputation, lung disease, child labor or black market weapons trade and civil war to usurp more attractive symbolic

associations is reflected in Nicky Oppenheimer's Chairman's Statement that, "it is appalling that a product which is the ultimate symbol of enduring love and purity and all that is the best in mankind should be linked in any way with the obscenity or war and the suffering of the innocent" (De Beers 2002 Annual Report). What happens to the symbolic significations of a particular item once purchased is not necessarily of paramount consideration to advertisers, but in the case of diamonds, maintaining a particular ideology of the diamond as a beautiful and necessary component of love, courtship, and status has been the focus of the campaign since its inception. Consumers' habitually thinking about human right abuses every time they look at a diamond would not be in line with industry strategy and De Beers fights to quash allegations that tarnish diamond's carefully managed symbolic load.

Obviously, diamond marketing has introduced ideas of romance, status and love and retailers are instructed by the DTC to echo these associations at the counter. And though the arbitrary nature of symbolic deeming has not been completely hidden, it remains a powerful social construct. As Allen, a 32 year old who works in finance on Wall Street explained, "*...romance is not what diamonds are about or vice versa even though a lot of people think that, it's just society that believes it. It's like flowers: if you send someone flowers by calling an 800 number and then they are all happy because you did something for them, diamonds are the same. People don't know why they like them, but they are just so darn happy to get one. But actually, it is an object with no meaning. People don't know why they think any of this and so to me it doesn't seem right, it is more or less a ridiculous concept. It is totally RANDOM – do you know the movie 'Good Will Hunting'? Well, the main star, Matt Damon, is asking this girl out and he is like, 'We*

should go out for some caramels some day' and she says something like maybe, 'that it is strange,' and then he is like, 'well going out for caramels is just as arbitrary as going out for coffee'. Diamonds are just like that – it could have been anything....why not just write the person that you are going to marry a check – just cut them a big fat check and hand it over?" In this example, we see how a consumer understands diamonds to have no intrinsic meaning and to reject the arbitrary association between diamonds and romance promoted by the industry.

De Beers has been honing the diamond as symbol for over half a century, and many of the practices put in place are still at work. Industry generated discourse is present in consumer narratives in addition to individual symbolisms and employment of other signification strategies.

The genius of Rhodes' empire was in his total control over the rough trade, but in order to stabilize prices, demand ultimately had to be managed. It wasn't until Oppenheimer's De Beers made a concerted effort to massage American demand that the US became the priority market, and the upward trending of pricing was guaranteed.

N.W. Ayer

In the 1920's amidst a failing US economy and diminishing demand for diamonds, control over De Beers was usurped by Ernest Oppenheimer, owner of the powerful South African Anglo-American Corporation. In 1938, Harry Oppenheimer engaged Gerald Lauck, president of the N.W. Ayer advertising agency in New York, on the advice of the Morgan Bank which had helped his father, Sir Ernest, consolidate his financial empire. At the time, about 75% of the cartel's diamonds were sold for engagement rings in the United States for about 80 dollars a piece, but they were of poorer quality than those sold

in Europe where the market for diamonds was never, and still is not, particularly robust. Oppenheimer believed that an ad campaign could persuade middle-class Americans, the “backbone of the diamond market,” that diamonds were integral to courtship and that the purchase of more diamonds at higher prices was a direct expression of love (Epstein 1982). Ayer used every technique then available to stoke sagging American demand: print ads, fashion magazine columns, “news” releases, radio spots, photos ops with British royalty, and an early version of product placement in motion pictures seemed ideal venues through which to develop a “tradition.”

The team at Ayer consisted of psychologists who devised consumer questionnaires, experts in public relations who hosted events, and writers that would send copy to be published in style sections of newspapers and magazines. Account managers negotiated with film producers to have titles reflect well upon the diamond, and to place diamonds in love scenes on the bodies of film stars. They eventually commissioned well known artists such as Salvadore Dali and Pablo Picasso to develop images used in ads. Using feedback gathered from focus groups, “news” texts containing “historical” information were devised and placed in major media.

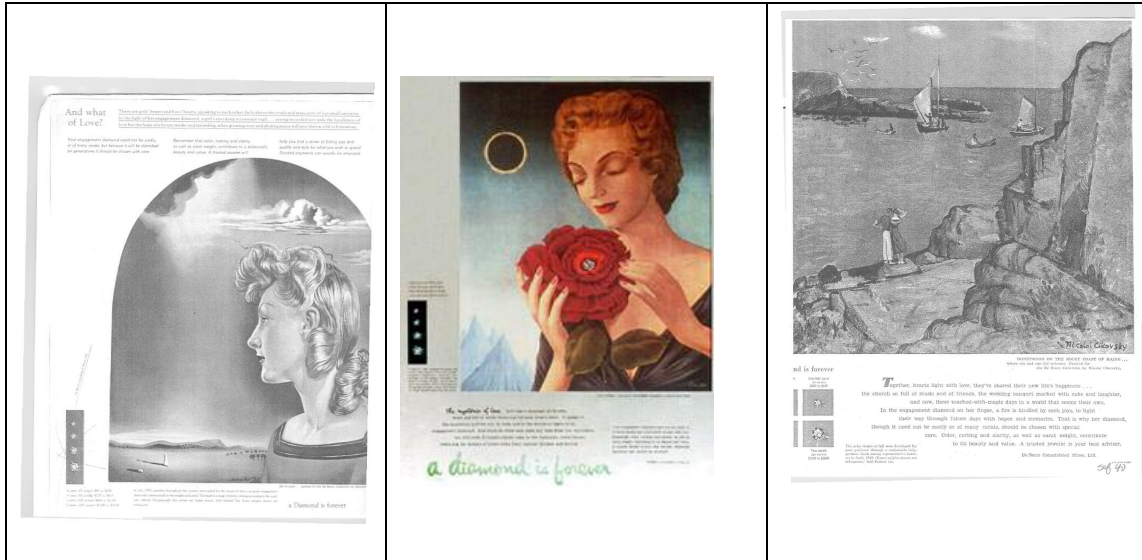


Figure 3-21 Artists like Salvador Dali, Pablo Picasso, and Nicolai Cikovsky were hired to encourage people to think that each diamond was a unique work of art by Nature. Copy includes the “A diamond is forever” tagline on lower right corner.¹¹⁰

Ayer developed the “Hollywood Service” to provide copy to press on the diamonds of movie stars. “Press releases,” portraits of celebrity’s ring-wearing hands, stating carat size and cut, were published in newspapers. The blitz continues in contemporary marketing venues such as the internet. “News” sources and shows such as Entertainment Tonight have taken over, showcasing diamonds that celebrities receive or purchase, usually stating the price. These shows/magazines cover diamond gifts such as in Winter of 2003 when rap mogul P.Diddy spent almost a million dollars on a diamond necklace for pop singer Jennifer Lopez after her break-up with actor Ben Affleck, or when the rings, gold bands studded with multiple stones, exchanged by actors Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston were “copied” by a jewelry distributor, who was then sued by the couple to the tune of 50 million dollars.

¹¹⁰ Images of Dali and Cikovsky ads from JW Thompson De Beers corporate archives at Duke University.

By 1941, the sale of diamonds in the US had increased by a stunning 55%, which Ayer explained as the result of “a new form of advertising” in which no direct sale or brand name is sold, but “simply an idea” impressed upon the public (Epstein 1982). In the 40’s the campaign was enhanced by sending out “authoritative” representatives to high schools to “educate” young women as to the importance of diamond jewelry, and publishing another portrait series, “Engaged Socialites.” Based on a logic of emulation, Engaged Socialites, as explained in the 1948 agency strategy paper, was a method by which Ayer wanted to “spread the word of diamonds worn by stars of screen and stage, by wives and daughters of political leaders, by any woman who can make the grocer’s wife and the mechanic’s sweetheart say, ‘I wish I had what she has’” (Epstein 1982).

When I visited the Hope Diamond¹¹¹ on display at the Smithsonian, I heard countless women, and even very young girls, using some variation of the following phrases, highly reminiscent of ‘48 strategy paper goals: “*Oh God, I wish I had that,*” “*I would wear that every day,*” or “*I want that sooo bad.*” The campaign works, partly through the clichéd “a diamond is forever” tag.

Frances Gerety

In 1947, copy editor Frances Gerety came up with the slogan “a diamond is forever.” Initial response to the phrase inside the agency was lukewarm, but within three years of developing the expression, an estimated 80% of engagements included the

¹¹¹ A red diamond, one of the largest known in existence, worth hundreds of thousands of dollars was virtually ignored while people literally pushed and shoved one another to get closer to the bluish Hope and other clear diamonds. Countless non-diamondiferous but very striking, some valuable, polished stones of all colors, sizes and shapes are on display at the museum, but none excited anywhere close to the high sense of desire continuously expressed as did the colorless diamond collection.

exchange of a diamond. Ayer believed growth of this trend was temporarily interrupted by the desire of women to differentiate themselves from their mothers (discovered through focus group research). Ayer responded with a “Not Your Mother’s Ring” campaign. This pattern of marketing to carefully tracked consumer response continues.

Ayer set up the Diamond Information Center (DIC), essentially an in-house public relations department, as an “authoritative” front through which to release “news” and “historical” information. Drawing on Veblen’s work on conspicuous consumption, the agency introduced the idea that a woman’s ring is an indication of a man’s success. The continuing acceptance of this idea in conjunction with the necessity of a diamond gift in legitimating an engagement in diamond consumerism was reflected in interviews with both men and women. Allison told me that when it came time for her to be engaged, she informed her fiancée : *“there is no question that I want a diamond... but I told him that I was not going to wear some little chip – so I said straight out, don’t even bring anything less than a carat around,”* and then, *“he didn’t want me to wear a small diamond anyway, as people might think that he was cheap. Of course he didn’t want that!”*

Echoing Allison, Roger believes that a woman wearing a bigger diamond is *“telling the world that ‘I can afford it,’ meaning this diamond and lots of other things too,”* but for him, and other men I spoke with, the link between diamonds and status is complicated by the fear that too big a diamond can be equally unacceptable. *“What I know about De Beers is just the ads I see, a diamond is forever and all that jazz. I see those ads all around town. And I do feel affected by them but I am a guy, and what I really want to know is what women think...you know giving someone something like that is a big deal and you don’t want to screw it up by giving something too small, but also*

something too big can be wrong. I mean it could be a disaster!” Roger went on to explain that if he had the money and she really wanted a big expensive stone, *“then, the sky’s the limit!”*

There appears to be a sliding range, highly individualized, within which diamond can signify the giver’s status. I did not discern any consistent factor determining the extent to which people interpreted diamonds as the type of status symbol Veblen imagined, although the idea that size can reflect a man’s financial success was at play. Allen expressed an idea shared by others, that evaluating success based on diamonds is “wrong” because *“you can never tell if you are dealing with the real thing or a fake,”* and further that, *“some guys will go into debt to buy something that does not fairly reflect their standing in life – they just want you to think they are up there, but they aren’t.”*

Celeste, who works with inner city youth, agreed with Allen’s basic assessment that reading status from diamonds is risky, but her reasons are her own. People’s “real” motives, ideas and status are hidden. She explained that as she had gotten older and *“started becoming aware of class issues,”* it was important that others did not see her as spoiled, or as someone who was pretending not to be spoiled, or even as someone from a privileged class that was pretending to be from a lower class. She had a pair of diamond earrings she once wore with some frequency that were demoted to permanent residence in a jewelry box in the midst of this crisis because to her the symbolic associations of glamour or status in the form of *“of having made it”* were not in keeping with how she wanted to be seen by others. *“But you know,”* she said, *“with diamonds it actually does not matter, because people who are really poor and don’t have anything will spend their last cent on a diamond or something that looks like one so that they will appear as if they*

have done all the things they are supposed to do and have been rewarded by being securely middle class – so as I see it, wearing diamonds is about being middle class, about wanting to be middle class. And I don't want that.” To her, aspiring to look middle class is “*tacky*.” Wearing a diamond announces to the world a “*middle class mentality*” and is for her, therefore, deeply unattractive. These symbolic attributions are riffs off of, responses to, both her social experiences as well as ad strategy, but are certainly not in line with ideas that De Beers is attempting to advance.

Levels of anxiety about how strangers read a woman's diamonds as an expression of a partner's success was surprising in some cases, but for every consumer who worried about such conclusions, another, brushed it off since others who “*don't know anything*” were of no real social consequence. This point is iterated in multiple ways by consumers whose interpretive practices are embedded in narratives and personal relationships known only to themselves, their closest friends and/or family. Memories, emotions, hopes and stories giving these objects their significations, are unbeknownst to social others who interpret the stone based on a default repertoire of symbolic significations promoted in marketing. Once the diamond is in/on a consumer's hand, this default repertoire is easily and often overridden by its possessor.

During the late 1960's, as diamond production ramped upwards and the industry found themselves looking for greater market shares outside of the United States, de Beers hired the J. Walter Thompson agency, with its expertise in international marketing, to spearhead campaigns abroad. Ads were developed for European markets such as Germany and France, and South American countries such as Brazil, as well as Japan. Diamond consumption remained weak in Europe and Brazil, but the Japanese campaign

was successful. Images of Japanese women participating in un-traditional, “western” activities such as biking or mountain climbing, while wearing western clothing and diamonds alongside a swanky looking Japanese man (also in western wear) who looked on approvingly, apparently fired the imagination of the Japanese public, because within 15 years, diamond consumerism increased from under 5% to over 70% of the population. Japan is now the second largest consumer of diamonds.

The Japanese purchase small, very high quality stones whose perfection and cleanliness¹¹² is supposed to stand as an analog of the bride’s virginal purity. A mar inside the stone is unacceptable in Japan, whereas in the US, size is sometimes more important than clarity, although several retailers on 47th street told me that shoppers are “*more educated about the 4 C’s than they used to be, so a lot of people come in looking for specific clarity grades.*” A “Bigger is Better” campaign was running in New York during the winter and spring of 2004, but the industry has at times strongly promoted small stones in the US as well.

Advertising strategies respond to consumerism, but also attend to supply side issues, such as size and color. In the 1970’s when De Beers cache of small diamonds became enlarged due to increased Russian production, a campaign to emphasize cut, color and quality over size was launched in the U.S. Small solitaire diamonds, tennis bracelets and cluster rings were promoted. Consumers were urged to concentrate on sentimental aspects of the gift, rather than the size of the stone. Average carat sizes for diamond purchases plummeted. The campaign was a little too successful in terms of matching production and larger stone reserves ballooned. By the late 1970’s, campaigns

¹¹² A diamond that lacks inclusions is called “clean.”

to rebuild desire for larger stones had to be devised that would not erase small stone demand. The solution was to sell multi-stone jewelry, particularly the larger solitary diamond framed by smaller “baguettes”,¹¹³ a design which is still very popular today.



Figure 3-22 Diamond solitaire framed by baguettes. Baguettes come in all shapes, sometimes echoing the cut of the main stone, but other times laying flush with the setting.

In addition to responding to size stocks, demand for color has been manipulated. Diamonds in ads are usually transparent, but most are far from colorless. Clear diamonds have set the standard up until recently. Recently, through color treatment, availability of natural and synthetic colored gems and, no doubt, with the help of advertising and product placement, colored diamonds have become fashionable. The supply of previously cheap yellow and brown ugly ducklings, under the aegis of “fancy colors” with names such as “canary,” and “cognac” are now expensive swans. One night at a BBQ, I met Russell and Paige, and told them about my research. As was often the case when I told people about the project, they began discussing their engagement ring. Russell told me that they had already purchased the clear diamond when they found out about colored diamonds - they *“regretted the purchase of the clear one because what we really wanted to get was one of those new colored ones - they are really valuable because they are*

¹¹³ Baguettes, particularly with the emergence of the Indian cutting industry, are relatively inexpensive and readily available.

¹¹⁴ Image from website: <http://www.1diamondsource.com/jewelry/rings/engagement.htm>

yellow!” Paige reassured Russell that, “*this one is beautiful and I wouldn’t want anything different*” before, rather jokingly, adding, “*it makes me feel so ‘traditional,’*” but later in private she commented that actually she would have liked to have a yellow diamond, and that “*a yellow diamond would be something different.*”

De Beers Flagship

In a new layer of marketing, De Beers developed the diamond-shaped “forever mark” logo for advertising and marketing of rough production, and the “De Beers” name was freed up to use in development (through the luxury item conglomeration LVMH¹¹⁵) of De Beers flagship stores in London, Tokyo, New York and Paris. Funds to pay for all of this were leveraged from consumers, partly from profits generated from the “bigger is better” campaign associated with American purchases of large expensive stones.

A common sales strategy is to use celebrity promotion to enhance product image, for example Michael Jordan endorsed Nike. Well known African model Iman, married to rock superstar David Bowie, was hired to promote De Beers because of her “international, committed lifestyle and her African roots both perfectly match the values of the De Beers brand” (LVMH website), a position that she has since relinquished in solidarity with the Gana and Gwi Bushmen and Bakgalagadi in Botswana’s Central Kalahari Game Reserve who have lost land to diamond mining through a combination of pressures from governments and corporations. De Beers, naturally, denies any role in the governmental decision to relocate people from these lands. NGOs such as Survival International have

¹¹⁵ LVMH is a holding company that owns over 60 brands, such as Louis Vuitton, Moet, Hennessy Givenchy, Tag Heuer.

tried, without much success, to arbitrate land disputes between De Beers (Debswana) and aboriginal peoples through petition and adbuster campaigning.



Figure 3-23 Billboard at De Beers (London) Iman on the left advertising the opening of the Flagship store. On the right is an adbuster campaign pasted over ad with the slogan “The Bushmen Aren’t Forever.” Iman, bringing great embarrassment to De Beers, quit just days before the store was set to open. In 2005, Lily Cole, a supermodel who became the new face of De Beers, having been alerted to allegations that Bushmen were being evicted from homes in Botswana to make way for diamond mines began refusing to work.

Property was identified for a De Beers store in the high end shopping district on 5th Avenue near 57th Street in New York, but because of a pending anti-trust suit waged against De Beers Centenary by the government, the company was not permitted to do business in the United States.¹¹⁶ In July of 2004, De Beers agreed to pay the maximum fine of 10 million dollars to settle the suit, but failed to show at court and as of May of 2005, no store had opened. In June of 2005, after agreements had been reached, the store opened with great publicity and fanfare. I visited the store, and was not surprised to find

¹¹⁶ De Beers Centenary AG, based in Switzerland, is a De Beers subsidiary formed to hold the non-South African assets of De Beers. (Rapaport TradeWire - Friday July 16, 2004)

it decorated in a minimalist, elegant style, using subtle colors, sound absorbing carpet, a plush video room, and semi-private desks and crannies where customers are wooed.

Diamond Information Center (DIC)

De Beers, through its the advertising/marketing arm, the London based Diamond Trading Company (DTC) and the Diamond Information Center (DIC), spends millions of dollars on ads per annum.¹¹⁷ The multi-media campaigns cross online, print, outdoor and promotional efforts to set up symbolic meanings for diamond. In constructing the diamond as an ideological entity, the DTC comes up with broad goals and targets which the agency, partly through the “authoritative” voice of the DIC, plans and executes.

For example, the ADiamondIsForever.com website keeps online consumers, about 200,000 per month, up to date on the latest DTC initiatives. The authority of the website comes from its citation of the “Diamond Information Company” as producer of information. No one I spoke with who was familiar with the site, which has an interactive feature that allows surfers build their own diamond jewelry and then even e-mail the image/design to a friend or lover, knew that DIC is the mouthpiece of De Beers. Additional print, web, and video ads are buttressed by contests, billboards and product placement in media events such as the internationally broadcast Oscar Awards.

Some consumers read through, and react rather negatively, to blitzing such as the steady appearance of diamonds in association with Hollywood stars. Claire, a film-editor in her mid 30’s who describes herself as “*not into diamonds*,” explained that, “*I know that the diamond companies are trying to make you feel like you have to have a diamond*

¹¹⁷ For example in 1999, De Beers spent \$67 million on advertising (Bittar, Christine, Brandweek, 10644318, 11/20/2000, Vol. 41, Issue 45)

to be a legitimate part of society, but anyone can see through that. They are just companies with a really expensive product and I think the whole Hollywood thing is caught up in it. I have no idea how the whole thing happened but you see the Oscars or whatever and they are all talking about so and so's diamond and how much it cost and where it came from, like Harry Winston or whatever, and its all just really stupid if you ask me, I mean who cares?" Even though Claire has a diamond, she rejects its association with glamour and status. The meaning is braided with the emotive thrusts of memory and hope; memory of her husband's grandmother and the close, loving relationship he shared with her, and hope that she and Dave's relationship will live up to all of their dreams and expectations (they are "*committed, but not married*").

As one of the most expensive and successful, diamond advertising is tracked by the industry by periodicals like Advertising Age, Billboard and Brandweek. Advertising Age regularly reproduces images from De Beers ad campaigns and marketing stunts. These campaigns are also objects of media attention: one of several recent articles in Brandweek on the De Beers brand and the right-hand ring campaign (O'Loughlin, 2004) was discussed in Billboard (Hay 2004). The right-hand ring campaign was then made even more visible when covered in American newspapers such as the New York Times (Walker 2004), the Wall Street Journal (Yee 2003) and USA today (Carter 2002), and then again when celebrity and fashion magazines like *People Magazine* and *Vibe* touted the purchase of right-hand diamond rings by public figures. In November of 2000, in typical form, Brandweek covered the De Beers holiday campaign. De Beers spent about \$15 million in TV ads targeted to high-income 25-54 year old men which complemented an online contest. De Beers had purchased all 140 available ad spaces in the New York's

former World Trade Center, from which to bombard prospective buyers with “guy-humored” ads with copy such as, “Only her ears need enhancing; Of course there’s a return on your investment. We just can’t print it here” (Bittar 2000).

Sex Sells

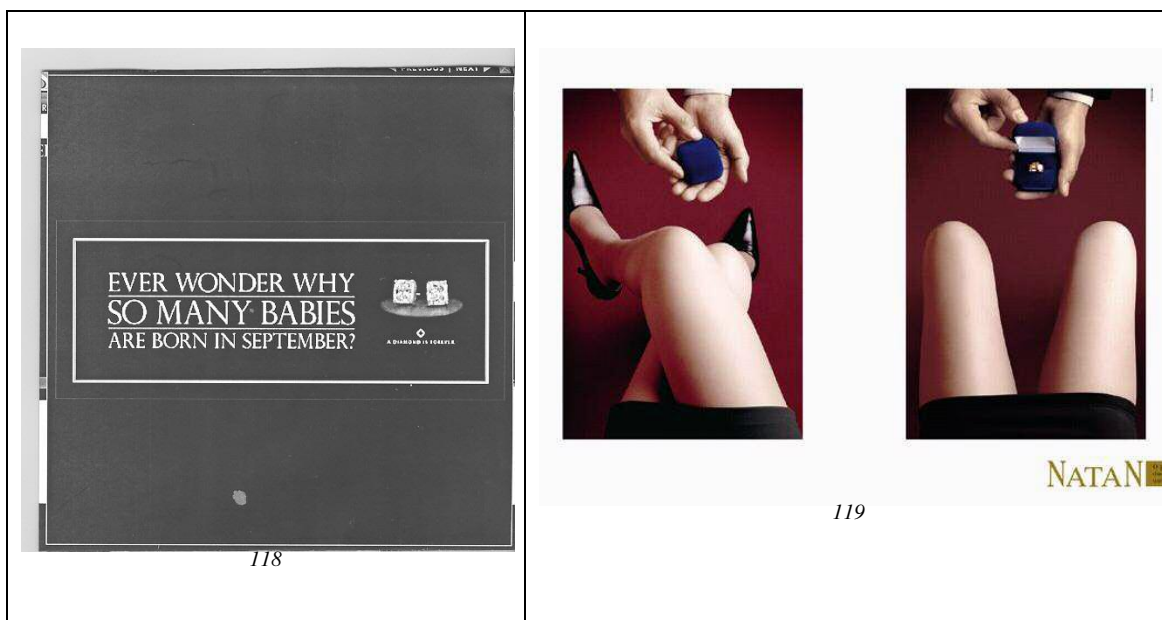


Figure 3-24 Ads that suggest a link between sex and diamonds. The “ever wonder why so many babies are born in September” ad was posted all over New York City in September 2003. Spoofs on diamond ads are all over the internet and in ad buster magazines.

There are many ads that like this real one, and a rather crass spoof, insinuating a connection between sex and offering a diamond gifts, that are interpreted variously by consumers. Most people I talked with who introduced a possible association between diamonds and sexual access did so with a rather negative, but complicatedly so, attitudes. Some women equate wearing or receiving a diamond with “*being possessed*” and so understand receiving diamonds as an exchange in which they are making themselves into,

¹¹⁸ <http://www.dis.uniroma1.it/~demetres/photos/Jan-15-2001/images/DeBeers.JPG>. June 2005.

¹¹⁹ www.groonk.net/blog/mt-archives/2004_06.php

or allowing themselves to be treated as, sexual objects, whereas men, perhaps not surprisingly, identify with the exchange as agents and some even suggest that giving or wearing diamonds is a way acquire sexual access.

Celeste explained to me that wearing a diamond ring *“is like saying, I have been bought. You know he gave you the ring and now you are his and the whole thing is oriented around him. You are indebted to him and that it, that’s the extent to what you are getting from him and now you have to spend your whole life paying him back, and gosh that sounds terrible....but that’s what it all about if you know what I mean, and it says ‘I am conservative and into home decorating’. Emeralds and rubies don’t say any such thing. Wearing them, you are more saying ‘Here I am, and I am exciting and lovely!’ I don’t think diamonds are very sexy in that sense.”*

Celeste’s statement works in contradistinction to the male perspective of Ian,’ who indicated that, *“I was walking past a bus station over on Madison earlier and I saw an ad for diamonds – and it said something like ‘ever wonder why so many babies are born in September?’ and then there is this image of this perfect diamond just reflecting all over with gleaming colors. And I was like, ‘Wow!’ – and it took me a minute – I was truly perplexed, but then I was like, ‘Oh, OK, so the idea is that you give her the diamonds in December and then she starts fucking you like crazy and the fucking is better and it is so good that you get her pregnant ‘cause she is so crazy to fuck you all the time. But I think that I am like most men and men want to make women feel good and happy and, you know, turn to you and smile and be glad that they are with you and feel like they are in love with you and enthralled and all that and the idea of this ad is that you can actually buy that. So in a way you are willing to lay out the dough and that is what some*

people are actually appreciating – it is the sacrifice that turns women on. Maybe – which I understand – but then there is the whole symbol thing too....”

Ian, (the well educated, writer introduced in Chapter 3) and Tom (quoted on page 1 of the Introduction), have coincidentally seen the same ad plastered all over Manhattan. Ian’ understanding of diamond for sex is perhaps a bit more generous than Tom’s. Tom was talking about rap stars and bling when the subject of sex was introduced. *“These guys are simple conspicuous consumers – they have the money and so they use it to adorn themselves. They don’t have money in the bank, they are walking around wearing it. It’s not like disposable income like I bought this coffee with. That’s all they have. So people can see it and envy them. And women will want to have sex with them. And it’s all the same with women, they get diamonds and then they have sex with you for the next 30 years. All women are ho’s, really – it’s like a contract – I will provide for you, entrust you with my money, here’s a diamond to prove it, and then you have sex with me. There is an expectation of fidelity – and women wear diamonds to show that they are taken, they are marked like that....and there are those ads on TV and billboards all over town – have you seen that one that says why babies are born? And the whole thing is how you can get someone to have sex with you if you give them a diamond. It’s all so visible and out there – now you don’t see that for pearls or sapphires and here it is, a rock. A rock!! It’s just a rock, OK? So I mean what’s it all about anyway?”*

The ways in which each man understands women in general, relationships with women, and the role of the recipient of the diamond are unique results of the personality and history of each individual. In the end, I learned that while Tom would give a diamond to a woman, even dipping into his savings to do so, Ian is unlikely to do so. The idea that

diamonds are “*glamorous*,” a concept De Beers has been promoting for decades, is completely ineffective on both Tom and Ian, who meanwhile both told me that diamonds are used as a symbol of love and romance by women and other men, but they themselves are aware of ad techniques and “*do not buy into that.*”

Some enjoy the ads, (“*I just love those ads!*”) while others I spoke with find them insulting. Simone told me that she had “*seen these ads for diamonds where there is like a silhouette of a woman but there is a diamond on it and the diamond is very present and sparkly but her whole face is erased and to me this is like such a major turnoff – I think ‘suburban’ and I hate that – I mean there is supposed to be a person there! But in the ads its like it’s the diamond that matters and the woman is just faceless.....*”

The faces of film stars are used as billboards for diamond promotion and help associate diamonds with glamour. In 2003, De Beers advertisers designed an elaborate slew of events and tie-ins to associate diamonds with glamour, fame, and success. In conjunction with General Motors, De Beers built the “Diamond Cadillac,” a car specially retro-fitted with professional jewelry cases, studio lighting and a make-up counter to transport jewels to the rich and famous for Oscar night (Atkinson 2003). Promoting diamonds through Hollywood is a mainstay in the diamond marketing history, and retailers report that designs worn by film, television and music stars are often seen flying off the shelves soon after they are broadcast.

Women I casually spoke with could recite the carat size, the color or were able to describe the jewelry of Oscar nominees and many who were knowledgeable in this way remarked on the beauty of the stones. But, some were critical of the general phenomena: for example, Melissa wondered how “*these people get those diamonds, I mean I bet they*

don't even get to keep 'em. If they are even real! It's just a publicity stunt, and half the time they don't even look that good." Regardless of the negativity of her reaction, however, Melissa was well versed in "who was wearing what" and this consciousness is part of the objective of the campaign, though she refuses to wear diamonds on the basis of the "exploitation of all the people involved – I had a neighbor from Sierra Leone and he only had one arm, and they had this meeting where they were talking about what had happened over there. I wouldn't be caught dead wearing a diamond ... Especially when it's just that same ring everyone has with, you know, that same boring setting. But mainly, like Nicole Kidman or whoever, they are just part of the whole machine anyway, so, I mean, who can be surprised that they are wearing diamonds? That doesn't make me want to run out and get one." But, she went on to explain later that when a diamond is handed down or in a very old setting, the gem becomes an acceptable, even beautiful and cherished item, otherwise she is "disgusted."

Raise Your Right Hand

Diamond campaigns have not just been the subject of deconstructive readings by consumers and social scientists. In advertising courses, ads are studied with zeal. Kalle Lasn's Media Foundation and its magazine *Adbuster* have used De Beers ads as a model upon which to teach ad busting, where spoofing ads reveals deeper messages. The "a diamond is forever" line has been copied, parodied and roundly criticized as the industry continues to prosper, partly as the result of their campaigns. Combining consumer research, celebrity photo ops and ad blitzes is reflected in one of the latest most visible campaigns to promote the right hand ring

Playing on a feminist sensibility, the 6 million dollar campaign called "Women of the World, Raise Your Right Hand" addresses womens' independence. The campaign is correlated with increased sales of right-hand diamond rings, but in a departure from the more common practice of receiving diamond jewelry as a gift, women are prompted to buy them for themselves to celebrate financial success. The campaign received a "They Get It" award from Advertising Women of New York (AWNY), a watchdog group that tracks how women are portrayed in ads. Ads show models wearing diamonds, worn on the right-hand "bling-finger," over copy like, "Your left hand says 'We'; Your right hand says, 'Me'," "Your Left Hand Rocks The Cradle. Your Right Hand Rules the World" and, "Your Left Hand Feeds the Family. Your Right Hand Takes the Cake."



Figure 3-25 Example of "Right Hand Ring" ad¹²⁰

¹²⁰ From the Diamond Information Center website: <http://www.adiamondisforever.com/hot/>

Right hand ring settings differ markedly from solitaire or other engagement-looking rings, tending towards vertically oriented and more playful “modern vintage,” “floral,” “contemporary” or “romantic” motifs which designers can use or modify. In addition to the ad blitz, the DIC placed these rings on the hands of celebrities like Faith Hill, Julia Roberts, and Sarah Jessica Parker. A right-hand ring ad featuring Halle Berry as Catwoman was tied into the movie opening in July of 2004. Retailers have reported brisk sales of right hand ring. Daria, a physicist in her early 50’s, wears a right-hand diamond ring, explaining to me that *“no-body was going to buy it for me, certainly not my husband who already gave me one diamond, so I had to buy it myself.”* Her big-by any-standard stone is a *“yellow diamond, but looks like a topaz, and it is something I did for myself, something different and just a little reward that I felt I deserved,”* and mirrors the self-esteem and financial success slant of the right-hand ring ads.



Figure 3-26 Some typical right hand ring designs. These rings do not look like the standard diamond solitaire that is the mainstay of the diamond ring market.

The idea behind the right-hand ring campaign is to “create a new usage occasion” in adding to maintaining diamond as a symbol of love and commitment, by “establishing

¹²¹ From the Diamond Information Center website design gallery: <http://www.adiamondisforever.com/hot/>

that diamonds can also be a potent expression of a woman's individuality and style" (O'Loughlin 2004), where advertisers exploit the slippage that exists in symbols between the signifier and the signified to increase the array of the diamond's significance within their own discursive universe. DIC's strategies do not always work: against the recent success of the right hand ring and the 3-stone anniversary arrangements there have been major campaign failures such as the attempt to create a market for elegant men's wear.

Gender and Ethnicity

Since many people associate gender with diamonds, they can be used to present or to make claims about gender. Conversely, people expressed notions of diamond wear related to construction of gender or ethnicity; that is to say they reported wearing and/or readings others' diamonds as indexes of gender, or of ethnicity. The diamond genders: consumers feel that diamonds are for women, that they are "*feminine,*" "*sexy,*" "*fun and charming*" or "*flirty.*" Giving diamonds a pole position in her fashion sensibility, Ruth explained that "*diamonds are so feminine and delicate and if you wear anything else it HAS to match this concept of feminine and delicate, so you have to create the whole wardrobe around it.*" A few stated that men should not wear diamond jewelry unless it is done ironically, in a "*rock and roll spirit,*" while others vehemently deny men the right to wear diamonds. at all

"*Listen,*" Celeste said, "*any diamond jewelry on men is too much. Ostentatious. Actually any jewelry on men is too much. Men should only wear like brushed steel at the most. Any gem at all looks gaudy and showy and therefore cheap. And it devalues the person.*" I also asked Katherine what she thought about men wearing diamonds. The gendering, and possibly ethnicizing, potential of men wearing diamonds for her is

reflected in her reply. She yelled, *“NO!!! Now that’s what I call ugly and vulgar, but, then again I don’t think women should wear mustaches. Because that’s not ladylike and you know, I think its OK for men to stick with a watch and a wedding band. That’s it. I’m not a big fan of diamonds and onyx pinky rings...if I see that that tells me ‘hey howya doin’ Vinnie Baggadonuts’. Like a mafia guy from Jersey or something. It tells me: Slimefactor. And then I start wondering if he has on a strapper t-shirt under there somewhere. You know a “wife-beater,” one of those white ribbed fruit-of-the-loom things, so no, I don’t like that. Diamonds are not for men.”*

Kate’s friend, Allison, echoed her assessment when I asked her what she thought about men wearing diamonds, *“UUUGGGHHHHH I HATE THAT!!! No way – there is no way to make that look good – I’m sorry but that’s soooo cheesy and it makes a guy look like a cheesy mobster with a nugget ring...call me judgmental but if I see a man with a diamond I don’t trust him – if he has that bad of taste in that then what else is wrong with him????? I think what is wrong with this guy? And like the man that sized my ring had on a diamond nugget thing and I was like eeeuuwww...bless your heart you poor thing don’t you know how ugly that is?????”*

Tim echoed some of Kate’s points saying, *“I think that I actually stereotypically associate men wearing diamonds with Italian American Sopranos¹²² type people, yeah, it’s the Sopranos type of thing, like a pinky ring. I work in Human Relations so I am honest. If I saw a man with diamonds I wouldn’t think much but until I knew the person I would wonder what they were up to.”*

¹²² “The Sopranos” is a popular television series centered upon an Italian American mafia family of the same name operating in New Jersey.

An approach that is a more tempered by Rosetta serves to illustrate the range: “*I don’t think diamonds are for men. I mean men don’t wear them, except for hip hop and the elderly or like metrosexual types, so I think they are female associated, but the engagement ring is really about heterosexual marriages, but earrings don’t have that kind of association, women, hip hop guys, anyone, both men and women, can wear diamond earrings.*”

Regardless of the feminine associations that some people hold, there are men who are willing to, happy to, wear diamonds. For Roger, only if it would he wear a diamond only under special circumstance: “*I don’t wear jewelry. I mean I would if it were a gift from a loved one and I really respected their taste, then, and only out of respect for them, would I wear one for special occasions, but I don’t like that. I don’t like to draw attention to myself, diamonds do that you know, even though I don’t really tend to notice them...but guys wearing diamonds? Its relative – I may end up with one (I doubt it) – it seems like a cop out but its too Italian goombah or Sammy Davis with the big rings.*” Ahmed told me that although the secrecy of the industry bothers him, he would wear a diamond, “*not a big flashy ring, but perhaps something small and flush, or perhaps an earring, but only if it were of the best quality. For me I would only want a very good diamond, because I would know and that’s what matters, its like coffee or even tea, you experiment and try things and then you, well for me, I like to buy the best, at least for me what seems to be the best, and it’s the same with diamonds, even I were to buy a cheap diamond that looked the same, if I thought it was somehow inferior, I wouldnt want that.*”

Diamonds are used in ads to symbolize heterosexual love. Against Rosetta’s views about the gendered/sexualized bent of diamond engagement jewelry, she wanted a

diamond to celebrate engagement to her female partner. She explained that she has a few pieces of diamond jewelry, “*but also there is one [a diamond] in my engagement ring – just a tiny chip and you know at first it fell out– it is small – its worth like 50 bucks – and it is discrete – it does not look like a big pointy thing – you know how engagement rings look – but I like this design...Grace and I bought it – actually I picked it out ...I wanted an engagement ring and so this is similar – I mean it is a diamond ring – and I wanted a diamond, but I did not like the way they all looked....its all very heterosexual and loaded like that – but this ring does not really look like an engagement ring and it is a band and a diamond so some people will see it as an engagement ring of course, but with this setting I think it is less legible – it has the elements but in a new way – its not the uniform.*” The uniform, I came to understand, is a gold band with a single round diamond placed in a high setting.

Several consumers, both heterosexual and homosexual, male and female, reported that they looked for engagement jewelry that was different from what they viewed as the “*common,*” “*ordinary*” or perhaps less pejoratively, “*traditional,*” in order to set themselves apart from the “*trend-following crowd.*” As exemplars of inconspicuous consumers, Frank and Jeab both wear wedding bands, but the diamonds are placed on the sides of the rings, so that the casual viewer cannot see them. Jeab’s friend Tuke wears a diamond engagement ring in which the diamond is actually on the skinside of the ring – only she and her husband would even know it were there – the ring appears to be a plain band. Recently, the Hitachi Corporation of Japan introduced what they are billing as the world’s smallest diamond ring. The ring has 5 billionth of a carat diamond¹²³ embedded

¹²³ The tiny diamonds come from the powder recovered from polishing large stones

in a 0.02 millimeter-diameter tungsten ring that can be seen only under a microscope. Since they are invisible to others, these stones are poor public indexes of gender, sexuality or anything at all.

Caught Up

Consumers are affected by the marketing of diamonds, but in self-conscious and convoluted ways and there is no simple correlation between diamond consumption and the acceptance or desire to convey symbolic attributes promoted in ads. A particularly expressive example of the “messy” reading of ad discourse is in Celeste’s story: *“I have dreams, one day I would love to have a really big fat emerald cut emerald, even as an engagement ring. Actually I would rather have that than a diamond, especially not a diamond solitaire. The emerald would be something different from the norm, but it can still represent what a diamond represents, and actually this is what is interesting to me: it upsets me that diamonds are so important but I still want them!! You feel all this pressure to have a relationship, and to get married and to get the ring and we, my friends and I say “until I have the rock” - its shorthand for saying that kind of relationship– “I am not going to live with a guy until I have the rock.” So it’s synonymous and that makes me angry – I mean I am a sensitive and enlightened woman and I know enough to know that it should not be important, but it is! Why should it not be important? Well because it’s a material thing. It’s a token – I mean don’t get me wrong – I love nice things and gems and stones are cool, I love rocks and stones that come from the earth – but well for me diamonds come with a lot of baggage – mainly status. I don’t want to be that horrible woman in the De Beers commercial where they are in Italy and he is like yelling, ‘I love this woman’ and then she is like ‘I love this man, I love this man’ and its soooo*

disgusting,' and, I think its for the three diamond thing, and the idea is that 15 years of marriage have come down to a ring with a few rocks on it. Its sooo fake and socially constructed and I know that and that's why it makes me really sad, But I am also part of society and truthfully I want those diamonds!."

People, like Celeste, do think of status and romance when they think of diamonds, that is to say diamonds *in general*. Tim talked with me about why he chose to purchase a diamond bracelet for his fiancé: *"I picked diamonds because they are more rare as far as jewelry is concerned and it goes with the ring and they tell me that all diamonds match – I mean I looked at a lot of other stuff like silver and I thought diamonds were the most I don't know, special I guess, and for me its tied to the whole marriage thing , I mean I don't know what other people do but to me I hear diamond and ring and that means marriage."* His fiancé told me that the diamonds in the bracelet *for her* are about Timothy stepping away from his pragmatic side in order to do something he would normally consider frivolous because he thought it would make her happy – it is this act which conveys significance to these diamonds, in addition to all of the "diamond is forever stuff." She does *"not really care about diamonds,"* but because she knows *"how important this was for him,"* partly because of the expense, she cherishes the stones.

The campaign taught people to associate diamonds with status and love and associated themes. Mary explained that while she has not bought into the marketing of diamonds, she has *"this one girlfriend and she is in her 40's she is not married but she is really into diamonds and she started buying them – she calls them 'starters' and she like 'trades up' as she calls it...she's said, 'no man is going to do it for me so I have to do it myself,' and for her it is a status symbol – which I don't get because you can go over to*

H&M and get the same thing for 2 dollars. And I defy anyone to tell the difference – I mean she overtly says that it is about status and power and she really cares a lot about it.” Echoing Mary’s story, Allen noted, “*a diamond is just a status symbol. Seeing it triggers you to say, ‘hey that’s worth a lot of money’. If it’s fake you could never tell the difference but I think what most people think is ‘Wow! That’s expensive’.*” So while consumers are embedded in ad discourse, they are simultaneously cynical as to its content, and endeavor to distance themselves from passive reception of corporate meanings. Particularly in terms of the troubled relationship that conspicuous consumption has with ideas about class or status in the US, the diamond is a poor index.

Conclusion

How directly advertising works is difficult to prove, but advertising does “work” in that the retail market is worth about 56 billion dollars a year, although in 2002 De Beers raised its advertising budget to well over 200 million dollars to achieve this, most of which is absorbed by the American market.¹²⁴ Considering the industry changes taking place, it is far from certain that the current mode of advertising will prevail.

Consumers constantly mentioned symbolic associations they learned from marketing spectacles (which can be understood on the basis of a reference theory of meaning). Consumers use them as part of their resource pool when it comes to interpreting particular gems, in saying things like, diamonds “*mean love and status and they are a symbol of all that, and they are pretty,*” or “*diamonds are status symbols, pure and simple,*” or “*they are the symbol of love.*” But they deny the power of advertising as

¹²⁴ For purposes of comparison, Gucci spends about 15% of profits on advertising which De Beers spends 1%. (Lyden and Ardalan)

well: Mary Sue, a lawyer in her early 40's, having inherited several diamonds, said that *“in terms of the marketing, I haven't bought into it. I would never spend my own money on diamonds and if someone ever did want to buy me something like that I would rather have something besides a diamond because I like to be different and my birthstone is ruby. Or maybe an onyx ring. I relay prefer rubies and onyx.”* Many qualified their statements about meaning with explanations of how *other* people buy into the “myth,” using diamonds in a limited way as a tired symbol of love or status, but that for them more personal aspects reign. The dovetailing of industry promoted significations with creative semiosis varied from person to person.

Semiosis is a complicated, contingent and context bound activity and in “real life” diamonds can operate as more than passive symbols. This is not to say that industry promoted associations are not present in consumer narratives, but there are other modes of engagement that consumers employ in understanding these signs as a way of experiencing others and meaning themselves into the world. A pointed study of the symbolic associations of diamonds might conceal, for example, the performative uses of diamonds. Consumers use non-referential semioses (motivated, poetic and performative) in concert with symbolic semiosis to interpret diamonds. These interactions are explored in the following three chapters.

CHAPTER 6 WHAT DO DIAMONDS MEAN? : COUNTERVAILING SENTIMENTS

I met Corinne, an educational psychologist in her early 30's, through a friend and happened to tell her I was working on a research project concerning diamonds. "*Oh diamonds, humph....I think diamonds are strange.*" I asked her what she meant and we started to talk. She eventually told me, as I commented on her rather large emerald cut diamond ring, that, "*I would never tell Brent, but frankly I am ashamed to wear this, and I don't always wear it. Sometimes I tell him that I am not wearing it because I don't want it to get stolen, or that its too flashy for the subway, but then whenever we go out together I always put it on and it's special and romantic and he thinks I am proud of it, and that makes him happy. And that makes me happy.*"

Corinne's husband, Brent, is a Wall Street stockbroker. She told me, with some pride, that "*he makes a substantial salary,*" which allows them to live in a fashionable and expensive Manhattan neighborhood. Corinne's sisters-in-law are "*materialistic*" as she put it, and "*concerned about status and having things that show people how much money they have. And they have a lot of it. I mean they wear their diamonds and furs to eat at the greasiest diner in town. I have diamonds and furs too, but I would be embarrassed to be seen at a diner dressed like that.*" As a couple, they seem to have plenty of resources, and enjoy a relatively high standard of living.

Corinne went on to explain, "*And you see, I have this other diamond. It's on a ring that came from my grandfather with sapphires and rubies and allegedly diamonds. I mean, I have never had it appraised, so who knows if they are even real. But I don't always wear it, in fact, I never wear it.*" When I pressed her further about why she

doesn't wear her grandfather's ring, she, without pause, said that she was, "*sure that the miners are mistreated. Truthfully, I have very negative associations with diamonds. I am sure somebody is being exploited, I mean, don't they come from Australia? I bet the Aborigines are the ones who have to go down into the mines to get the diamonds and they are probably treated so badly that I would not want to have any part of it. But it is from my grandfather, so I keep it and well he treasured it and, so, do I.*" Corrine is sensitive to the issue of labor practices and wishes to avoid participation in an industry she believes to be unfair, but is simultaneously drawn to building and maintaining of emotional bridges through passing down possessions. She experiences these ideals as countervailing sentiments, but in her use and emphasis of the phrase "*but it is from my grandfather,*" Corinne indicated that in this particular instance, her local, personal, familial attachments won priority over political awareness.

In Corinne's narrative, personal content (including a moral position against exploitation), constitutes a salient dimension of meaning-making, not at all an uncommon feature in narratives I collected. As the interview proceeded, I realized how Corinne's relationship to diamonds is fraught with contradictions of one sort or another, manifest in mixed sensibilities of affection, pride, shame, love, and even contempt. What could account for this sentimental complexity? How might we systematically examine such contradictions in semioses?

Contingency and Local Context Operate within Social Discourse

As covered in previous chapters, diamonds have a complex global commodity chain. In response to the marketing blitz, some consumers adopt selected elements of industry symbolism, and a few take on this discourse wholesale, where particular

diamonds are said to mean status, glamour and/or romance. The majority of people I spoke with, however, impute meanings to their diamonds that are micro-locally situated, emotionally charged, volatile (changing over time and circumstance), idiosyncratic and creative. Many individuals readily accept industry promoted meanings with respect to the diamonds of others, or to the abstraction of diamonds in general, but will immediately go about resetting meanings circulated in public discourse (in ads, movies, celebrity and fashion magazines) when confronted by particular diamonds that they are themselves consuming by drawing upon their own circumstance and history.

Semioses of diamonds are often personal and self-conscious responses to marketing. Others claim that while others are duped or brainwashed by advertising, they themselves are “*too savvy*” or “*smarter than that,*” and meanings they create are informed by their own life context. People regularly expressed in more or less direct terms that they are aware of and consciously work against marketing as in the following excerpt from my interview with Mary Sue, a 40 yr. old lawyer.

I asked Mary Sue how diamonds compare to other gems and whether or not she thought that diamonds are the most attractive or most desirable of all gems. She expressed her preference for rubies and onyx when she launched a discussion about her response to marketing: “*Well to me, diamonds have the most emotion attached to them because they are supposed to be tokens of love and used in engagement and things like that, so for that reason I attach a lot of emotion to them...but you know that baggage is just a huge marketing strategy and we have all bought into it, but it’s not like that all over the world. Actually, I personally have not bought into it. Because well, you know my dad was sick last winter and he, I guess, knew that he didn’t have much time left and*

so at that time he gave me a safe deposit box that contained my mom's ring, my biological mom, she had died, and her ring was in there that he had given to her. She died when I was 19 years old. And he also gave me his mother's, my grandmother's, ring. And I think they are real valuable and I've had them for almost a year, but I wouldn't even consider wearing them. I keep them in a cardboard box. I mean they are not even insured, which is really stupid 'cause they are really big and expensive, but as far as how they actually look, they are not doing it for me. There is so much going on there that I can't even think about wearing them." Mary Sue describes her stance towards ads' symbolism by using the phrase *"I personally have not bought into it."*

Mary Sue's diamonds are so saturated with emotion and personal history that putting them on is unbearable. As meaningful objects, they inhabit a separate category from generic stones promoted in ads. The meanings of these diamonds are unique to Sue, shared by none other, primarily indexical of her circumstance, and imputed only to these specific diamonds. Though the tendency to, for example, associate particular diamonds with whom they may have once belonged is pervasive, no others share the set of meanings that Sue imputes to these signs, and in this sense the meaning of the diamonds is idiosyncratic.¹²⁵

¹²⁵ ¹²⁵ Individual variation is masked in consumer theory that glosses consumers custom-fitting signification to commodities in individual contexts by integrating memory, local contingency and personal perspective, only opportunistically adapting or responding to ad discourse, and infrequently finding reason to actively pursue information on the realities of commodity production. As I have been arguing, the reason that some studies of commodities do not engage with consumerism at this level results from importation of a of sign model been borrowed from structural linguistics which can be productively problematized in its application to analyze culture, broadly, and commodity objects, specifically.

Icons and Indexes

As previously discussed, (see Chapters 2 and 5) the sign of structuralism is arbitrary, ahistorical and does not specify agency. By contrast, Peirce's semiotic accounts for subjectivity, context, memory and the attribution of meaning with respect to an object's material particularity, formal qualities and temporal persistence in identifying three types of signs (symbol, icon and index) which are triadic: a *sign* stands for *something* to *somebody*. To review, icons operate by likeness, for example a portrait that resembles the person to whom it refers to operates iconically. The key to the icon is structural similarity – think of metaphors and maps. In language, onomatopoeiae are iconic signs. “Indexes” operate by spatio-temporal contiguity, for example a knock on the door signaling someone on the other side is an indexical sign. Think of a souvenir, a weathervane, a scar. In language, words like “this” or “that,” or pronouns such as “I” are indexical signs whose meaning shifts in accordance with context.¹²⁶ Saussurean signs are best subsumed within Peirce's rubric as symbols. All three modes work in concert to generate meaning. Instances of “pure” symbols, icons and indexes are rare, if they exist at all, but interpretation of any signing vehicle requires the privileging of one modality.

One of the most crucial differences between Peircian and Saussurean sign theory is that in Peirce's semiotic, the meaning of any given sign is processural and context-bound rather than static and defined by virtue of relations to other signs within a larger system. Meaning is not generated through binary oppositions, but through chains of associative signification. Peirce's semiotic concerns the activity of interpreting signs that can theoretically signify almost anything to a given interpreter in a given context.

¹²⁶ See Crapanzano, 2003 on indexicality.

Diamonds can serve all at once as symbols, icons and indexes. It is as a result of potentially conflicting meanings that can arise from using various methods of meaning-making that countervailing sentiments, such as love and shame, may be simultaneously associated with a particular diamond. And yet, a single emotive note such as pleasure can be enhanced when all semioses are in harmony. The following section will focus upon how consumers treat the diamond as an index, and then I will explore how consumers treat them as icons.

The Diamond as Index

The term 'motivation' is sometimes used to describe the extent to which aspects of the meaning determines or influences the form of the sign. The more the form of the sign is affected by what it means, the more 'motivated' the sign is said to be: iconic and indexical signs are relatively motivated, while symbolic signs are unmotivated. The less motivated the sign, the more learning of an agreed upon convention is required, as is the case with much language.¹²⁷ For symbols, the form of the sign is not in any way caused or linked to that which it represents. Icons and Indexes are more motivated than symbols in the sense that the form of the sign is influenced *in part* by that which it represents.

The meaning that any symbol takes on can be reset due to what is often referred to as “slippage” that advertisers can exploit.¹²⁸ People acknowledge the symbolic pairing of diamonds with notions of romance, for example. But these same people might discuss in

¹²⁷ Linguistic items that are onomatopoeiaic like “bang!” are more motivated than some other words, such as “tree,” and exhibit a certain degree of iconicity.

¹²⁸ The more unmotivated the sign, the more frangible the relation between sign and interpretant. The signifier, or the signified, can thus more readily be changed and replaced.

their next sentences their own invented symbolic meanings in addition to indexical and iconic meanings they develop for their own diamonds in Corrine's narrative cited at the beginning of this chapter: Corinne understands, recognizes, and is to some degree herself a participant, in sustaining the ongoing construction of diamonds as a status symbol. Her conflicted interpretations and emotional responses to the diamonds she owns are emergent from tensions that exist between industry-promoted and socially accepted associations having to do with status, and the meanings she holds, which draw upon her own personal history, knowledge and relationships. She values the diamond as a symbol of romance, glamour and success, and appreciates its role as a meaningful link between herself and her grandfather and herself and husband, while simultaneously worrying about the diamond which is to her interpreted as an index of mistreatment, "*materialism*" (a value she clearly condemns), and "*status-consciousness*."

Corinne's stance, echoed by others, that there is exists a relationship between ugly labor practices (she is "... *sure somebody is being exploited*" in production) and diamonds on the market is an example of reading diamond not only symbolically but indexically as well. In general, several themes appeared with respect to the reading of diamonds as indexes. Sometimes, people interpret diamonds as symptomatic of, or proof, or evidence of, relatively distal, underlying circumstances of production or acquisition (with both positive and negative content). In much the same way that one reads backwards through a souvenir to a previous trip, through a scar to a prior injury, or through a weathervane pointing south to the fact that the wind is blowing southerly, people can, and do, read diamonds as indexes of a variety of loosely connected themes such as real socio-economic circumstance, family ties, particular characteristics of the

buyer, suburbanism, types of relationship, life events, sacrifice, and so forth. I have culled these categories out of interviews even though each person's reading of diamonds is particular. Most striking is the fact that indexical readings emerge by creative, historically embedded subjects interacting with signs whose meanings are idiosyncratic, context-specific and contingent, and develop in concert and/or at odds with industry-promoted meanings. That this is the case is exemplified in Ian's narrative.

Ian considers himself to be somewhat removed from the "mainstream." Having invited Ian to meet me at the Graduate Center for an interview, when I asked him how he felt about the practice of giving, inheriting, or receiving diamonds from loved ones, Ian told me, that, *"I have really started to appreciate Aileen, my ex, and our shared practicality because now I am finding that women want diamonds – they see a diamond as a symbol of love and forever and the rest of that bullshit, so in a way if I was 35 and getting married and my future wife was like, 'OK, now let's go pick out a diamond,' and I was actually participating in normal American society, which I don't really like to do, I know, I just know, that I would have a moment, a flash of darkness in which I would experience this 'You are becoming one of them.'"*

"One of who, Ian?," I replied.

Ian continued, *"Well I am afraid to say this almost, but OK. You know, it's like Aileen and I didn't need anything, anything material, especially a \$20,000 rock to illustrate our love to one another.... We liked to write poems on notebook paper and that was wonderful and important. So buying a diamond and all of that is slipping into this consumerism where money is equal to emotion and it's, for me, a moment of defeat.... So the "them" is the people who feel like they need to buy a diamond to prove their love as*

opposed to those who do it more creatively, I guess, though, maybe a diamond can be creative.”

Ian's contrary stance towards the association of diamonds with romance, love, materialism, and consumerism leads him to associate diamonds with an imagined “them” whom he loathes. While believing that women want diamonds as a symbol, he reads them as an index of a lifestyle and value set that he wants to avoid. But Ian's orientation to diamonds is contradictory, as he also later told me, by his knowledge that women, at least in his family, value diamonds above all else “*for remembering,*” with respect to how it has been handed down, and further that if his girlfriend really wanted a diamond, then a diamond she would get, and he would be more than happy to give her something that would inspire good feelings between them.

The treatment of family diamonds as indices of kin ties and life events was evident in another moment during our conversation. I had asked Ian whether he has any diamonds and he began to talk about his family and expectations about inheritance: “*I will be asked to inherit some diamonds, because you see my family is very matriarchal and things get passed down and I am the only guy in the family in several generations and all across the board... but we pass things down,...they are very serious about it. Like there is this painting, and I frankly find it scary and when somebody died, my grandfather, my cousin was like now you have to go and take that painting and the painting is, well, there is this guy and he kind of looks like me, I think that's why I find it disturbing, but he is holding this thing that is a cross between a basketball and a goat bladder and I have the thing wrapped in brown paper – what am I going to do with that? I don't know, but I mean at least diamonds are small. But the most important thing for them, my mother and*

everybody, has to do with remembering, you know how it has been handed down, and for all the people in my family that is what those diamonds are all about. And they LOVE to tell you about it. For hours. My mom will likely ask me to inherit the diamond, or diamonds, before she dies. I guess all her jewelry will be divided up and she will say here take this for your girlfriend or wife or keep them in a box or something.”

The extent to which Ian will himself continue the tradition of interpreting the family gems as markers of kinship and life events as he believes his relatives do is unclear, but the condensation of the diamond as a sign of such matters is present with regard to these particular diamonds, and this plays into how he interacts with them. These diamonds are, at the very least, understood by Ian as signs that have an indexical significance having to do with family ties and life events for the women in his family.

Katherine, a 34 yr. old former stockbroker turned housewife and mother is a self-admitted diamond aficionado. She describes herself as not particularly moneyed, yet she owns numerous diamonds, comfortably wears them on a daily basis, and very much appreciates the aesthetic of precious gems. We sat at my kitchen table talking over a cup of tea and quickly found a friendly tone. She talked freely, with much humor and what I would describe as un-self-consciously. I was struck by her insistence that while, *“Of course, some people associate diamonds with those ridiculous commercials on TV with the lovers walking in the park about to overrun an elderly couple,”* she also said that by examining the gems of others she can, *“see what kind of person someone is. ... Everyone looks (at other people’s diamonds) and I think this is because people are inherently competitive. But I would say that much more than that, mainly, it is the curiosity element because when you see diamonds you always wonder, or I do anyway, if they got it from*

family or what is the story behind the diamond....you know, how did you get it and why...That is really the interesting part and that's the part that gives diamonds their meaning to people. I don't think people care about all the other stuff...especially if it is someone young. When I see a young person with a big diamond, I wonder how did you get that, where did you get that kind of money, or did you get that from a family member or what. So it's really about the story behind the diamond that makes them worth having. I remember my friend Yvonne got diamonds when they had their first baby. And Eve got one when she had her second, Richard... To me its interesting to get the story behind the diamond because it can be telling, so, I saw Yvonne at a party and she had one of these kind of horseshoe shaped diamond earrings that I commented on and it turns out they were part of a watch, the clasp actually, that belonged her mother-in-law, so her husband had them made into earrings for her and I thought that made it a lot more special."

We can see that one of Katherine's first responses to other people's diamonds is to attempt to read back through them, as indexes, to both the context of acquisition as well as the market value. The stories she would go on to tell me of her own diamonds are what give them significance to her, and she projects onto others this kind of indexical treatment by other diamonds consumers she encounters.

Ian, in addition to identifying diamonds as indexes of family ties and life events, is also oriented to the financial aspect, and after discussing more sentimental issues, his discussion turned to the issue of market value: *"To me there are a couple of things going on with the meaning of diamonds: there is the expense and value and rarity of the diamond and that means that it is a sacrifice – when you buy a diamond it, it is a financial sacrifice 'cause they are expensive!."* Someone having a diamond means, is an

index that, someone else has sacrificed significant economic resources, and in fact, there are those who highlight an equivalence between diamonds and actual cash, an equivalence that is far from arbitrary. Diamonds are purchased at some point by someone, and for some, reading back to price not only informs the interpretative conversations they have with themselves, but they may also wish others to read their diamonds back in the same way. An example of a consumer reading her diamonds in this way Diana's discussion of her earrings.

I met Diana through Corinne. Diana's husband works with Corinne's husband, Brent. Diana, a "*stay-at-home mom*" in her mid-30's, explained to me that she really loves diamonds and has "*done her research*" so she knows a lot about them. She adores how diamonds look and wearing diamonds make her feel special and feminine. When I asked her about her diamond ring, she said that, "*what I really like is the glitter and sheen when it hits the sun...but this diamond is very important to me, I even have it insured, it's just worth a lot to me and to tell you the truth, I wanted diamond stud earrings. I got them and I was ecstatic, I didn't think that I would be. But I was and they were from Tiffany's and I wanted to hang the tags on them so everybody would know where they came from and how expensive they were. I hated myself for thinking like that, but truthfully I was very pleased to have them.*" Diana hopes that others will read the earrings as an index of a special purchase.



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Figure 3-27 Diamond studs set in platinum from Tiffany & Co. are priced at \$1,050.¹³⁰

Tiffany & Co. is a well known high-end jeweler. According to their website¹³¹ a pair of round brilliant diamond earrings, having a total carat weight of .34 and color grade I, clarity grade VS, and set in platinum costs \$1,050. A pair of diamond stud earrings with a total carat weight of .22 (so each weighs about .11, very much on the small side), color grade I, and clarity grade VS, set in platinum costs about \$675¹³². Obviously, not all diamond earrings are this costly, and by glance, I doubt that most people would recognize her earrings as a Tiffany product, but for her, this fact looms large in her feelings towards them. Diana mentioned, but only parenthetically, that her husband had given them to her, but she was much livelier and engaged when discussing the brand, her pride in having such an item, and the fact that she wished others would

¹²⁹ A commercial photographer told me that diamonds are notoriously difficult to photograph.

¹³⁰ A pair of earrings could cost \$100,000, even more, but one of the curious

¹³¹http://www.tiffany.com/shopping/item.aspx?search=yes&c_id=WEB1&c_it=46Z&start_id=1&keyword=diamond+stud+earring&attribute=&searchcategory=&lowprice=&highprice=&chunk=5&jewelry=&metal=&jewelryIndex=&collectionsIndex=&metalIndex=&stoneIndex=&priceIndex=&homeIndex=&sLowPrice=&sHighPrice=&collections=&stone=&home=&watch=&watchIndex=&table=&tableIndex=&searchType=2&. October 25, 2004.

¹³² Actually the current average price paid for a piece of diamond jewelry in the U.S. is about \$593 (2 Degrees Freedom, 2003).

recognize them as she did. Her feelings of embarrassing self-condemnation (“*I hated myself for thinking like that*”), for feeling proud (“*but truthfully I was very pleased*”), and wanting to show-off (“*I wanted to hang the tags on them ...*”) her status symbol are blatant, and emerged from countervailing interpretations of the diamonds’ meanings as both an index and as a symbol.

The meaning of Diana’s diamond earrings is strongly related to branding, luxury, price, and status. She also suggested that an overt aesthetic consideration is at play, as in: “*what I really like is the glitter and sheen when it hits the sun.*” In Diana’s narrative, we can see the complex set of meaning making strategies coming together as she, consciously or unconsciously, selects aspects of symbolic meanings in combination with others germane to her own situation. The earrings have a performative thrust: she wishes to exhibit these diamonds to be read *by others* as an index of a purchase at Tiffany’s.

In terms of casting indexical value into relief, one might complain that we are back to a discussion of economic status, which is true to some extent, however, the relationship of meaning to material conditions, that is to say the kind of relationship that ties the diamond to “status”, is in this case indexical, not symbolic. There exists a real world component to diamond purchase/possession, cost, that is anything but arbitrary. Structuralist and post-structuralist readings of commodity meanings do not address this issue since they are focused on generic social significations that objects as symbols carry without any concern with grounding social significations into underlying material facts. A straightforward political economy reading would also link diamonds to class, aligning economic resources with status claims, but would miss the crucial subjective renderings so important to consumers themselves and discernable through a broad semiotic inquiry.

While the consumption of Diana's diamonds are related to status, thinking through the lens of the index provides a more nuanced, and I think more accurate, understanding of how this actually works. Because indexes are grounded in temporality and "real world" circumstance¹³³, they are less volatile than their symbolic counterparts.

An even clearer example of interpreting diamonds as an index of money is by Zach, a 38 yr. old teacher, who also owns a pair of diamond stud earrings which he wears, not necessarily everyday, to snazz up an outfit. I took Zach out to lunch one day and we chatted casually before we began the interview. He mentioned that he only wears his earrings on occasion because "*its not always appropriate.*" Zach's take on diamond consumption is that wearing diamond earrings is, "*... about vanity. I mean they are not exactly expensive, but after all they are diamonds. It's like walking around with hundred dollar bills taped to my ears. They are a low-level status symbol. It says, 'hey I pay my power bill on time!'*..." Here, diamonds are conceived as a direct equivalence for money. He told me that having the studs is an index of "*the ability to produce.*" Zach's diamond earrings are, in the sense that they can be interpreted by Zach as a direct exchange for money, very much like hundred dollar bills taped to his ears, and therefore it is more accurate to think of his interpretation as indexical rather than as symbolic. Interestingly, though people take diamonds as indexes of cash, I found they also readily admit to lacking an ability to evaluate how much diamonds are worth, even their own, nor can they recognize simulacra. Taken together, these factors make the diamond a pretty strange status index/symbol.

¹³³ Indexicality requires spacio-temporal contiguity, which is a causal relationship. One must have acquired, and then given up \$1,050 to buy earrings that cost \$1,050.

I talked with consumers about their experience with and attitudes about diamond simulants (fake diamonds), synthetic diamonds (lab-produced diamonds). Even experts, cannot always tell the difference between a real and a simulated diamonds (although some consumers believe that they can recognize a fake when they see it). People might attribute meanings to a simulant that might not be attributed had they known it as an imposter. Related to the ease of counterfeiting diamonds and the “status” load attached to them, Anne P., a real estate broker, commented that, *“most people equate diamonds with wealth, which is wrong, because you can get a CZ (cubic zirconium¹³⁴) the size of your head and who will know? No one!!”* In echoing Anne’s sentiment that most people cannot tell the difference between a “real” and a “fake,” Mary Sue, the lawyer introduced earlier in this chapter, commented, *“You know I have this one girlfriend and she is in her 40’s, she is not married, but she is really into diamonds and she started buying them, she calls them ‘starters,’ and she like ‘trades up’ as she calls it...she’s said, ‘no man is going to do it for me so I have to do it myself” and for her it is a status symbol, which I don’t get because you can go over to H&M and get the same thing for 2 dollars and I defy anyone to tell the difference. I mean she overtly says that it is about status and power and she really cares a lot about it.”* Diana, Corinne’s friend, said she would happily take a fake diamond if it were bigger than the real diamond that she already owns, because *“the imitations are so easily taken for real that nobody can tell the difference, so, I mean, for all intensive purposes, the fake ones are real.”*

The context of acquisition is a central element in the interpretation, and each story is unique. But meanings related to acquisition can be unstable, as knowledge or

¹³⁴ CZ is Cubic Zirconium, one type of material used as “fake” diamond.

relationships change over time or space. A diamond can operate like a souvenir, as it is a marker of events, of relationships and transactions while concordant emotions and memories are projected into the diamond object so that it appears that the diamond carries the significance and is treated as such. Dina, a young woman who had recently moved to New York, centers her interpretation on the context of acquisition, largely absent of status considerations, yet firmly tied to a financial equivalence and the general social sense of symbolic value nonetheless: *“This one (pointing to a ring with a diamond in it) from my grandmother is a diamondI had it appraised once and the guy was like its worth 100 dollars and I was really disappointed....You see she had either been lying to me or maybe she was just mistaken, I don’t know, but it was a real blow to me....I was curious so I had it appraised, curious because you see she had given it to me before I came here and it was supposed to be for a last resort, I could sell it, she said, ‘if you get into trouble, you can sell this,’ and so it was like having money in the bank, in a special savings account, but right here on my hand instead of in some dark vault...I really looked at this as an investment...and it ties me to her. We were really close, you know many antiques are really just savings accounts and the thing is that they become more valuable over time...just like interest....that’s how I see this thing....”* Her diamond is first and foremost an index of kinship and an instrument for holding money. As conditions changed (when she discovered the stone was not worth much), so did her interpretation, and although part of the meaning rides upon at-large social significations, another part ties her to her grandmother by projecting meaning into the diamond rather than in herself. The diamond acts as a kind of metaphorical cairn directing her to her grandmother.

The economic aspect of diamonds can take on a more sinister side. For Deborah, a 36 yr. old park ranger, married to Jason, a music video producer, consuming diamonds is an index of ignorance and/or non-compassion. Deborah's discussion about her diamond suggested a certain ambivalence, and I had asked her whether she would like for her husband to give her a big or expensive diamond. She responded with evident disdain, *"Jason would, he knows, well he better know, not to ever come home with something like that for me...."* I wondered why, and an explanation was forthcoming. Although she wears a diamond engagement ring, she is aware of, but rejects symbolic associations offered by the industry and replaces them with her own readings, but for diamonds she does not yet, and may never have, her interpretation is informed by her knowledge of how they are produced: *"I saw a show on TV that was really horrible showing how the mining industry takes advantage of children and they don't pay anyone and how they just fake the price. It's all artificial, like it's all a big fraud and the consumer is tricked. What came to my mind was, 'Wow! It's all a MYTH!!' Just a few companies and weird practices are in place to keep up this myth about how rare they are and I bet they are real easy to come by. I don't know how they get them, but I know that they are not rare and that a lot of people get exploited... Personally I don't want to support the exploitation involved and also the myth. I wish everyone would find out about what those people do in Sierra Leone and then the diamond would mean something different.....something real: What they really stand for is exploitation."*

But Deborah was careful to explain that she wears her diamond ring because it belonged to Jason's mother, and therefore she feels that is acceptable. She would never herself, nor want for Jason, to purchase a diamond. Diamonds that are already in the

family, it seems, take on a special condition that new ones do not, cannot, possess. This special condition are as carriers of personal, contingent histories that make them ontologically distinct from their generic cousins. From Deborah's perspective, family diamonds are completely different from those on the retail shelves that, as the fruit of a particularly wretched production chain, indexically "*stand for exploitation.*"

The Diamond as Icon

The icon represents by resembling.¹³⁵ By way of comparison, symbols, work by virtue of habit: I am habituated to linking the (word/sound) symbol "tree" with ideas and images that go with those tall plants. One can similarly become habituated to the diamond as a symbol of romance. The chief aspect of interpreting a sign as an index is recognizing it as grounded in temporal-spacial causality, having a direct existential connection with its object. Ordinary English can be used to understand the index; for example, as in Samuel Butler's sentence, "*Her face . . . was a fair index to her disposition*",¹³⁶ where one's disposition motivates the face to appear as it does. The term "icon" in semiotics cannot, however, be readily understood as the word is used in ordinary discourse to refer to objects such as the Christian cross, as a representation of a

¹³⁵ Though more complex than might be necessary for my purposes here, it is worth reviewing how Peirce conceives of the icon: "An icon is a representamen of what it represents and for the mind that interprets it as such, by virtue of its being an immediate image, that is to say by virtue of characters which belong to it in itself as a sensible object, and which it would possess just the same were there no object in nature that it resembled, and though it never were interpreted as a sign. It is of the nature of an appearance, and as such, strictly speaking, exists only in consciousness, although for convenience in ordinary parlance and when extreme precision is not called for, we extend the term *icon* to the outward objects which excite in consciousness the image itself. A geometrical diagram is a good example of an icon. A pure icon can convey no positive or factual information; for it affords no assurance that there is any such thing in nature. But it is of the utmost value for enabling its interpreter to study what would be the character of such an object in case any such did exist. Geometry sufficiently illustrates that" (Peirce 1903: 4.447).

¹³⁶ Online Dictionary Nov. 4, 2004, including usage of terms in sentences.
<http://www.bartleby.com/61/7/I0100700.html>

sacred article or personage, as a known and enduring symbol, or as an idol. It is more akin to the original Greek *eikōn*, from *eikenai*, which means “to be like,” or “to seem.” Diamonds can be interpreted iconically when qualities or features of the diamond itself are taken as metaphors, as diagrammatic of some other idea, fact or fantasy.

Consumers treated diamonds as icons less frequently than they did as indexes and/or symbols. However, there were those who did engage with diamonds’ formal properties such as brilliance, clarity, size, hardness and so forth that were taken metaphorically, in standing for, by virtue of structural similarity, a variety of ideas. Diamond, especially compared to other gemstones, is “brilliant” and “fiery”¹³⁷, and consumers sometimes consider these traits in using stones as signs.

Ian had been talking about how memory, kinship and romance can become attached to diamond (see above), but then, much to my surprise, he launched into a sidebar about the meaning and brilliance, though he didn’t use that term: *“To me there are a couple of things going on with the meaning of diamonds. First of all there is the way that it reflects the light. But the light thing is, well, I mean, you look in there and the light is literally bouncing all around and you get inspired. So, with the right cut and if it’s a good diamond, I guess it’s better. And it is sparkling, and you just feel like this thing is different from anything else. It’s hard to describe because it’s like describing the taste of tequila to someone who has no idea about it, or the flavor of a lime versus a lemon... I am not very poetic I guess, its hard to describe, but anyway, there is the visual, sensual*

¹³⁷ Recall from Chapter 3 that “Brilliance” is the fraction of the light hitting upon a diamond that is returned to the eyes of an observer. The more light that is returned, the more brilliance a stone is said to have. “Fire” results the splitting of white light into a colorful prism such that the greater the separation of color, the greater the fire.

aspect of diamonds and it is a very pure experience. Looking into a diamond is stimulating to the eye. And I think that light is often associated with Christianity and add to that the idea of the spirit or soul that is in there and people talk about when they die, there is the light and God has a big light around him, so I think the fact that it seems to have this really special intense light is making it a kind of spiritual object and it makes it perfect to use as a symbol for something that stands between or, brings together, two souls.”

Ian is privileging, the formal quality of light return to interpret the diamond as a binder, that “*stands between or brings together, two souls*. His idea is reminiscent of diamonds’ symbolic association with romance, but in his case the meaning is motivated by the character of the diamond, and is, therefore, more properly understood as iconic.

Others introduced the element of light play into interpretation. But each person has her own way of thinking about this feature. Like Ian, Penny also approaches the diamond partly as a brilliant entity, but has developed a more threatening set of iconic significations to impute. Penny is a visiting nurse – she moves from hospital to hospital in temporary appointments and thus has the opportunity to learn from each place and to bring what she has seen to new environments. My impression was that she is a curious, stiff and hard woman, but also intelligent, efficient and compassionate. We had been talking about the diamond she inherited from her mother, and the engagement ring she wears containing a small diamond. The bulk of our conversation revolved around the inherited stone, her feelings about it, as well as the circumstances under which she came to have it instead of her brother, who was vying for it. That particular stone, for Penny, is linked with unpleasant memories of her mother’s death, a lifetime of family strife and a certain degree of discomfort with her mother’s insistence and pleasure in what Penny

described as wearing something showy and aggressive. Later our conversation turned to Penny's job as a nurse, and she mentioned that she had taken to chit-chatting with patients about their jewelry as a way to both relax them and pass the time.

A few days later, Penny called me on the phone to say that she had been thinking about her feelings about why she has such little fondness for diamonds: she disliked the “*black hole effect*”. At first, I thought Penny was might be talking about a dark centered diamond or a the “fish-eye” effect that can occur when a diamond is not prepared close to “ideal cut” standards, and so I started asking her about cut and light.

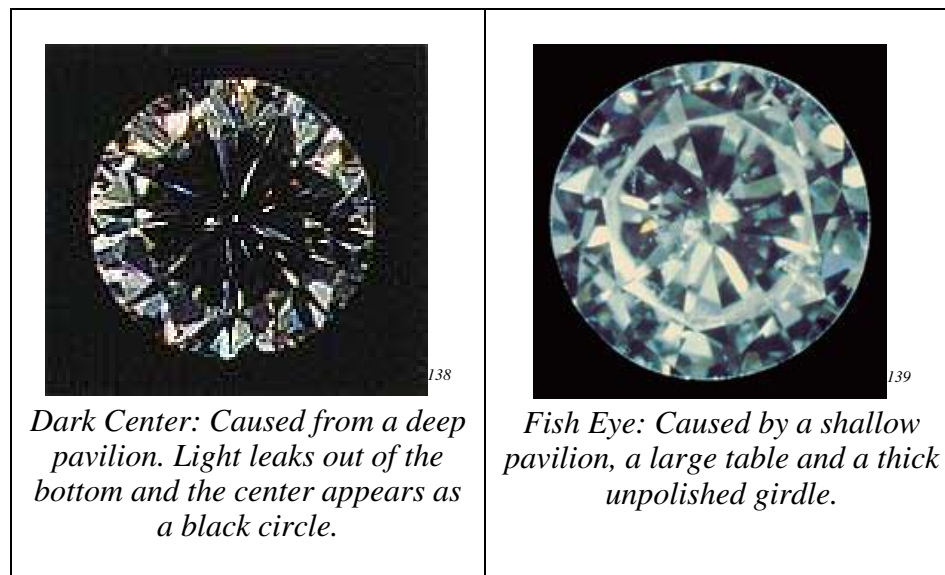


Figure 3-28 Poorly cut diamonds allows light to leak causing dark centers or fish eyes.

Penny interrupted me to explain that she did not know anything about cuts but that diamonds can “*pull you in.*” Her tone was assured and confident, asking me to remember what she had said: “*They pull you in but I mean you look in there and its like a well that could suck you in, and you would never come back...*” The winking and

¹³⁸ image from: <http://www.idasgems.com/diamonds/cut.html>. Nov. 4, 2004.

¹³⁹ image from http://www.preciousmetals.com.au/Tutorial/t_fisheye.htm. Nov. 4, 2004.

twinking of light is related to what Penny called diamonds' "tease factor," they are "all talk." Diamonds wink and promise, but ultimately they just "tease."

Of particular interest is the relationship between personality and the diamond, in the sense that some interpret the diamond, however else they think of it, as a metaphor for personality. For example, Kate combines her understanding of diamond as an index of finance, among other things, with a reading of it as an icon of personality. We had stumbled onto the topic of big, fake diamonds and she started to talk about a friend whose diamond reflects what Kate thinks of as character: "It just fit her personality," she said.

"What do you mean by that?," I prompted. Kate replied, "I look at people's diamonds and sometimes I question if it is real or not, I mean you can't tell, but sometimes circumstances make me think about it. I have this one friend, Lissa, and she showed up one day with this really huge diamond ring and told me how her husband got it for her, and I mean, she doesn't even have a dishwasher, but here she is with this big ring and to tell you the truth I wondered about her priorities. I mean she had told me before that she doesn't like to cook because they don't have a dishwasher, and I was thinking to myself, 'if you can afford to buy that ring like that surely you can afford a dishwasher'....then she told me it was fake!! I think it was Skatell. (I then asked her to tell me what Skatell is.) Skatell is a synthetic jeweler and they make diamonds and my friend Lissa is always joking, "Do you have anything to Skatell me?" Cause she wears stuff like that and well, about that one ring, I was cracking up when she told me it was fake, but it doesn't change anything because it's funny. I mean the thing was so big and obnoxious and she is very gregarious and outgoing and I thought it just fit her personality. It's too big for me, but it looked great on her. This thing was huge! I mean like the Start of India!!

No, not that big but about I dunno, like 5 carats. I myself wear fake diamonds all the time and I have some great fake jewelry and I love it because you don't have to worry about it and it looks just as pretty."

Kate's assessment of the size and "wow factor" of Lissa's "Skatell" is a good example of a metaphorical, iconic rendering of a diamond, although it concerns her friend instead of herself. Indeed, she determines that such an object would not be in keeping with her self-image. I heard again and again people discussing the extent to which this or that kind of cut or size or setting "fit" with their personality. While many people talked about size mattering, the "clean" or "pure" look of the colorless diamond was taken as a metaphor for one consumers' personality.

I interviewed Anne P. about her engagement ring. Anne told me that at first she didn't want an engagement ring but was given one anyway, and was, in the end, thrilled to have it. She discussed a direct linkage from the "clean and pure beauty" of the diamond to her own "clear thinking style" and "no frills personality" in showing why the diamond is an appropriate fit to her own self-image. She explained, "*And as far as diamonds go, now that I have one – I never gave them a thought before this, anyway, now that I have one, I recognize that they are just clean, pure beauty, and so I understand why they are so sought after...other kinds of gems don't appeal to me and I think that's because I am a clean thinker, I am not an impressionistic thinker, I am a black and white kind of person and not frilly at all, so I think the clean lines of the diamond really suits me. It reflects my personality: simply elegant is the way I like to think of it. (What do you mean by "clean"?, I wondered aloud). Clean means that there is not a lot of room for interpretation. I am not a florally person. I wear black and white*

every day. I am not an impressionistic person; I like be 'what you see is what you get' and when I say diamonds are clean, that is what I mean, that you can see what you get and that's it." She interprets the diamond's clarity as a metaphor for her own self-image.

Anne P. is focusing on the aesthetic, formal characteristics of her diamond, but she went on to talk about how the unusual cut and setting often attracts attention when she goes shopping or is out with friends. She also told me that her fiancé had expressed to her that wanted her to have a diamond, actually insisted that she have one, because he felt that for her not to have one or to have one of poor quality would reflect back poorly upon him. She agreed, believing that others might read her diamond as an index of her husband's ability to provide. The intertwining of indexicality and symbolism with iconicity in combinations that are unique to each individual operates to bring about emotional responses that can be either positive or negative, or somewhere in between. Anne P. aligns herself, explains herself, narrates herself, in positive terms through an iconicized reading while recognizing that others might read it as an index of her husband's ability to provide. But, after all this, the iconic reading seemed to be the primary signification strategy.

Kirsten, introduced above, is a 37 year old massage therapist and Iyengar Yoga teacher I met at a workshop on Yoga. Part of the workshop dealt with the meaning of Sanskrit chants and we found ourselves talking after the session about how things often have significance for one person and not for another. I told her about my research project and asked her if she would be willing to be interviewed about diamonds, to which she excitedly agreed, saying that she had already thought through this very topic.

We went to a nearby coffee-shop where she explained that she had recently gotten married. Her mother had given her one diamond. She had also been married and divorced from one man and then had become engaged to, but not married, another several years prior, and explained that, partly as a result of these previous relationships, she and Charles, her current husband, had discussed “*in-depth*” whether or not to buy a diamond, and what the significance of the diamond would be in the context of their relationship. Charles was surprised that she wanted a diamond, but after their lengthy discussion, he came to see things as she did, and Kirsten is currently wearing her diamond engagement and wedding ring. For Kirsten, a heightened sense of appreciation, love and desire is fomented by the semiotic strategy she uses in interpreting her diamonds.

The following excerpt from my discussion with Kirsten shows how she reads diamonds as symbols of romance, and as a promise for a man to provide and to be present in the marriage. For her, diamonds represent the desire and intent from both parties to sacrifice as well as the desire by both to work to “*make the marriage endure, like the diamond does.*” Indexes have direct existential connections with their objects: the outlay of money is an expression, is symptomatic of, of a man’s desire and intent to sacrifice for the marriage and as such Kirsten interprets the diamond as an index of this attitude. Recalling that the key feature of the icon is that it bears a resemblance to its object, Kirsten’s taking of the durability of the diamond as a metaphor for the durability of the relationship should be understood as an iconic interpretation. By considering the icon and the index in addition to the symbol to understanding “*sacrifice*” and “*durability*” as diamond meanings, it is apparent how, in addition to her knowledge of American social

discourse on diamonds, Kirsten's personal circumstances, behaviors and memories interact in her interpretation.

Overall, Kirsten's narrative contains hybridized signs, in terms of representing combinations of iconicity, indexicality and symbolism. She explained, *"I think that this diamond is symbolic of embracing the best union possible, it represents the ideal between a man and a woman, and it's that the diamond is the ideal gem in a lot of ways. The diamond says, 'We will strive to be the best for each other,' and it reminds you of that when you look at it. Diamonds, I mean they have all these connections and I am a woman in the modern age and I just think that they are gorgeous so I have an emotional response and maybe it is conditioned into my consciousness through advertising although it sure doesn't feel like that to me...(Kirsten paused to think about this for a moment) ...no, it does not feel like that. But I do have a startling emotive response that just stops me whenever I see one. I can't even imagine other stones being able to create the same allure since, well, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but the light and the translucence of diamonds do catch the eye whereas the darker stones or other kinds of stones just can't do that. They don't do that...so, it's the simplicity that is important. I don't know how to describe it but a diamond is like the essence of something and this essence is reflected in the context..... (I asked her to explain what she meant by simplicity and essence.) Simplicity is part of the whole transaction, of meaning because a diamond is pithy essence, it is beautiful and long lasting. It endures anything. Like marriage is supposed to. Of course I know that diamonds can become chipped or crack, but they are so hard and they basically endure. They can scratch glass, and this hardness is communicated in the stone and it means essence, it means endurance. "*

So the diamond's meaning iconically springs from its hardness, its purity, and its simplicity, but the presence of symbolism, and her reading of diamond as an index sacrifice (see above) are also at play. So, all three modes of semiosis are working together. The evident complexity of Kirsten's diamond meanings can be approached in a systematic fashion by considering meaning as a process that emerges from subjects with individual histories, hopes and imaginations but who are simultaneously located in the particular social and political context of the United States, and so they exposed to, bombarded at times by, marketing discourse. Exclusive use of the semiotic "symbol" cannot capture the full complexity of Kirsten's meaning-making practice.

Why Discerning the Semiotic Relationship is Important

The basic structural model was initially developed to explain language at the level of the phoneme and, in some ways, has been productive in studying problems in language as a system, but it was never meant for analysis of signification of signs having material particularity, formal qualities and temporal persistence, characteristics that not only allow for, but encourage the application of meaning in ways that exceed the parameters of the arbitrary sign concept. In this chapter, I have tried to demonstrate that consumer-generated meanings exceed the symbolic associations promoted by the industry in also treating diamonds as iconic and indexical signs.

Icons, indexes and symbols are not in reality discrete, but each contains elements of the others. Understanding how consumers take diamonds as icon or index in addition to symbol, we can more systematically investigate how material culture such as diamonds mediate everyday experience. Contemporary theory could do more to elucidate the subjectivity at the core of consuming. As is currently under discussion in linguistics

(Johnstone 1996), cultural studies can benefit by recognizing that idiosyncrasy is not trivial. We need the capacity to enter the matrix of time and space in which individuals are ensconced and thereby address the personal/experiential aspect of consumerism while maintaining sensitivity to large-scale issues of political economy and mid-scale phenomena like class and identity formation. This chapter has explored how analysis of diamond consumers' meaning-making with a Peircian semiotic can help us to achieve such a capacity.

CHAPTER 7 OSTRANANIE: THE POETICS OF BLING

Ostrananie

“We do not experience the commonplace, we do not see it; rather, we recognize it. We do not see the walls of our room; and it is very difficult for us to see errors in proofreading, especially if the material is written in a language we know well, because we cannot force ourselves to see, to read, and not to “recognize” the familiar word. If we have to define specifically “poetic” perception and artistic perception in general, then we suggest this definition: “artistic” perception is that perception in which we experience form – perhaps not form alone, but certainly form.” (Schlovsky, Victor. 1914. *Voskresheniye slova* [The Resurrection of the Word]. Petersburg.)

* * *

Bling bling / Everytime I come around yo city

Increasingly part of mainstream American discourse, the term “bling” has been added to the newest edition of the Oxford English Dictionary. “Bling bling,” or just “bling,” describes big diamonds, jewelry and all forms of flashy style, and was first coined when New Orleans rap family Cash Money Millionaires started gaining national awareness in the late '90s with a song titled "Bling Bling" by Cash Money artist BG

(Baby Gangsta).¹⁴⁰ "I'm so surprised that the word has spread like it has," BG told MTV, "but I knew it was serious when I saw that the N.B.A. championship ring for the Los Angeles Lakers had the word 'bling-bling' written in diamonds on it." (MTV News, 2003).

The term is part of the song's chorus of, (see full lyrics in appendix):

*Bling bling
Everytime I come around yo city
Bling bling
Pinky ring worth about fifty
Bling bling
Everytime I buy a new ride
Bling bling
Lorenzos on Yokahama tires
Bling bling*

Once a strictly underground urban performance phenomena, hip hop has become a multi-million dollar global enterprise, revolving around music, personalities and style. Hip-hop, far from occupying the once obscure spaces of South Bronx schoolyards and streets, now is world-wide (Boyd 2003, see also Mitchell 2002). Bling is a striking element in contemporary lyrics and rapper ensembles. While some bling is interpreted as a status symbol, it can have a more complex and active function. Bling is rapidly becoming co-opted by mainstream media and "culture" (by the time you read this, capital will have sought to further neutralize blings' potential for dissent) and will eventually lose its ability to jar¹⁴¹, but because of its origin in a once marginalized "subculture" of rappers, bling is often understood by consumers as surprisingly political and poetic.

¹⁴⁰<http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1471629/20030430/bg.jhtml?headlines=true>. March 2005.

¹⁴¹ Hip hop has moved from an "underground" practice to something "that is really really popular. You have Nelly. You have Eminem. You have Eve. All these people crossed over from hip-hop to mainstream, so its only a matter of time before everything else from that world crossed over," explains Tuma Base of MTV speaking about the use of "bling bling" by "Middle America" (Rohan 2003). Hip-hop and the styles that accompany it are increasingly mainstream (accompanied by rising debates surrounding the twin issues

This chapter explores how consumers interpret bling. I do not claim authoritative knowledge regarding the intention of rap stars, film stars, or athletes with respect to diamond wear, nor wish to deconstruct bling from an academic perspective, but rather, illustrate how diamond consuming can be, is, frequently read as a “poetic” practice, in which an extraordinary form of diamonds wear is at issue, brought to the fore, and interpreted in ways that can act as a foil against which one defines one’s own practices and ideals. As poetic devices emerge from historical context, bling must be situated in the contemporary American cultural landscape. After locating it at the nexus of two competing discourses, one promoted by DeBeers, the other in hip-hop, this chapter explores bling in consumers narratives.

Competing Discourses: “Diamonds are Forever” vs. “Ice”

De Beers has associated diamonds with status, romance and gender. Diamond marketing is buttressed with evaluation by 4C’s, maintained across wholesale and retail outlets through retailer explanations and “educational” literature.

of authenticity and selling out). As an illustration of the extent to which hip hop is an important cultural force, consider that the album "Get Rich or Die Tryin' " by rap artist 50 Cent was the top-selling recording in 2003. In discussion of of *ostranenie*, as disordering, as estranging from the habitual, Shklovsky notes that, "should the disordering of rhythm become a convention, it would be ineffective as a device". (Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," 24). It is just the current unconventionality of diamond wear by rappers that creates reflection in some consumers. One bling becomes “commonplace,” it’s jarring impact will be muted. Couture and pop culture, in co-opting hip hop, is eroding its disordering potential. As a matter of fact, by the time this chapter is finalized, bling’s estranging potential may already have already been destroyed!



Figure 3-29 De Beers ad and Cover of *The Source*

The “Diamond is Forever” campaign promotes diamond wearing by family-oriented women¹⁴², and judging by the models in most De Beers/The Diamond Information Center ads, demure white and middle-class women who receive diamonds as gifts from husbands, or husbands to be. Ads usually feature small diamond rings or earrings, almost never in ways that could be construed as ostentatious.

In an oppositional discourse, diamonds appear as part of the vocabulary of hip-hop. “The Source,” a self-stylized “magazine of Hip-Hop Music, Culture and Politics,” has, in every issue for the last several years, published hundreds of photographs of young, single (mostly) African-American men, wearing huge diamonds in flashy platinum and

¹⁴² De Beers launched a major ad campaign to promote the wearing of diamonds by men was in the 1970’s, but did not do very well.

gold necklaces, pendants, earrings, rings, pimp cups (diamond encrusted platinum mugs) and “fronts” (worn over the teeth), and other custom-made objects, below which are captions that discuss the jewelry in detail (often including the price). Rappers, in contrast to the ideal of marital sexual relations but in keeping with a kind of machoism promoted in De Beers ads, often perform a “pimp” or “playa” personae buying diamonds for themselves as indexes of prowess and success. Text under a recent photograph of 50 Cent reads: “Within the Hip Hop community ‘Bling Bling’ is a large part of fashion. When Hip Hop first came on the scene gold jewelry was a fashion statement, the income of an artist was measured on how big his/her jewelry was. Now, gold isn't a fashion statement anymore, platinum has taken over, and it is doing big things.”¹⁴³



Figure 3-30 Rapper 50 Cent

Rappers’ “ice” overtly challenges the grain of “traditional” diamond practices produced in industry ads in terms of race, gender, setting and size. Schlovsky wrote of the commonplace that it “is in front of us and we know about it, but we do not see it” (Schlovsky 1914). Consumers like Kate echoed Schlovsky’s notion of the commonplace in telling me, “*I do not really notice other peoples diamonds, I mean unless it is unusual*

¹⁴³ http://users.cnu.edu/~mbates/Hip_Hop%27s_Fashion.html. March 2005.

in some way – then I notice.” Implicitly, there is a “usual” way to wear diamonds and partly for this reason, bling calls attention to itself. That we notice bling is itself an index that normalized wear exists.

History of Hip-Hop

Initially hip hop was performance oriented, being only occasionally and informally recorded, and most accounts of it’s history place it on the mainstream radar when Sugar Hill Gangs’ studio recording of “Rapper’s Delight” hit the Top 40 charts in 1979. “Rapper’s Delight” opens with the now famous verse (see appendix for lyrics):

*I said a hip hop the hippie the hippie
to the hip hip hop, a you dont stop
the rock it to the bang bang boogie say up jumped the boogie
to the rhythm of the boogie, the beat¹⁴⁴*

These first lines hint as to its overall a-political, G-rated content. The lyrics contains no mention of killing, fucking, pimping, pissing, stealing, raping, smoking, weapons, or gangsterism, as opposed to “The Message,” that came out a few years later, by Grand Master Flash and The Furious Five. The first few lines in “The Message,” touted as one of the most important songs in the history of the genre because of its overt realism and social commentary, suggest its overall more politically aggressive content:

*Broken glass everywhere
People pissing on the stairs, you know they just don't care
I can't take the smell, I can't take the noise
Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice
Rats in the front room, roaches in the back
Junkie's in the alley with a baseball bat
I tried to get away, but I couldn't get far
Cause a man with the tow-truck repossessed my car¹⁴⁵*

¹⁴⁴ <http://www.bus.miami.edu/~ldouglas/house/shill/rd.html> (March 12, 2005)

Hip Hop diversified and spread out of New York throughout the eighties. Groups like Public Enemy with rappers Chuck D and Flavor Flav espoused a radical political stance, urban whites such as the Beastie Boys mixed a somewhat punk sensibility with rap, De La Soul produced a sampled, more “palatable” message, and the popularity of other East coast groups such as Run DMC and LL Cool Jay swept across the country and into increasingly greater (whiter) segments of the market. On the West Coast, particularly in inner-city Los Angeles, groups such as N.W.A. (Niggas With Attitude) with front men Ice-T and Dr. Dre, and Tupak Shakur were focusing on the culture of guns, drugs, sex and violence in Gangsta Rap, much to the ire of politician and parent groups.

During the 1990’s, hip-hop evolved into a multi-million dollar industry, managed by members of the hip-hop community such as Russell Simmons, Sean Coombs (P. Diddy, formerly known as Puff Daddy, or Puffy) and Suge Knight. Moral outcry surged from politicians and their wives (for example, Tipper Gore), academics, parents, and cultural critics from various political camps who recognized rappers’ challenge to the status quo and denounced the music on the grounds of songs’ profanity, violence, sexism and bigotry. Morality groups criticized the record industry: then presidential candidate Bob Dole charged that the industry “must be attacked for the marketing of evil through commerce” (Ogbar 1999:174). The anti-rap hysteria reached an apex in the mid-90’s when Robert Bork, conservative political commentator and former supreme court nominee, wrote that rap is a monolithic genre of crude “noise with a beat” in which the “obscenity of word and thought is staggering,” little more than a “knuckle-dragging sub-

¹⁴⁵ <http://www.lyricsfreak.com/g/grandmaster-flash/62225.html> (March 12, 2005)

pidgin of grunts and snarls, capable of fully expressing only the more pointless forms of violence and the more brutal forms of sex” (Bork 1996:124).

Obviously, the effort by anti-rap critics to quell enthusiasm for rap failed, and may have even had the opposite effect by creating free publicity. Snoop Doggy Dogg, Jay-Z, P. Diddy, Missy “Misdemeanor” Elliot, Nelly, OutKast, 50 Cent, Pitch Black, Lil’ Kim, Dr. Dre and many others articulate aspects of the American experience that many ignore: poverty, racism, crime, violence, death, prostitution, gangsterism, venereal disease, murder, despair, rage, political oppression, drug use and other aspects of “ghetto life” make up central themes of lyrics. Another prominent theme is consumerism: some rappers issued warnings that aspiring to consume luxury goods (cars, clothes, and jewels) can lead to death, jail or destitution (Schusterman 1991) while simultaneously glorifying their own commercial success through a kind of extremely overt, Dionysian consumerism, including the consumption of jumbo diamonds set in platinum, bling style.

Two rap styles most relevant to this discussion are hard core and gangsta. One the one hand, “hard core” rappers like Run DMC, LL Cool J, Mos Def, the Roots, and Talib Kweli promote social and political awareness. Committed to a racialized identity, they work towards developing a political aesthetic that operates as a fruitful path toward “authentic existence in Black America” (Boyd, 2004: 20). These politicians are opposed to gangsta-ism, viewing it as a digression from the social task at hand, in the end making “a class-specific argument that wants the negative imagery of lower-class gangsterism to disappear” (*ibid*: 52).

Gangsta’ rap, first developed by Tupac, Suge Knight, Ice-T and Dr. Dre, later grew into gangsta’ riche by Jay-Z, Nas, Notorious B.I.G. (a.k.a. Biggie Smalls), Snoop

Doggy Dogg, DMX, and Mobb Deep and promotes capital pursuit as a means to “authentic existence in Black America” (Boyd 2004:21). “Gangstas” interpret the accumulation of wealth and material possession as significant to the articulation of their own sense of identity and considering the odds of success for poor urban black youth, “they see a triumph over these obstacles to be a political journey in and of itself...”(*ibid*). The documentary film “Biggie and Tupac,” covering career developments, rivalries and the assassinations of both Tupak Shakur and Biggie Smalls notes that Tupac and Suge Knight (of California Death Row records) were aficionados of the Godfather movie series, and contains scenes of Tupak acting out scenes from Scarface.¹⁴⁶ In term of style, gangsta’ personae mimic Hollywood’s presentations of organized crime bosses and drug kingpins. Gangsta’s don bling.

What is Bling?

Examples of bling include diamonds of exaggerated size, of unusual color, or striking placement, and includes encrusting personalized designs with diamonds and adding “sparkle” to pieces of customized jewelry like fronts and name plates.

¹⁴⁶ Filmic influences on gangsta rap include blaxploitation classics such as Superfly and the Mack, but the emphasis and play on Gangsterism became most elaborate during heightened gang wars in Los Angeles, which was recycled and spectacle-ized in films such as “Boyz N the Hood” and “The Wood.” The extreme Gangsta character development where “real” thug life and the appearance of extreme menace are tend to be more commonly associated with the West Coast/ Los Angeles, whereas the politically radical “hard core” style is linked to East Coast/ New York where gang wars were somewhat less elaborate.



	
<p>Fronts: gold and diamond tooth covers. This model has “six yellow gold teeth with extended fangs. The middle four teeth are white gold diamond cut with fine round cut stones. Can be made for top or bottom teeth.” \$ 440.00.¹⁴⁷</p>	<p>Diamond Name Plate: 14K Diamond name plate with 20 diamonds. \$480.¹⁴⁸</p>

Figure 3-31 Front and Name Plate

Placement of a commonplace thing in a new semantic setting, the tampering with or playing against, conventional expectations, norms, and habits causes people to take notice, which is one way that bling works. Since it is highly stylized, exaggerated and set against the canon as defined by normalized, hegemonic discourse and wearing practices, bling can be taken as a poetic device requiring special interpretative engagement.

Interpreting Bling

That bling as style is seeping out of its role within the hip hop community and becoming more “mainstream” is reflected in commentaries on “ice” that appear in popular media from fashion magazines to NBA pre-game shows to the New York Times magazine (see Safire, Nov, 23, 2003). The association of diamonds with hip-hop, (currently itself the object of vigorous academic attention¹⁴⁹) gives “bling” its flavor. The

¹⁴⁷ <http://www.brunsonjewelry.com/catalog/item/1540912/995033.htm>. March 3, 2005.

¹⁴⁸ From: <http://www.brunsonjewelry.com/nameplates.html>. March 3, 2005.

¹⁴⁹ For academic treatments of hip-hop, see Mitchell 21001, Nelson 1998, Ogbar 1999, Perkins 1996, Rose, 1994.

claim by Russell Simmons that “hip hop is... the new American cultural mainstream....we don’t change for you; you adapt to us” (Simmons 2001: 4) seems to have some truth to it. That the once local and extremely esoteric phenomena created by and for urban black youth is known to New Yorkers who are even tenuously dialed into contemporary popular culture was reflected in interviews with diamond consumers (many of whom would be considered members of the white middle-class) who introduced “bling” during interviews, quite without prompting from me. “Bling,” however, is interpreted “*differently from,*” as one woman put it, “*you know, regular diamonds.*” Thinking through how consumers arrive at these differences using the lens of Schklovsky’s *ostranenie* is instructive.

The use of language as a communicative device depends upon the habituation of signification. In mundane communication, interpretation is streamlined and the formal qualities of the language (the actual sounds of the words, for example) itself are subordinated, if not erased, by attention to the message. We often do not notice the form of the language at all. But all language, all communication, is not mundane or practical. Some language is poetic, where the form of the language is essential, and habituated reading is purposely disrupted. In speaking about poetry or art, *ostranenie*, the making strange, transfers an image or object (a sign) into the sphere of new perception – it effects a semantic shift pulling the reader away from routine recognition of an image or object and towards a heightened awareness of things and their sensory nature. It is an act of “creative deformation” which “restores sharpness to our perceptions” (Erich 1955/80:177), but this dynamic is contingent upon the reader apprehending the object as such. The reading of diamonds as a status marker can occur as a habitualized reading,

reflecting a widely circulated social norms that link generic diamonds to wealth. But to understand bling, the social norm “habit” model falls short.

People sometimes interpret diamond display by others as a poetic device, rather than as a gesture meant to be taken at a habit-driven face value. In literature, poetic device results from techniques of writing in which the referential meaning of language is embellished, enhanced, extended, or reversed, and is implicated in the artfulness of literature. Language in literary works should not always be taken “literally,” and device signals to readers that non-literal interpretive engagements are required to reveal a full range of meanings. As a reading strategy, a literalist approach is partly predicated on placing meaning in the text, rather than paying attention to the form of the text, the context of its production, and a reflexive consideration of one’s own positionality as a reader (see Crapanzano 2001). Meaning, however, is often intended to be read outside of, even in contradiction to, literalness.

Bling is interpreted as if it were a poetic device, at times explicitly “literary,” or “artful”. Bling, taken as metaphor, as parody, or as exaggeration, demands a conscious engagement between consumer and the object (as sign), and can generate understandings that throw attention on more “naturalized,” unconscious interpretative moments of diamond consumption. We may not actively experience commonplace diamonds, but one that is very large or worn in an unusual way or place, through the device of exaggeration, for example, calls attention to itself. The form of the object is no longer trivial. We perceive the form. We, as Shlovsky suggests, “see” the diamond itself. We linger.

The fact that there are diamond wearing conventions, particularly with regard to size and setting, was highlighted by interviewees who introduced ostentatious diamond

wear, sometimes in the context of “*old ladies on the upper east side,*” or “*women in their fur coats and giant jewels,*” but also in reference to the phenomena of bling, in giving examples of what they considered inappropriate. People referred to wearing large diamonds as “*vulgar,*” “*showy,*” or “*flashy,*” and as a model against which their own beliefs and practices could be better explained. Many become animated, expressing strong opinions, when talking about rappers “huge diamonds”. I was familiar with bling and had no intention of looking at rappers’ spectacular diamond wear, but it came up repeatedly in interviews.

Bling was understood by consumers I talked with as emblematic of “*their culture,*” as “*self-serving,*” as “*like, but not the same as, nouveau riche,*” as a “*gesture of one-ups-manship,*” as “*calling attention to their background,*” as “*exaggerated, just like their sexuality,*” as “*eye-catching – it’s a way to get you to wonder ‘how did they get that?’*” Some see it as an ironic gesture, as a critique of consumerism, or as parody. Those most likely to discuss bling as device were also likely to extend a rich, engaged interpretation of rap songs, rather than taking lyrics at face value. Ideas about diamonds’ cost as compared to an assumed financial potential of “*guys from the ghetto*” was a stated theme in a few interviews. Conversely, some understand bling as a simple play for status or as a crass shows of wealth reflecting an unsophisticated, if not skewed, notion of how the “*real wealthy*” behave.

When Setting and Context come into Play: Rosetta and Celeste

Some consumers imagine how others will interpret the gems they have or hope to have: Rosetta and Celeste are both educated, white, middle-class women between the ages of 25 and 35. Rosetta told me that diamonds are gendered, “*diamonds not for*

men ...they are female associated.” Celeste told me that she wants a big diamond, “*but only a good one – its got to be a big one,*” in her engagement ring “*because the diamond becomes something that tells others, and I am embarrassed to say this but you are an anthropologist so I can tell you what I really think, that someone loves me and is committed to me and there is just no getting around it...*” Rosetta and Celeste project onto others, strangers “*out there,*” purported readings that are not necessarily congruent with what they reported a particular diamond means to them. Nor are projected readings, intended meanings, necessarily shared by others. For example, the same diamond that Rosetta imagines to be a gender marker as far as others are concerned, to Rosetta, is deeply embedded in kinship ties with her mother, from whom she received it as a gift. Personal relationships and the history of acquisition reign in terms of meaning ascription for Rosetta. A stranger, particularly in a large urban center such as New York, does not, and will likely never have, access to this information and thus may be left to read the diamond based on their particular experiences or upon a more generic set of notions, if the diamonds are even noticed.

“*Diamonds,*” Rosetta further explained, are “*conservative,*” “*suburban,*” and “*snooty, if they are big,*” but they can also be “*sparkly*” and “*pretty.*” She reads the tennis bracelet, a fad started by tennis player Chris Everett when she dropped a diamond bracelet during the 1987 US Open Tennis Tournament, as “*obnoxious...my mother is really into that shit, and maybe I am reacting to that but, I mean, why is it called that? Are you supposed to wear it when you play tennis? Who would do that? It’s so over the top –waaaaay to ostentatious. By that I mean: showy.*” Here the setting emerges as a salient issue in what and how diamonds signify, but her interpretation of diamonds in

general diverges from her interpretation of diamonds in a tennis bracelet, which is entwined with her attitude towards her mother, and her mother's values and beliefs.

By way of contrast, for Celeste, ostentatious diamonds are showy, and can signify status, but moreso they are sexy and glamorous. Both her mother and grandmother are “*gem aficionados...owning big, gorgeous diamonds*” that she, “*would like very much to have and wear,*” to “*make her feel beautiful, as long as they are not so big as to create the impression that they are fake. You know the bigger they are the more people assume that they are fake.*” Chunky jewelry has positive associations for Celeste, whose own relationships with her mother and grandmother for whom she has much affection, and their jewels, provide a partial template for her interpretation of “*showy*” diamonds.

Rosetta went on to explain that showy diamonds are about wanting to be seen and admired, but “*with the whole rap thing and ghetto fab¹⁵⁰ and hip-hop, its different – I don't really get that whole thing, but to me its not as offensive as a tennis bracelet...its all about the over-exaggeration or the performance of wealth and yes, its visible exaggeration, and I don't know if its intentional or not, but they are playing with images and being self conscious about it. They know it's over the top and showy – that is why they are doing it! There's a difference between bling and tennis bracelets: tennis bracelets are oppressive and stupid, bling is more ironic and witty.*” Rosetta, by pointing to ideas such as “*over-exaggeration,*” “*performance,*” “*ironic*” and “*playing with images,*” illustrates that bling is taken as a device requiring conscious interpretation.

Celeste, in applying her idea that “*diamonds argue for status*” more straightforwardly, interprets bling as part of the overall style of “*ghetto chic*”¹⁵¹ that works, in the end, ironically with respect to what she believes the intention of the wearer to have, as a class and race marker oppositional to the status and glamour she attaches to them for herself: “*Bling is for black and Hispanic lower working class. I guess that might sound racist, but I can own that....they are just people trying to be showy, saying ‘I have arisen! I have transcended the race, place and class that I am singing about.’ But then they haven’t.... it’s just a sign of a lower class lifestyle with upper class pricetag.*”

So although, Rosetta and Celeste view big diamonds as potentially signifying class and status, and even race, when setting and context come into play, which they inevitably do when people are living, signifying and interpreting in the real world with particular signs, the impact of individual experiences come to bear. The influence of Rosetta’s past is demonstrated in her statement that, “*...my family aspired to tennis bracelets, but if they were to aspire to bling bling, well, I don’t know, I can’t even imagine that, I studied rap music in college and so I think that I have a more detached response than most people do. For me, it’s a cultural phenomenon. To me it’s interesting to think about what is going on – I mean it’s such an exaggeration...*”

Celeste’s personal experience with bling is work related. She works with “*inner city teens in a NY Public School improvement project*” where she has sustained contact with urban youth of color. “*We don’t allow do-rags or any of that crap at work – I mean*

¹⁵¹ Terms such as ghetto chic and gangsta’ chic are part of a cluster of high fashion terms that describe styles that are in vogue, but which might be set against mainstream norms or draw from sub-cultures. Others “chics” include nerd chic, geek chic and the controversial heroin chic in which models appear to be drug addicts and sets look like sleazy bathroom shooting galleries. Ghetto fabulous is another related style in which rappers use couture as part of their appearance; relatedly, sometimes hip hop fashions inform couture.

it's supposed to be a work day, but sometimes they do show up you know with the teeth, or diamond earrings or those name plates and, you know, they are blingin,' and like little Axle showed up the other day with the big diamond earrings and I just assumed they were fake. Definitely bling bling, but definitely fake. Maybe its racist or classist on my part but how could he get the real thing? Unless he is a drug dealer. Which he might be...." She finds it *"strange and discomforting that ... her kids have to be about bling to feel proud or cool...everybody needs something, when I was coming along it was these Calvin Klein sweatshirts, but with diamonds it takes it to another level. It should be easier to fit in...."* While she loves and covets diamonds, hating the fact that she is buying in to what is a *"fake construct,"* far from being an interesting and self-conscious, playful phenomena, Celeste stated that, *"bling basically sucks."* Bling is an inauthentic claim to status, and as a practice, results in undue pressure on urban youth.

Diamonds' size, the settings, and the overall knowledge that Rosetta has about hip-hop culture inform interpretation. Though large, often extremely so, Rosetta, like Celeste, does not interpret bling as *"real"* class, or status-markers, but for Rosetta it is exactly because diamonds are being used as a device, demanding special attention, that she reads the entire practice through a different set of considerations. Admitting that *"she does not really get the whole thing,"* her encounter is unfinished and ongoing, prolonged in just the way that Shklovsky describes the readers' encounter with *ostrananie*. The habitual legibility of diamonds is severely impacted by the context of display in bling, ripped from a commonplace domain to effect a rejuvenated hermeneutic.

The statistical model of language, and of the meaning of commodities, where for example, discourse comes to define the meanings of signs, does work on a gross level (as

in Celeste's statement: "*nothing says money like a diamond*") much in the same way that a dictionary carries legitimate information about what words mean. But generic definitions must only be accepted with an important caveat: creative uses in particular contexts generate localized meanings. In the "dictionary" version, big diamonds can mean status, but this interpretation is neither predictive nor authoritative, and in terms of individual encounters with specific diamonds, far from hegemonic.

Challenging the Cliché: Ian, Luke and David

Ian, the writer, explained that diamonds are a symbol of status and love, but "*not my style.*" Diamonds are "*silly*" and part of a consumerist society in which people use impersonal things to signify love, the most personal of emotions. Ian finds this highly contradictory and "*weird*" but went on to say, "*I know that some people criticize the whole hip hop culture and wearing those huge diamonds for its materialism but to me I think it is just a game of materialism to the nth degree and bling bling is its logical conclusion – you know its like big pendants on a huge chain with giant gold letters filled with diamonds. Guys like Cobain and other white rockers try to hide their money whereas blacks want to show it off because I mean they don't come from there– and there is a whole history that explains why –rappers are multimillionaires and showing it off ... so while the white guys romanticize poverty, bling is part of the romanticizing of wealth. I mean they certainly do not come from that world...I look at it in those terms. Not only that but supposedly it's a good way to get a lot of pussy. I hear 50 Cent and all those diamond wearin' rap stars get a lot of pussy so I guess, bling, that's a chick magnet.*"

According to Ian, the taking of bling and materialism to its logical endpoints is part of an underinformed romanticization of wealth. Far from conventionality and class,

bling calls forth to Ian a particular narrative of rock and roll, American history and social segregation. Ostentatious diamond display by rap stars is not, for Ian, reflective of “*normal American society*,” nor does it have anything to do with romantic love (versus “*getting pussy*”) or status (of the kind that he equates with “*super wealthy people*”(even though he talks about rap stars being multimillionaires)) and must be read through different eyes. And though Ian is loathe to participate in diamond consumption he views as a sign of submission to a consumerist ethic, he will happily align himself with bling, in a spirit that is perhaps reminiscent of the way that Hebdige analyzes punk style (see Hebdige 1979) as oppositional if not revolutionary. Ian explained that, “*if I ever had a diamond I would, well, there is this book by J.G. Ballard called ‘Cocaine Nights’ and there is this utopian place, but there is this tennis coach and he keeps inserting bits of violence into the whole thing and one night he just like goes on this crime spree, you know crashing into cars and robbing and stuff and he comes out of this one place and he has this diamond on his finger and its real flashy and that I do like, that’s more rock and roll. So it’s like an affront. That’s bling.*”

Rosetta and Ian identify bling as presenting a challenge to the cliché – bling’s form and context are such that naturalized readings are displaced, resulting in a more favorable interpretation. Some, however, see the poetic use of diamonds as a ruse. It is irrelevant in what direction a semantic shift occurs as the result of making strange, but that it occur at all. Luke, a computer technician, considers himself to be an average consumerist who “*likes to have nice things, you know a 27” TV, the diamond ring I gave my wife, I would like to have a nicer car,*” stated that he is, “*behind having functional things that have a purpose - but this bling bling thing is just a distraction. It is part of the*

consumerism and commercialization of hip hop in the past say 10 years that has stymied creative development. These guys just use bling to cover up a lack of talent... maybe its their way of distracting you into just thinking about what you don't have versus what they do have and that is how they are trying to earn respect, based on the diamonds that they have instead of what they can do. And it is distracting – I mean you can't help but to look right at it." Luke, encountering these diamonds as device, is not interpreting bling as he would the diamond worn by his wife. He is explicating what amounts to the "quality of divergence"¹⁵² between diamond consumption by "your average guy" who "just wants to have nice things" and the "obscene" use of diamond by rappers. When asked about his use of "obscene," he urged me to consider, "that guy 'Jacob the Jeweler'." Jacob the Jeweler, whose titular name sounds very much like a stereotypical mobster, is Uzbeki jeweler Jacob Arabo of 57th street.¹⁵³ Arabo creates commissioned pieces for rappers.¹⁵⁴ "Jacob the Jeweler" is himself something of an idol, featured in rap lyrics, ("I took you

¹⁵² The term "Differenzqualitat" by German aesthetician B. Christensen, became of one the key terms of Formalist aesthetics (Erich: 178). Poetic language is perceived against the background of ordinary speech, against "practical" speech, so that a true explication of the deformation or deviation from the norm must also include within it some articulation of how the norm is constructed – in this sense ostranenie is both historically situated and revolutionary, and the pleasure of the aesthetic encounter is contingent upon some recognition of the tension between the two.

¹⁵³ Arabo's "Diamond Quasar" was one located on 47th street, but with the fame and income generated from his place in hip-hop, Arabo has opened a very up-scale boutique on 58th street .

¹⁵⁴ "Iced-out" custom made pieces such as diamond studded handcuffs, diamond encrusted watches and a diamond crusted eye-patch sets Arabo's work apart from most 47th street stores who were advised by the journal National Jeweler in July of 2003 that "even if you don't stock the type of jewelry that the term "bling bling" implies, you should know its meaning." Bling means Big, and though any direct causal relationship would be impossible to prove, according to De Beers, the sale of diamonds 1ct. or more rose by 81% from 1996 to 2002. Interestingly, although De Beers' target market for diamonds is not geared to rappers and other consumers of bling, de Beers did unleash in 2003 the "Size-Matters" ad campaign, retailers report a trend in sales of larger stones, and policies which allow consumers to "trade up" have become popular.

outta Jacob's / Busters, they wanna rush us / Love the way you sparkle when the sun touch ya" raps Jay-Z in "Girls Best Friend," which is an ode to his diamonds), hip-hop magazines, and mainstream newspapers such as the NY Times (NY Times, 1999). Luke noted with unconcealed scorn, *"Man, one of those watches can cost like \$50,000 or earrings that are like \$100,000!"*

As a self-described "very amateur hip hop fan", Luke narrated a rap history, and views bling as a red herring at best, and as a sign of selling-out at worst. *"Bling is a huge turn-off... People talk about the politics of hip-hop when it's not really about that a lot of the time. It certainly is not a consistent progressive politics, if you listen to the lyrics you see that it is very inconsistent, in terms of race, in terms of violence, in terms of the objectification of women and things like that, they are all over the place, and I mean how can you talk about progressive politics when you are sitting there wearing these obscene diamonds and still have the gall to be silent about the realities of the South African diamond trade. That just doesn't make any sense, so to me hip hop and blinging and all that can't be said to be about politics, but about the manufacture of personas and I mean it is hard to characterize because there are regional variations – it would be interesting to see how different regions play into the whole bling bling thing, or underground versus above ground rappers talking about bling – mostly what I hear is the above ground stuff and that whole bling thing, it's just a huge turn off..."*

But this interpretation is too flat. Context exerts a powerful influence on diamonds' meaning and in finding his own statements too sweeping, he immediately began qualifying his statements. *"But wait, generally, I mean, it's all about vanity and covering up a lack of talent but then you start really thinking about it and looking at*

individuals then... like there is Kanye West, he is produced by Jay-Z, and he just released a new Album, "College Drop-out" and he is talking about blingin' but it's different from guys like Master-P, who took it to another level, where it really is all vanity – and Jay-Z uses "ice" to create this pimp persona, but I mean he is partners with Ratner in the Jersey Nets deal so he is also using bling bling to create a player persona when he is in real life a player too – so he is a pimp and a playa and diamonds help him to achieve the look – so that's different, that's more about a performance." The creation of ever more discrete categories of signification is based not only on the actual size and setting of diamonds, other factors inform his reading, including who is involved, when and why.

Contra bling as obscene or as rock and roll, David, a internet advertising designer, views bling as *"absurd."* David explained, *"I saw something on TV Friday night before the [NBA] game and they had some guy on there talking about how many carats this stuff was and what it cost - absurd. Some of that bling bling is like 100K... Is that necessary? Really? We pay these athletes too much money...."* Social critics like Todd Boyd have argued that basketball is one of the few venues, in addition to hip hop, that provides an opportunity for young black men to "succeed" (Boyd 2003) and there does appear to be a shared aesthetic between the domain of hip hop and basketball "playas." The use of diamonds by athletes is fairly widespread, and David's reference to players' diamonds under the rubric of bling reflects this confluence. When I pressed him for greater explanation about this he, curiously, actively refused to answer. Boyd's suggestion that race is what links these otherwise discrete groups is provocative, and of course, the issue of race and racial identity/politics in thinking through bling would seem central, though few volunteered race overtly as an issue or topic of conversation (see below for

discussion of race/ethnicity). People were likely to discuss class notions predicated on style rather than race, though sexuality, personality, and the playful side of bling figured strongly.

I wish I had more Bling! Jean and Zach

Allowed to follow their own thoughts, informant narratives often contained complex, sometimes internally contradictory, readings. Signs often take on multiple meanings so this is no surprise, but it is nevertheless worth noting, that a single consumer often engages in several interpretations of a diamond with none assuming any obvious privilege. People maintain several takes on any one diamond that are not necessarily in coherence with one another. For example, Jean, a high-school teacher, remarked to me that, *“I wish I had more bling! I have this necklace here (she points to a gold diamond studded pendant nameplate of her nickname, “Squirrel”), See? But I want a big ‘ole canary yellow diamond. A few months ago in Source there was a thing on Puff and the hottest jewelry which is how I know about the canary diamond thing...there is a lot that is very playful and theatrical about it. I love it. I love the bling bling thing. But I have problems with it too – It’s about misogyny. There is section in Source called “The Dime Piece,” which is a centerfold and it’s total objectification – like this month the pin-up is there and then it says “Destined To Blow” underneath it, and there is a Q &A where she tells people, who write in about how much they loved the dime piece, and its always the same boring letters, how she “keeps it together” and it’s so stupid. I hate it – it’s totally gross, but that’s bling too.”*

Like Jean, others apply some construction of bling to their own diamonds. Zach, wearing small, diamond stud earrings told me that he had received them as a gift from an

ex-wife, but that he had lost one of the studs. He had subsequently purchased a new pair to replace the set. *“With these earrings,” he explained, “there is an element of affectation – I was never a gold man and I was never one to wear silver hoops or rubies – I mean I’m not a pirate walking around with a peg leg, like ‘Aarrrrggggghhhh!’ – I like diamonds because of the bling factor, the sparkle...but in the early eighties when I started wearing this, and not many guys were doing it so I was being different...but big status symbols, like in the hip hop world, are BIG diamonds, big-ass rings, Crystal champagne, mansions, big cars, esplanade and lexus. These are not things I indulge in. But I do it to dress up. Its fashion. It’s a nice thing. But these are like blip blip – in bling bling it’s all about size – and blinging is like the light, you know, blinging: glowing, bouncing off of the thing. Anything can be encrusted with diamonds so it can be blinging. But me, I’m blippin’.”*

For Zach, diamond studs spruce up his appearance. Far from making a clear statement about class, race or gender, this consumer is toying with meaning. The meaning for him has changed over time, and with the emergence of diamond wear in the hip hop community, he is able to link his practices with theirs, albeit in a very playful manner. He acquired them in emulation, iconically, of a former pair of earrings, having nothing to do with copying rappers, but, underscoring the historical and contingent nature of interpretation, now discusses them in the context of bling, using the framework to talk about his jewelry in humorous fashion. History and context are crucial aspects of ostranenie since device must operate against routinized practices that are temporally

sited.¹⁵⁵ In 2004, one can talk about diamonds in relation to hip-hop; in 1984, this was not possible since Bling only emerged in the mid-90's.¹⁵⁶

A fairly radical and probably mutual incommensurability: Elizabeth

Some consumers attributed to others an intention of illustrating gross information about money and relationships through diamond wear. Resorting to a discursive, even stereotypical, script to explain strangers' behavior is not so unusual, and consumers frequently, when shifting to discuss a single individual, had more nuanced and, at times, elaborate testimonials of significance. Consumers projected narratives onto others that differed from those they themselves offered. Evidence suggests that there are chiasmic

¹⁵⁵ Formalists were partly responding to a limitation in theories that constructed language as a means of referential communication. By dividing language into practical and poetic components, they were recognizing and then focusing upon extra-referential aspects, at least in literature. Although in their attempt to develop a science of literature, formalists initially cleaved historical and social contexts from their object of study, after seeing that device is only created and recognized as a result of historical situatedness, historical contextualization was brought back into the fold. As Eichenbaum explained in his "Theory of Formal Method," "our moving in to the area of history of literature was no simple expansion of our study; it resulted from the evolution of our concept of form. We found that we could not see the literary work in isolation, that we had to see its form against a background of other works rather than by itself" and then he continued, "actually the original attempt of the Formalists to take a particular structural device and to establish its identity in diverse materials became an attempt to differentiate, to understand, the function of a device in each given case. The idea of functional significance was gradually pushed to the foreground and the original idea of the device pushed to the background...work on specific materials compelled us to speak of functions and thus to revise our idea of the device. The theory itself demanded that we turn to history" (Lemon Reis 1972:119, 132).

¹⁵⁶ Finally, the artistic device cannot be systematized – should a disordering device or practice that defamiliarizes become conventional or routine, its reading will become habituated: the art falls into the mundane. What is implied in this formula is a temporal and contextual embeddedness: devices operate against that which has come before, that which is habitual and conventional – the poetic device is unexpected, jarring, startling. It demands: Who am I now? It is this quality that interpolates the reader, provoking her to think, to explore, to play. Because poetic device operates against habituated knowledge, it is useful to excavate the origins and facts of the conventions against which a device is working when regarding a particular formulation. So although Formalist theory had in one breath sworn off "history," their construction of device mandates attention to a context rife with knowable historicity. It is in fact, the device itself which may bring as an effect, into stark relief, the historical sequences that engendered the device in the first place: device may, in other words, focus our attention to historical leadings-up to rupture.

gaps between what a diamond means to its owner versus how it might actually be read by strangers. There appears to exist a fairly radical and probably mutual incommensurability in terms of diamond signification practices between individuals and others.

Consumers intend, interpret, impute meaning to their own stones in ways that are not extended to readings of others'; particularly when those others are part of a group from which the consumer excludes himself. And because people often scrutinize their own diamonds, meaning is worked and reworked with context, knowledge and circumstance. Elizabeth, a 37 year old stay-at-home mother, said, *"I mean if I saw J.Lo wearing her big ass pink bling ring versus if I saw Paris Hilton wearing it, I would think Paris got it from her dad whereas I know J. Lo [Jennifer Lopez] is working the system and she is just part of a machine. She is doing the movie thing and getting with Ben Affleck and P. [P. Diddy] so she is in the spotlight where people want to market stuff through her, like Harry Winston will lend her something to wear and she will have a photo taken in his store on 5th Avenue or mention it on Access Hollywood and she is probably getting a deal because its marketing for Harry Winston. But Paris grew up with stuff like that and J. Lo, she is just from the block, so I mean it's not really about status its about making money and revenue,"* in reducing Jennifer Lopez to the status of a billboard. The subjectivity, idiosyncrasy, complexity and agency Elizabeth ascribes to herself is erased in the case of Jennifer Lopez, whose diamond is an emulation of the ones Paris Hilton wears as a legitimate index of her place in society.

This was not the only interview in which rap stars in wearing diamonds were viewed as *"trying,"* but failing, to do or to be, particularly with respect to making claims about class or being *"high society."* After all, J. Lo is, *"just from the block."* Consumers

are sometimes willing to read diamonds as part of a larger claim to class status, but in reflecting general American stratifications based on class, they tended to construct class stylistically, as much as a function of socio-economic status or power.

Diamonds can operate an index of a pre-existing status. For example, Elizabeth reads a big pink diamond on Paris Hilton as an index of her family's wealth and fiduciary fitness. Semiotically, the same diamond being worn by Jennifer Lopez operates as an icon – it is read as if it refers, mirrors, echoes, mimics, what Paris Hilton would be doing had she worn the same diamond. The big pink diamond is read by Elizabeth, in the case of Paris Hilton, as a reliable index and status symbol, whereas on J. Lo it is read as an icon of the index and the related status symbol. It is derivative. The meaning of the pink diamond, for Elizabeth, is not merely a means of communication in a symbolic fashion, but its meaning is determined by her preference that diamonds be both a legitimate index and symbol. The wearing of the big pink, as well as the wearing of diamonds in general by rappers is *“not really a convincing act to me – and I believe it is an act.”* She views rappers' bling as a naive, ultimately vain, attempt to claim a social position based on mimicry of the way rappers mistakenly understand wealthy people to behave. Bling is a selfish and pale imitation of more authentic practices. She went on to explain of rappers that, *“Their culture is removed from the reality of how it is supposed to be when you have money. These people just seem to want to better themselves in the sense that they are always in the market, and the whole thing is just a shallow attempt at self-promotion rather than a bettering of your neighbor.”*

In terms of her own use of bling as ostranenie, Elizabeth explicitly explores the device as irony: *“Aesthetically I don't necessarily have anything against it – as a matter*

of fact, if Thomas gave me a plaque with my name on it and some huge diamonds, I would definitely wear that – but because it would be funny. Hilarious actually! But they are not trying to be funny. For me to do it, it would be funny because I am, of course, not in that scene and so I have a certain distance, and it's an ironic distance. For them it's just a normal way to behave.”

Gilded Lilies: Roger

Much current ethnographic literature on the United States focuses on the construction of categories such as race, gender, ethnicity and class.¹⁵⁷ Other categories receiving less treatment include generation, nationalism and religion (though with current political events such as the US lead war against Iraq, religion and nationalism in the U.S. are receiving more attention). “Class” is often defined by researchers on the basis of economic and occupational variables, and situated within global or national political economies. “Subcultures” are most often constructed as categories that exist within the often intersecting categories of race, class, gender and ethnicity in particular locales. This type of grouping includes, for example, young Vespa-riding mods (Hebdidge 1988, though this study relates to the English working-class, not Americans), Filipino transnationals in Los Angeles (Bonus 2000), or poor Latino men in New York City (Bourgios 1995). Many of these studies come out of a concern for tracking how policies developed for the national and international scales impact local peoples, particularly those most vulnerable to structural violence.

¹⁵⁷ See representative work on class by Omi and Winant 1986, Gregory and Sanjek 1994, Ong 1995, Rocco 1996, Kelson and DeLae 1999, Hartigan 1997, Massey and Denton 1993, Milenkopf and Castells 1991, Patterson and Susser 2001, and Susser 1996.

There are practical considerations that inform how people are identified for social research, such as geography and access, but one category that has been under-researched is social grouping on the basis of style. There is a small body of work seeking to understand the perspectives of large, sometimes geographically dispersed, non-communities that are heuristically identified on the basis of stylistic practices such as reading strategies (Crapanzano 2001), residency (Ruddick 1990), and commodities and commodity experiences, such as around particular brands (O'Guinn 2001) which may have little or no congruency with other ways of pre-selecting individuals for study.

Some used bling as a foil against which to discuss "class," to which membership was defined by virtue of behavior, style and even a certain degree of morality, which are aesthetically dimensioned class notions, in addition to ideas about class based on economic and occupational considerations. These constructions of class were much more varied than expected and included discussion of gangsta' riche (akin to nouveau riche but "*more interesting and less tacky,*") and gangsta' chic. Some interpret bling as exaggeration, as figurative device meant to approximate, yet exceed, to challenge, a status symbol wielded by the wealthy. The result is seeing diamond wear in a fresh way, either as a witty comment on mainstream America or as a naïve attempt to declare what it does not properly have. Consumers volunteered information about what underlies, in their minds, legitimate claims to class which included attitudes, behaviors and values that often had little to do with economic or occupational considerations. In this sense, diamond consumption can be understood as part of a constellation of activities that informs the construction of "class," understood as an aesthetic phenomena rather than a purely socio-economic one.

Bling was repeatedly as “*like nouveau-riche*”. Discussing bling as a failed declaration of class, Roger, a 38 yr. old film critic, said that, “*a diamond can be too much if it’s all about size. You know, if it’s just bling-bling. Ostentatious diamonds. That shows a real lack of subtlety to me. It says, ‘Hey! I have poor taste, bad taste,’ because it should be worn as if its not there, with subtle grace, and when its too big or the shape is jarring or juttering, you know if it has too many angles and refracts the light incessantly, that’s just ‘Look at me’! People that do the bling thing are nouveau-riche, you know, poorly educated, but its not that they are not good and nice people, I have cousins like that. You go to their house and there are leopard prints everywhere and the whole thing is in really poor taste. Like Donald Trump style buildings. Terrrrrrrible. To me, it’s all gilded lilies, taking a perfectly good and beautiful lily, and then spray painting it with gold paint and just ruining everything. With bling it’s the same thing because they are telling the world, ‘Hey I can afford it,’ meaning I can afford this and a lot of other stuff too, BUT it may not be the reality...they are claiming a kind of wealth through the diamonds, but half the time its not really true.” The declaration of wealth through “*doing the bling thing*” is specious. Money and class are decoupled, where class is not just about having money but also about knowing how to spend it “*correctly*”.*

Class intersects with taste in terms of possessions, but also with how one acquires money, and the presentation of self. The discussion was threaded with the trope of exaggeration, especially with respect to men wearing diamonds. Masculinity, sexuality, and style play into Elizabeth’s discussion of exaggeration and bling, “*The whole persona is entirely exaggerated – like the advent of ‘MTV Cribs,’ they show rappers’ houses and it’s like ‘Oh my god,’ everything is so exaggerated and totally overt. Overt sexuality,*

overt consumption, overt violence, everything and whereas 20 years ago, or today, other people who could have those things, they might still wear an ostentatious diamond, but they certainly wouldn't be caught humpin' on television, or feeling themselves up and down like they are fucking. So I think its also about sexuality and their bodies in some ways ..they are so exaggerated and they want to prove that they can do what has been done by others. I mean as a culture they have been held back in so many obvious ways and they have found a way to express themselves, that elevates them, in a sense, and they are putting it in your face. It's almost like 'Fuck you,' but it's sad because they will just spend it (money) all...I don't think people find, well, look – it's just not real. Their culture is removed from the reality of how it's supposed to be when you have money.” In the case of rappers, Elizabeth rejects bling as a sign of class.

Race and Ethnicity: “*diamonds are for black people*”

As the racial aspect of hip hop is blatant, why did informants fail to explicitly mention race (though Tom stated quite candidly, but with exaggeration, that nowadays “*diamonds are for black people*”) when discussing bling?¹⁵⁸ The construction of a certain white middle-classness in ads and in “normalized” diamond wear is partly indexed and reproduced by the, sometimes sharp, way that consumers percieve, and also distance themselves from, rappers and bling, often avoiding the use of overtly racial language (perhaps in keeping with “political correctness” taboos against identifying people by race, and using class, or style, or “*guys form the ghetto*” instead).

¹⁵⁸ In keeping with the strategy of allowing informants to dictate the terms and vocabulary of narratives, I did not actively pursue the absence of a racialized discourse when it did not appear.

The underlying racism that played into discussions of rappers was absent from discussions of film, media stars and moguls, “*rich old ladies with their big diamonds*” and “*those tacky girls with their big diamonds and furs*” (although I did hear more than one reference to the tacky wearing of large diamonds by “*those women from New Jersey*” and Italian mobsters’ women, “*like Tony Soprano’s wife,*” reflecting a kind of ethnicism against Italian-Americans). Race was at times glossed under the rubric of “*ghetto culture*” in bling-talk. Some promoted different standards for rappers with respect for reading diamonds for class. Roger for example, said that rappers are part of a “*different culture that what I am used to,*” and by wearing diamonds they are showing “*their people*” that they have succeeded, and so “*it’s not the same poor taste,*” but the authenticity of their “*having made it*” is also understood differentially as refracted in his next series of statements elaborating the idea. “*You don’t need a 50’s style culture of conformity to understand that it is a form of showing the neighbors that they can keep up, even though in reality they can’t, but they wont sell that diamond for anything – I bet they would sell the house, the car, everything before the diamond would go because of what it represents to them.*”

Tom maintains a similar interpretation, but was overt in his discussion of race: “*Now, I do not associate diamonds with wealthy people or with glamour because they have been co-opted by black people so that they can call attention to themselves. They are saying, “I have arrived, I am rich, I am valuable.”* When I asked him why “*rap guys*” aspire to acquire diamonds, he explained that, “*Mainly it’s because they are hard to get. You have to get them out of a mine and they are so scarce and they are even harder to get once they are out of the ground – I mean you have to go through a lot to get them from a*

store. BUT it is still about exaggeration...they want to show white people what they have. The want to show that they are louder, faster, bigger and better..." In both of these cases, the wearing of diamonds, seen as a showy public act, was discussed as a foil for the way that one "*should*" behave, vis-a vis diamond consumption, when legitimately monied (and possibly white).

The consumption of diamonds and other consumables can be implicated in the construction, maintenance or imputation by others of identity, including ethnic, class or racial aspects, but talk about consumption can also itself, as a social practice, be subject to these dynamics. Some of the discussions about bling included language that seemed also to be part of a larger, more sustained practice of constructing whiteness, through insinuation and oppositionality. The use of phrases like "*those people*" or "*they want to show white people...*" can index whiteness as well as a kind of classism. Indexing whiteness, class and ethnic identification were sometimes combined in diamond talk. For example, some placed bling and the jewelry wearing practices of Italian-Americans into a category of either using diamonds to claim status that they do not legitimately have or practicing a kind of diamond consumerism that is stylistically unacceptable, glossed by qualifiers such as: "*I guess it OK for them but I would just never do that,*" or "*I wouldn't want to be seen wearing something like that – I mean unless it was a joke.*" People index how they identify themselves, or how they want to be identified at times through their talk about other people or things. The type of data I had to work with is talk about diamonds, and I examined that talk to understand how diamonds are constructed as signs, but what consumers said about others' diamonds was often a source for me to

understand incidentally how race, class, gender and ethnicity were being understood and constructed by those consumers themselves.

Blingin' at the Oscars

Rappers' bling in the service of a status claim can be said to function indexically or even symbolically, but many understood these diamonds as icons operating through a likeness to a kind of idealized, or imagined, diamond jewelry in the mind of the wearer. Consumers interpreted rappers' diamonds as signs (unsuccessfully) attempting to mimic what "*real wealthy people do.*" In this way, consumers read bling as a derived practice, and although the diamonds are real, the practice is deemed inauthentic, because it is motivated by the impersonation of an (false) ideal rather than emerging naturally. In a simplified format, some explained that rappers wear diamonds to imitate how they think rich people wear them, "*but because they don't understand how rich people behave, they screw it all up and end up looking ridiculous.*" That the diamonds advance a failed argument is partly what brings the form of the diamond forwards.

Simultaneously, bling can be interpreted as an index of financial success: one must have the resources or acquire access to resources, to buy expensive diamonds. It is worth noting that rappers diamonds are often publicized with the price. Most people have a poor idea of what diamonds cost and the practice of reporting color, carat size and price of named diamonds, such as the Hope, or in the style of Bling, Oscar Fab (diamonds at the Oscars and other televised award ceremonies, for example Halle Berre wore a "5 ct Pumpkin Diamond Ring" when receiving an award for "Monster's Ball") or Pop Royale (diamonds for pop stars, as in the \$1.5 diamond tiara designed for Madonna by Gianni Versace (Blanchard 2003)), is a response by the public media to people's inability to

accurately estimate diamonds' value.¹⁵⁹ Media reports like this foment the practice of interpreting diamonds as indexes of cash.

Oscar Fab co-opted by Hollywood, is bling for the Oscar awards. Sporting a large diamond pendent from Harry Winston is an index of standing within the Hollywood community evidencing the existence of certain social networks and an expectation of exposure (for instance, nomination for an award, or sitting with a nominee). The indexical significance of wearing such a gem on Oscar night is also related to the ever elusive "star-quality". Signs whirl around, are copied, and transformed and diamonds in the context of Oscar Fabulous are an advertisement for the diamond industry, and for the film industry (which has been involved in ad campaigns for diamonds since the 1930's), and yet as an advertisement, may become the imputed subject of iconic representation in Ghetto Fabulous.

Diamonds in the context of Oscar Fab and Ghetto Fab prolong the glance because they are so big; the "vulgar" quality associated with large diamonds is often dismissed in the context of starlets and rappers, for different reasons to be sure, however when a diamond shouts BLING!!!, it transforms the glance into an interrogatory stare, "*What is that?*", "*Is it real?*", "*How many carats is it?*", "*How much does it cost?*", "*What are you trying to prove?*" as people try to read backwards into the circumstances of acquisition.

¹⁵⁹ The media publicizes Oscar attendees diamonds' by distributing materials that focus, sometimes, explicitly, on pricing. Angelina Jolie, for example, reportedly wore a 10 million dollar 85 ct. diamond necklace at the 2004 Oscars. It was reported that Uma Thurman wore rose-cut diamond earrings with briolettes valued at \$15,000, a diamond chain lariat with two diamond pendants totaling 20 carats that were valued at \$175,000, a diamond bead necklace totaling 70 carats valued at \$135,000, a diamond bead bracelet of 40 carats valued at \$65,000, a 13 carat rose cut diamond ring valued at \$150,000 and a 10th century diamond hair comb valued at \$20,000 (PR Newswire, March 1, 1004).

Couture Co-Opts Bling: Grandmaster Flash of the Message and De Beers

Rough diamonds have become fashionable. I have yet to see rappers wear rough diamonds, and though it is not “blinging” in the sense of sparkling and shining, the big, oily looking, raw diamond jewelry can be ostentatious (when recognized), and calls attention to the playful, self-conscious dialectic of design and material that takes place at the level of couture, a realm that informs, relies upon, and responds to popular culture, for materials with which to create new design statements and vice versa. Designers such as Domenico Dolce of Dolce and Gabbana overtly connect “black culture” to emergent couture, as in : “...icons like Puff Daddy and Lenny Kravitz have had a great impact on the public. However, the trend has gone beyond this in a much more sophisticated way. The new attitude is using jewelry and decoration with irony for one’s own pleasure” (Sherwood 2003).

Couture co-ops bling and rap while rap music is full of references to houses of couture such as Burberry, Versace, Tiffany’s and Cartier as in the song “*I Like Them Girls*” by Tyrese:

*i like them girls between the sheets
like them girls iced up like me
i like them girls in the fly Gucci
rollin deep in the 6, Cartier on the wrist
i like em thick/ small waist with the big ol hips
i like them girls in the drop Bentley
that's the kind of girl i need
out the corner of my eye spot a shorty
/ ice so bright baby lightin' up the party
she got the Prada fitting right on her body...*

or Gangsta Boo in “Nasty Trick”:

*Oh, my God Y'all see that nigga over there
Ha-ha-ha-ha Well, his lines are great*

*Hey, is that a real Rolex you got on
Hey, those ain't Cartier, switch your frames, nigga'.*

It is no coincidence that the luxury goods firm Louis Vuitton, part of a major corporate conglomerate LVMH (Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton) that includes De Beers, recruited rapper Grandmaster Flash for an ad campaign and that rap stars, and even their mothers, are routinely interviewed beside the catwalk where they bestow their judgment on what's hot in being cool. The practice of "sampling," "quoting" and inverting, exaggerating or interrupting narratives, very much at the heart of couture, is also a central dynamic in hip-hop. Diamonds as bling arose out of sampling and quoting, inverting, exaggerating and playing with normalized diamonds wearing practices. Semiotically, the ostranenie of bling is predicated upon treating diamonds as all three sign types: symbol, icon and index.

Conclusion

When entities are created (or encountered) "artistically" or "poetically," automatization is removed and through elongated perception, new connections are made. The idea is that "roughened" forms of language, "disorderly" rhythms, strange and fantastic phraseology, unpredictability, writing against convention, and device such as repetition or exaggeration can catapult the reader into a heightened state of interpretation bringing about a brightened understanding. Ostranenie reconfigures habituated takes, much in the way that some anthropology seeks, through a rhetoric of denaturalization, to reconfigure perspectives on our own realities or through remediation, on those of other peoples (see excellent early example on the Nacerema by Miner, 1956). This chapter details how diamond jewelry can operate as ostranenie.

Bling can be consumed as a kaleidoscopic aesthetic phenomena, as entertainment, as a basis upon which individual practices are modeled, as failed/successful attempts at status exhibition, or as class or racial reifiers, all of which are not just mediated by, but enabled and maintained by the media. Bling, as *ostranenie*, makes strange what is usually not an object of conscious interpretation. Consumers interpret the use of diamonds as if it were a poetic device in these playful exchanges that argue, quote, hide, pan, parody and sometimes (though more rarely) critique.

Individuals bring beliefs, experiences, and values into day to day confrontations with diamonds and the sometimes extreme contradictions within and between individuals across macro-groups that are sometimes taken as starting points for social analysis (such as “class,” “race” “gender”) is substantial. In this context, problems associated with use of a culture as text metaphor become more apparent. Meaning resides not in the “text” but is emergent from readerly interpretative practice. In a referential theory of language, meaning is located in a shared code and is learned and used through habit. But to understand how cultural objects operate, it is necessary to, if using a linguistic metaphor, a) move the locus of meaning out of the “text” or object and into the individual interpreter or consumer, who brings his own experiences to bear, and b) allow for interpretive strategies that go beyond reference, by considering, for example, poetic readings manufactured outside of the confines of routine (the code). Reading bling as *ostranenie* means that consuming subjects bring into consideration an expansive context as well as their own experience and identity, so that meanings are at once highly local and socially constrained.

CHAPTER 8 GLOBAL PRODUCTION, LOCAL INTERPRETATION: THE PERFORMATIVE ROLE OF DIAMONDS IN INDIVIDUAL LIVES.

“They take one look ...”

Carla and Gene are well educated, successful thirty-somethings living in an uptown apartment. Carla writes children books. Gene is a novelist. Carla and I set up a meeting to talk about diamonds in a bar in downtown Manhattan and she arrived wearing a suit and lugging a briefcase overflowing with papers and books. After some general conversation, Carla told me that when she and Gene were first married, five or six years ago, she had refused to wear a ring, much less a diamond ring, but that her Aunt, in seeing that she was without, gave them one for Carla to wear. Her Aunt was very excited and proud to be able to give Carla the diamond. Because it was a gift from a close family member, and she didn't want to seem ungrateful, Carla felt obliged not only to accept it but to wear it. Then she told me that, *“Well, I could care less about wearing a diamond, really, but I have been surprised, because what turns out to be the most important thing, or the thing I notice the most I should say, is the way people react –and that's why I want Gene to wear a ring, I insist that he wear one, now. I mean when people see this they back off... my aunt gave me this and I really didn't even want to wear it or even have it. But its growing on me. Actually, I had to get it reset because it had this really high setting and it looked like a rocket that was about to be launched , and I didn't like that, so this is better, but you cannot believe the way people, men actually, just automatically look at a diamond. And men were always hitting on me, at the gas station, at bar's wherever they are, but they take one look at this and they are gone. Usually.”*

In Carla's view, wearing a diamond causes men to react differently than they might otherwise, giving a diamond worn on the left ring finger has an imperative force based on the social convention of signing marital commitment. Carla counts on the fact that men who might otherwise approach her to be aware of, and accept, a significance that "*will keep them from hitting on her.*" She uses her diamond to impact her social environment, and in this sense, it has a forceful potential.

Diamond performances take place within a social landscape that contains a history of potent marketing, but peoples' insertion in this landscape is varied: agency and creativity loom large. The presence of performative elements in narratives suggest that a focus on individual actors within social groups, discourse (see chapter 4), and commodity chains (see chapter 3) will help clarify how diamonds are used as signs in the everyday. Rather than thinking of these levels of commodityism as embedded one inside another in the fashion of Russian dolls, an entanglement metaphor might be more revealing as individuals draw on ideas, memories, and relationships in their direct presence¹⁶⁰ rather than on more distant commodity/marketing or identity production in interpreting diamonds, though the impact resulting from these factors cannot, be entirely eradicated.

Diamonds Do Things

We experience, know, react and impute our will to the world via material culture. The significance that generic material objects carry is produced through social discourse, such as advertising, but significance with respect to particular instances of objects/signs,

¹⁶⁰ Consumers often emphasize indexical or iconic values of diamonds that result from personal histories and knowledges that are shared with, or known to, those closest to them (see Chapter 6).

is produced locally and idiosyncratically. Interpretation can be influenced status and identity, but diamonds can be wielded performatively.

Combining insights garnered from Austin's work "*How To Do Things With Words*" on the performativity of language (Austin 1962), with the growing attention to idiosyncrasy in linguistics (which takes the individual as the locus of meaning production, see for example Johnstone 2001), this chapter examines narratives that illustrate how diamonds are wielded in, as part of, performative events. Diamond performatives can be emergent, local and contingent. Consumers reported that they, or others, wield diamonds in ways that suggest "performance," but significations are created contextually so that they are unstable so that performative valence can shift over time, or place. By performance, I mean that diamonds, rather than merely describing, signaling or constating, are embedded in active contexts that impact circumstance, that, in other words, have consequences. Wearing a diamond can be a performative event, or part of an event, in an action intended to change the world in some observable way. Having productive force, diamonds *do* things.

Austin's taxonomy of linguistic elements distinguishes performatives, words that "do things," from constantives, which are descriptive. Performatives are utterances that do not describe, report, or merely refer but are part of an action with consequences. In working with first person utterances, Austin identifies several types of performative language acts such as "declaratory" (as in "I declare war," or "I dub thee knight") and "contractual" (as in "I bet," or "I promise"), in which saying something makes it so.¹⁶¹

¹⁶¹ Austin's work *How to Do Things with words* deals with first person utterance, while I am using the term to describe diamond interpretation/use falls outside of strictly first person cases, such as reflexivity.

Performatives are neither true nor false, but more or less successful depending upon the conditions under which the performative is uttered. The context must be “felicitous” for the success of the action, so that if and only if the conditions and intention are “appropriate” will the performative action succeed. For example, to declare war, one must be in a position to declare war and be sincere in his declaration in order that when the sentence, “I declare war!,” is uttered, that war is actually declared.

The diamond can, as can ordinary language, be understood as performative, integral to an overall action. They can be consumed as a “performative prop,” a necessary but not alone sufficient ingredient in transforming circumstance in some given direction. The felicity conditions for acts to be successful may be conventional and/or idiosyncratic.

Homo performans

Use of the term “performative” for consumption is not only supported by appeal to Austinian linguistics; there is a social scientific tradition of using performance as a lens through which to explore culture (see Goffman 1959, Singer 1959, Turner 1987). The dramatalurgical metaphor can help clarify how diamonds are discussed as signs in service of particular ends. Consumers employ diamonds as a cipher or prop, enabling them to inhabit a veritable “stage” upon which to present, imagine or pretend themselves (and sometimes others). These “stages” and the “plays” which take place there may benefit the self alone or be for real or imagined others.

Goffman, in focusing on “impression management” through controlled, sometimes negotiated behavior, developed a dramatalurgical paradigm to examine the dynamics of social relationships, but it only weakly explores the subjective, individualized nature of social drama. In my use of the term performative, I draw from

this work a sensitivity to context and the impact of circumstance on how individuals impute significance. In widening the conception of “performance” to include activity outside of “what we in the west usually call by that name – for example plays, concerts and lectures,” Singer identified his object of study as publicly communicative “cultural performances” to include ritual and religious activity in addition to the cultural and artistic (Singer 1972:71). As publicly communicative, diamond consumption can be performative. Pushing this conception, diamond consumption can also have a strongly reflexive dimension, as in Turner’s formulation: “If man is a sapient animal, a tool-making animal, a symbol-using animal, he is, no less, a performing animal, *Homo performans*, not in the sense, perhaps that a circus animal may be a performing animal, but in the sense that a man is a self-performing animal – his performances are, in a way, reflexive, in performing he reveals himself to himself. This occurs in two ways: the actor may come to know himself better through acting or enactment; or one set of human beings may come to know themselves better through observing and/or participating in performances generated and presented by another set of human beings” (Turner 1986: 81).

Diamond can be used to perform the self to the self (reflexively) or to others (see Schneider, forthcoming), as suggested by Celeste when she suggested that people who wear diamonds are ostentatious, but that she wears them differently. In fact she would love to have a large emerald cut stone, though she is not herself an ostentatious person. *“Mostly I see diamond jewelry as frivolous and a real marker of excess and also status seeking. I mean in earrings there are even two of them!! So it’s diamonds times two! That’s showy...I might want something like that, BUT it would be special and I would probably feel self-conscious at first. But I would also feel beautiful. Special.”*

Throughout our interview, she described reading people who wear diamonds as showy and concerned with creating an impression of money or status, but that for her, wearing diamonds is a way to make herself *feel* a certain way *to herself*, beautiful and special.

Felicitous Performance

Social conventions inform how we think about material culture and the roles it might play in performative acts. For example, we habitually break a bottle of champagne over the bow of a ship upon its maiden voyage, not a bottle of soda or vase filled with flowers. Convention dictates that we use champagne. Diamonds are called for in conventionally defined cultural performances as well: this point was made in my conversation with Allen, a 32 year old who works in finance. He had recently proposed to his girlfriend, but said that he knew almost nothing about diamonds before this happened and that he had done a lot of internet research and talking with his women friends and colleagues before making the purchase. He explained to me that when he *“asked for her hand, I knew that I had to present her with a diamond.”* Allen said in an aside that the truth of the matter was that he did not want to buy a diamond, and stated that *“you can put me down as anti-diamond...as far as being a requirement, I think it’s pretty much just silly. But,”* he explained, *“I didn’t even think about getting another stone because, you know, the diamond is a requirement, I could not imagine proposing without a diamond because then it [the proposal] would not be real.”* Two felicity conditions, a) of the sincerity of Allen’s question, and b) the diamond, are ingredients that are necessary, but each alone insufficient, to making a marriage proposal authentic. From Allen’s point of view, the diamonds’ presence is necessary to the proper execution of the proposal.

Conversely, it is the proposal that makes this particular diamond, in this case, a symbol of a promise for marriage.

The “*requirement*” of a diamond to legitimize an invitation to marriage is an American social convention, a “tradition” promoted by De Beers. In highlighting the historical conventionality of the engagement stone, it is instructive to compare American engagement practices to European ones in which De Beers tried but failed to promote the same “tradition.” Legitimizing props can also be developed locally, and therefore a working theory of commodity performativity should account for both socially conventional and local felicity conditions (which do not always reflect the “tradition” as engineered by the industry).

Illustrating that industry discourse is far from hegemonic is Margaret’s perspective (Allen’s fiancée). Margaret works at a television station and when I went to visit her in her mid-town office, we sat at a large desk overlooking the Hudson River. She calmly explained to me that she really didn’t care about receiving a diamond from Allen “*but don’t ever tell him that.*” From her perspective, a sincere proposal alone would have been felicitous enough to take seriously.

More obviously idiosyncratic interpretations appeared in interviews, especially where diamonds are used performatively in staging narratives. Some women said that they use jewellery as status markers, but diamonds were also used in creating and maintaining specific narratives. Particular diamonds sometimes become fetishized, in the sense that for an individual, or a group of individuals, they take on special meanings that supersede “diamonds are forever” and related discourses, and become associated with local memories, fantasies or situations. The meaning of signs like diamonds can become

naturalized to the extent that consumers come to think of meanings, such as memories, to be part of the diamond itself, emanating from it, rather than seeing the stone as something upon which a set of meanings are imputed.

When treated as reservoirs of memories, like a souvenir, diamonds become sites of condensation for private imaginaries having a potential to be made public through narratives. Semiotically, their use as props often involves indexicalization where consumers read a causal history into the e.g., acquisition process, and then take the diamond as a stand-in for those circumstances.¹⁶² In this way it serves as a cairn, marking the way to an internal imaginary that can be translated into a narrative, while simultaneously representing indexical “proof” of those circumstances.

Over and above its use as touchstone, diamonds are sometimes thought to be productive of changes, and then used to continue representing that change. They can be acquired or re-distributed in association with rites of passage such as births, graduations, weddings, and death. For example, Mary Sue, (the lawyer introduced in Chapter 5) explained to me that a diamond, given to her when she graduated from high school, for her and her family, primarily marked entrance into the world of adults, and the wearing of this diamond, which she thought was “*incredibly valuable and glamorous,*” worked not only to remember a rite of passage, but it was the granting, possession and wearing of it that in effect carried her over from adolescence to full personhood. Because a similar gift had also been given to her sister, local family tradition rendered the diamond a necessary, felicitous in Austin’s terms, element in authenticating the passage. Donning this “*valuable pendant*” literally, from her point of view, helped transform her into a

¹⁶² See Chapter 6 for extended treatment of “index”.

grown woman. The diamond is performative, perhaps magical in the productive force it exerted, in addition to carrying symbolic associations such as glamour. The example of Mary Sue's semiosis can be understood as a foil to the notion that meaning resides in a code, apriori to and external to, individual and context. The significance of her "passage diamond" is a family activity that is more accurately, though not unrelatedly, understood as an event in a restricted environ rather than as an object cohering to a social code produced by industry discourse, though the latter is partially entangled with the former.

The Declaratory: Is That Real?

The relationship between social groups and consumption has received emphasis in studies on commodities, especially by those seeking to link contemporary theories of the political-economy to social practices, and consuming patterns to social structures, such as class, gender or other identity groups. The grouping that has received by far the most consideration is "class," commonly understood as a socio-economic category. The idea that preferences for particular commodities is correlated to class, for example, is explored in the work of Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1984). But less has been done on consumerism from the perspective of individual consumers, and neither subjectivity nor agency have received a great deal of attention (see Millers work on Shopping as a rare exception). The tradition of doing cultural analysis on consumption at the level of social organization begins as far back as Veblen's classic, *A Theory of the Leisure Class* (Veblen 1899).

Veblen's work linked consumerism to declarations of class. In approaching consumption from a perspective grounded in time, emulation and material experience, the idea of conspicuous consumption has been influential in academia and in mainstream public discourse (even shaping advertising strategy), although evidence in interviews

resonates with arguments that the relationship between consumption and class is more complex than Veblen's theory suggests. Veblen, did however, explicitly explore the relationship between class and consumption patterns with a semiotic amenable to a Peircian framework in that conspicuous consumption includes consuming goods that are symbols (Veblen's terms are "insignia" or "badge" (*ibid*:46)), as well as those cast as indexes, where goods are understood as tangible results of productive labor, and as emulatory icons. Having and consuming certain goods operates as "proof" of financial success. Conspicuous consumption is a performance in which commodities and other entities (such as having a wife who is a woman of leisure) are wielded in status claims, but having these things is themselves an index of a person's wealth. The idea of pecuniary emulation, where consumption of class insignias or indices is practiced by those of a lesser status, can best be understood under the rubric of Peircian iconicity, in which resemblance motivates acquisition and consumption of goods.

The relationship of status to emulatory "fake" diamonds is complicated by the ease with which diamonds are faked. A closer look at the semiotics of commodity emulation can help illuminate why simulants may be less potent status symbols than real diamonds, or why a "knock-off" lacks the declatory punch of that which it imitates. Fake diamonds are icons, having abstracted from diamond certain qualities to emulate: Moissanite, for example, is a simulant that "refers" to diamond in clarity, hardness and dispersion through similitude, and not its "rarity" which is part of the discourse that maintains diamond's market value that ultimately creates the possibility for interpreting them as indexical of financial standing or status. Cheap cubic zirconium, which is even softer (and less expensive) than Moissanite, and gives off a bright fire and has even less

semantic force than Moissanite. Because its similarity to diamond is degraded, more visibly “fake,” its artifice is revealed, and calls attention to itself as an icon. Through the lens of conspicuous consumption, wearing cubic zirconium may mark one as an emulator, occupying a “lesser” status compared to the bearer of a diamond.

While the issue of authenticity is challenged by the relative ease of simulating diamond, any purported correlation between display and socio-economic class is also problematic as a result of the variety of ideas Americans entertain about wealth and conspicuous practices. Even though some reported that diamonds are for the elite, others attributed inverse relationships between alleged wealth and/or status and conspicuous consumption. Conspicuous consumption renders one “*tacky*” according to some consumers: Tom told me that in terms of wearing larger, more expensive diamonds, he believes that “*wealthy people do not engage in such behavior.*” A number of consumers said things like, “*people with money do not wear big diamonds,*” while others believe that diamonds are used declaratorily in an “*attempt to convince people that they have status when they really don’t.*” Large diamonds were sometimes associated with wealth, but wearing large diamonds was also negatively understood as “*vulgar display,*” or as “*obnoxious.*” Wearing big diamonds was sometimes associated with the nouveau-riche, a group described as the economic equals of the upper-class, but constituting a separate category based on style. The nouveau-riche are emulators, not authentically classed. The practice of applying “authenticity” as a mode of evaluation in both cases, for diamonds and for class, points to, actually is itself an index of, the existence of a normative state of affairs where “authentic” “real” diamonds and “real” wealth are the legitimate, un-

marked, semantically powerful cases as opposed to degraded inauthentic fakes (“zirconiums” and the nouveau riche).

The permutations of diamonds are interpreted as status markers are many. When I asked Allen, who as stated above had done “*extensive research*” about bigger diamonds prior to purchasing one for his girlfriend, explained that, “*when I see bigger diamonds I am, now especially that I know how much they cost, I am like ‘Oh my god – look at that thing –that’s too flashy!’ or, ‘It’s fake!’ It’s too superficial to be like that, and I think there is an inverse relationship to an extent – I mean that is how I think of it, and its all just appearance and probably nothing underneath.*” Dovetailing with Allen’s perspective, Tim, a 35 year old Human Relations Officer, explained that he does “*not like to see people wearing large diamonds*” since he is “*more impressed by a small, simple stone with a lot of personal meaning...because to be otherwise is a sign of superficiality.*” Allen’s use “*superficial*” suggests that he thinks others believe wearing flashy diamonds is a convincing wealth performance, but doomed since authentic wealth does not employ such performances. Tim’s use of the term also points to an absence of authenticity, though of a personal rather than of a material sort. Similar beliefs about ostentatious diamonds creating an impression of tastelessness and the probable absence of class, or “*real wealth*” variously constructed, was shared by more than a few. But size is relative: there was virtually no agreement on what counted as “too big” or the value at which a diamond becomes not just big but vulgar. A convincing declaratory performance of wealth with diamonds is evidently fairly tricky business.

Still, people do sometimes associate diamonds with class. I spoke with women who overtly strategize to achieve financial success (or help their husbands to do so) so

that they can, in one person's words, "*acquire bigger diamonds so other people will know that we have arrived,*" which is very much in the vein of Veblenesque conspicuous consumption. Some people expressed having plans to "*trade-up*" as soon as possible, exchanging the diamonds they currently own for larger ones (for a price, of course), while others celebrate the "*sweetness*" or "*special attachment*" to even very small diamonds and "*would never want any other stone.*"

Thomas is a young professional who bought a diamond for his wife. He thought it was an extravagant expense, but she really wanted a particular shape and size, so he decided to go ahead and make the investment, but he worries about the expense involved in trading up. His wife expressed a strong desire to do so in the future. "*The older you are, the bigger jewelry you can get away with wearing, and that's why they have this trade up program where I got the stone...this is really geared toward more materialistic people when really it should just have sentimental value, but my wife wanted it so I enrolled and now in the future we can turn in that stone and get a bigger one. The only thing is that the next one has to cost twice as much as the first one did so it's like I have to buy it all over again.*" Trading-up is a kind of arrangement for the future that many retailers are now offering: consumers can trade in a diamond they have purchased for a larger stone, usually at a slightly discounted price, but the arrangement might contain caveats, like the new diamond must be twice as large as the old one.

An interview with Molly, who "*definitely plans to upgrade*" revealed a composite of meanings, but signification was clearly weighted towards the use of diamonds as a communiqué to others about status. She knew more than most about grading and prices, confidently explaining that her diamond engagement ring "*is a brilliant cut, a little over 2*

carats, and its color is G.” She told me that she had forgotten the clarity characteristics, but given her self-assured and expansive knowledge about grading, it seemed odd that she would “forget” the clarity grade. Molly is hoping to acquire “something around 3 or 4 carats in an emerald or radiant cut...its like a princess cut only better...”



Figure 3-32 Princess cut, Emerald cut, and Radiant cut.

The strategic use of synthetic (lab-made) or imitation diamonds is, in some cases, “successful” where the appearance of an object so resembles a diamond as to be taken for one. Given Molly’s aficionado-like attitude towards diamonds, I was surprised to hear her say that, *“in up-grading, you know I would take Moissanite instead. It is man-made but nobody can tell and it’s a third of the price so to me that’s fine and I’d rather have a big Moissanite than this smaller real one....”*

Molly imagines that in terms of effect, Moissanite is identical to diamond on the basis of what others think they are seeing and the consequences for diamond and Moissanite are the same. Molly’s idea speaks to the non-essentiality of diamonds’ meaning and underscores the fact that the message is in the messenger.

For her, big diamonds, real or simulated (as long as they look sufficiently like diamonds) satisfy. While deftly sidestepping any questions that dealt directly with why she wanted a larger stone and what she wanted wearing big diamonds to say about her to others, she explained to me that she *“feels good”* when she wears diamonds as she *“truly appreciates the beauty of the diamond moreso than other people...they make me feel very special, very feminine and powerful,”* and in this sense the stones have a palpable impact

on how she experiences herself when she is wearing them, but in the midst of exploring her subjective experience, she oddly and quite without provocation changed the topic to branded stones: “Have you heard of all the branded stones? Like the Yehuda diamond?”¹⁶³ They can actually laser a signature on there. But to me this is just a waste of money because no one else can see the brand – if it showed I might feel differently, but you have to have a loupe to see it so who’s even going to know?” I pressed Molly to discuss why she wanted a bigger diamond, but she would only say that, “Well, bigger is better.” This phrase actually appears on Yehuda advertisements:

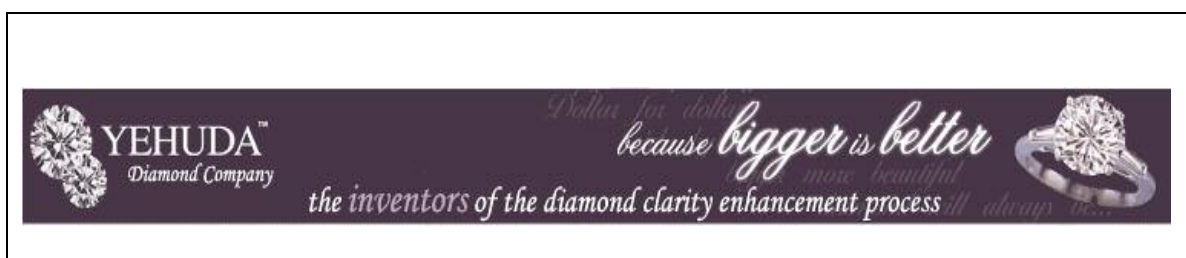


Figure 3-33 Yehuda Diamond Company ad¹⁶⁴

Interpretation may be directed towards the self or to others. In Molly’s case, she describes a concern with others interpretations in addition to feelings she enjoys while wearing diamonds or their look-alikes. Not all consumers share this perspective and one’s own knowledge of the stone’s quality may be paramount. For Ahmad, who “likes to buy the best,” whether it be coffee and tea or diamonds, and therefore, “even if I were to buy a

¹⁶³ Yehuda diamonds are diamonds that are specially treated to improve their clarity grades, rather problematically for the gem industry, by removing inclusions, the appearance of cleavages, and “bearded” girdles (when the girdle becomes scratched and/or nicked). Diamonds are cleaned, and then filled with a molten glass formula (the procedure and material composition is a company secret). As a result of this procedure, color grades usually drop by a full level. Fracture fillings can be detected by a knowledgeable grader (Skawinska). A one carat, SI2, color J diamond costs around \$2,700 from the Yehuda website selling loose stones (<http://www.yehuda.com/default.asp>).

¹⁶⁴ Image is banner from website at: <http://www.yehuda.com>

cheap diamond that looked the same (as a quality, expensive one), *if I knew that it was somehow inferior ... then, I would not want that.*” For Ahmed, the consequences of wearing a cheap stone or a fake one are different from that of an expensive high quality stone, they are not “*the same*” as they are for Molly, and therefore the performative consequences are different. The felicity conditions for Ahmed have to do with what he knows about the quality of the stone; for him to feel good about wearing it he needs to know that it is “*the best,*” whereas for Molly, how the stone appears to others is what matters: “*I mean people can tell if you are wearing low quality, cheap zircs,¹⁶⁵ but not with the good Moissanite.*” Her easy use of slang such as “zirc” belies a certain level of comfort with looking, evaluating and talking about diamonds and their simulants, and it seems that she may impute such abilities onto others.

People had varied feelings about the issue of authenticity for diamonds, much of which hinged upon whether one believed others could discern whether the diamond was “real”. Some were concerned with aesthetics (for example, “sparkle”) or feeling themselves somehow disingenuous or ashamed to be engaged in deception. Consumers were divided on whether they would wear a fake or cheap stone. Shannon, a woman in her late 20’s, told me that her parents don’t have a lot of money and when they got married her father could not afford a diamond, but that “*last Christmas my mom opened her gift from him,*” and then as an aside in pre-emptive defense, Shannon interrupted her story and said, “*I mean, I have never seen my mom act like this, she is really the most*

¹⁶⁵ Cubic Zirconium is is [zirconium oxide](#) (ZrO₂), a [mineral](#) that is extremely rare in nature, but is synthesized for use as a [diamond](#) simulant. “Zirc” is hard, lacks the internal “flaws” that mark the vast majority of real diamonds and are colourless, similar to a D color diamonds (also very rare). The high dispersion rate make the zirc “fire” too “colorful” and under a loupe the cut looks sloppy because of its softer edges (cubic zirconium is hard (8.5 on Mohs scale) but not as hard as diamond).

gracious and polite woman you will ever meet.” She continued: “But anyway, so she opened the present and there was a diamond ring and she took one look at it and handed it back over to my father and said, ‘This is fake’. And that was the end of it. I don’t know how she knew, maybe the size, but she didn’t want it and was not about to take it. So anyway, he finally did on their last anniversary give her a real one. It’s small, but real.”

Besides the fact that her father may have been trying to trick his wife, the ability of a stone to hold *appropriate* signification, hinged on its authenticity.

The relative construction of “authenticity” is highlighted by Sandra. I met Sandra and her husband, both magazine editors, at a dinner party. She explained that her husband had given her a paste (glass) diamond when they were engaged. Many years later, he confiscated it when she took it off one day to work in the garden, had the paste replaced with a diamond and gave it to her again. She was very pleased that he had done this for her, but told me while he was away from the table, “*in strictest confidence*”, that she didn’t really care if the diamond was real or fake, “*to me, the only thing that matters is that it is from his heart*”. For Sandra, the paste is as “authentic” as the real. For others, one may be more authentic than the other.

An issue connected to the success of a diamonds’s declaration is: to whom a declaration is being made, which reminds us that, as Peirce points out, a sign means something TO someone, leaving the door open for alterity and contingency. Some men argued, in being concerned with how others would perceive them, that even though their girlfriends claimed not to have any preference about the size of diamonds, they would be loathe to purchase a small gem because of a fear that it would reflect badly on them: I heard plenty of men saying things like, “*I don’t want anyone to think I’m cheap,*” or “*You*

have to go for something that is big enough so people don't think I am a cheap guy but not so big as to be over the top." The statements reflect how these men *imagine* others will read them, rather than how they themselves might see the stone, or how others actually read them, which in some ways is one of the most salient cornerstones of performance.

But, some imagine that others will not read the stone. For example, Jenny believes that diamonds are popular primarily for aesthetic reasons, which complicates their use by men as a status claim: diamonds are *"so popular because they are not colored and so they go with everything – they are the most versatile fashion accessory and I guess that they have some status but that is really more important for the guy who is like, 'see what I got for my wife,' but I don't think that women care. Men are the ones who really think about it but its weird because they don't ever notice other people's diamonds."* So the conspicuous consumption of a large "real" diamond can be simultaneously a claim and a demonstration of status and wealth.

The Contractual

Diamonds are employed in contractual performances. By saying, "I'll bet you 5 dollars that the Tarheels take the Devils," a contractual illocution resulting in a relationship with contingencies and obligations takes place. Some people think of diamonds as part of a contract, for example, as a promise of sexual availability.

Diamonds were interpreted as symbols, indexes and as a contractive, as in the following excerpt from my interview with Kirsten (introduced in Chp. 6): *"I mean there are all those symbolic associations like trust and love and stuff but to me when a man gives a woman a diamond it is like he is making a promise to hold up his end of the*

bargain, a bargain that takes place on several levels – one the one hand if there is a family involved then it's the man's role to be both a provider on a material basis and also to be secure and committed and so its about money and other material provisions but even more than that he is promising his presence, his interested presence, his protective presence and that he will be there to protect the vulnerable family unit – he promises to create a situation in which the mother can devote herself to the care of the children and so to me this is all gelled in the diamond – the diamond is an example of his ability and willingness to be a good provider.” A woman in accepting the promise is responsible “*for being nurturing and supportive and honouring what the man is giving up, namely his freedom.*” While admitting that in having such a thing, there is an “*aura of conservative-ness*” and that she is conflicted with guilt she feels as confronted with the realities of production which “*siphons off some of the pleasure,*” Kristen’s interpretation is nuanced and personalized, the result of negotiated conversation between her and her husband.

Into the Past

I met Nancy at a fundraising event and we arranged to meet at a coffee shop for a formal interview. She is a well-educated, artistic woman in her 30’s. In speaking with Nancy about how her extended family relates to jewelry handed down from her grandparents, I realized that diamonds are used like props on a stage or cairns on a walk. Props suggest, authenticate, or identify, a setting. A cairn is a pile of stones heaped up, a pyramid of twigs, perhaps a specially tied frond, that is used as a landmark meant to catch one’s attention and to mark a particular spot; hikers leave cairns at places where they change directions, or a cairn may be left to identify a site at which something can be seen

or found. Diamonds can be cairns that direct one's attention towards landscapes of memory or across space to imaginaries, and then act as props within those landscapes.

Objects can literally set the stage for narrative tellings. As a thought experiment, we can consider ordinary objects (signs attached to memories or fantasies, for oneself or that are shared with others. One might use them to convey a particular stance, mood, or spirit. As with travel souvenirs, diamonds with known histories can act as prompts/cairns to narratives. An audience's consciousness can be transported, intended into the past, or the past may be brought "forwards" to the present.

The following excerpt regards a collection of diamond jewellery that belongs to Nancy's family, currently in the possession of her Aunt Beth. We had been discussing rap stars' diamonds in the style of bling (see chapter 7). Nancy remarked on the "*deplorable*" use of diamonds for self-promotion, as she believes P. Diddy to do, and about social responsibilities that accompany wealth in the form of moral imperatives. The term "prop" was specifically used to describe how diamonds are deployed in performance, in the production of a reflexive setting (by the diamond consumer for the self in a rehearsal of memory or fantasy) or as a setting for producing a context or mood for others. Her use of the term "prop" was the main interview used to develop this idea:

Talking about all of this...This all makes me think about my Aunt Beth. She is, and has been for as long as I can remember, so consumed by the diamond jewelry that is in our family...My father's family once had a good deal of money – now they don't, but they did before, and the last pieces to go are always the jewelry and the silver – and why? Because she hangs onto her ideals and memories through them and she doesn't want to

let go...I have watched how Beth has clinged to those diamonds, like with her life – like she possesses them and now actually they possess her - she is literally out of her mind. And that has given me such a different view on diamonds than I otherwise would have had - I would rather be happy and be with my husband and my friends and family and have good relationships than have some diamond if it came down to that, which in this case it has, she uses them to create a fantasy world, she clings to every remnant of the past through those things. And she and all her sibilings, they don't even talk over it.

And I think for her it is all about being owed something. Maybe by birthright, but she wont even share with her brothers and sister! I mean people do have a responsibility when they have money to look after their neighbors and also to be careful with that money so that their children can benefit from it. But Beth has never had any responsibility in that way, she has frittered away everything, you know, except for the diamonds, and she is not even sharing that with anyone. Like the hip hop community putting diamonds in their teeth is absurd, especially, you know, knowing where they came fro, its all so selfish and irresponsible, why don't they use that money for people who really do not have anything?

But Beth, she is addicted to diamonds, some people actually get addicted to them, and its like the diamonds are her greatest happiness and getting a new one is the only thing that she looks forward to...because she has run off all her brothers and sisters over them so there is no family happiness, really, to speak of.

And she will hang onto them at any cost I believe. And I have thought about this a lot. You see to her it represents what she once had, and what she could have had, what she should have had, and she really did have it in some ways, I mean the family had more

money than anyone else in town and so she had that feeling of status and importance and security, so its like living in the past. And she has ironically lost the irreplaceable things like her family over these things, but she, well, she did kind of ruin her life, her mother died when she was very young and granddaddy remarried this woman that frankly wasn't very nurturing and so Beth, like she got in with a wild crowd, and was being rebellious, and got pregnant and granddaddy wanted to send her to a convent in Europe to have the baby and put it up for adoption but she wouldn't have any of that. And so she eloped when she was 16 with TK, this redneck, and she stayed with him for a long time. Too long. And she even went to college and she was like the only one to graduate that already had kids.

So she was more non-traditional in those days but then she started clinging – I don't know when this happened – but anyway there she is – these diamonds are part of a past that is partly true, I mean they are like characters in her memory I guess, but she has built them up in her mind so that its like they are props in this fantasy that she has about what could have been, what the possibilities were, what she should have been and things like that – but these are dreams that don't exist in any way. It's like these are false realities and having the diamonds make it all seem real to her. She is willing to give up the here and now to keep those diamonds that allow her to live in a fantasy world of I don't know what....

Nancy's narration exemplifies the extent to which historical and local as well as imaginary factors enter into the signification process, and underscores the need to theorize commodity performativity as a fine-level process with sensitivity to these conditions. Family diamonds work as props in the locution of Aunt Beth's imaginary.

Others perform themselves into scenarios, past, present and future, taking diamonds as felicitous props with which to “do things” such as become engaged, become an adult or place themselves into an imagined landscape. But these events take place within a social milieu rife with extensive media and production ideologies. Performance into the past, therefore, is thus also influenced by social discourse: advertising and marketing spectacles inform personal dramas that unfurl in shared society as well as in fantasy. The unique nature of imputed meanings, colored by experience and imagination, participate both with and against discourse centering on romance, glamour, and wealth.

Into the Future and Other Imaginary Spaces

In the same way that diamonds can serve as cairns or props about an imagined or remembered past, consumers use them to launch projections of themselves into the future or spatially distant. I was talking with Mary Sue in her Brooklyn office when she led me into a digression about the diamond she inherited from her mother. Mary Sue acquired several large diamonds from her mother, and upon thinking towards the gems, slowly conjured them to mind. Describing what her minds eye saw, she told me of their presence in a cardboard box along with other valuable jewelry that she does not like to wear “*because it is for fancy people and I am not fancy.*” As she is talking, we are both transported to her apartment, to the top of her closet into the dark, inside a box, lying just under a pile of sweaters and other wintry clothes; here is an unassuming “*cardboard crypt*” holding several rather large loose stones. She describes the stones in as much detail as she can muster. The stones contain, she explains tentatively, an emotional content that they absorbed from the wearer, her mother. She went on to rehearse the memory of a close and loving relationship with her mother and her mother’s recent

untimely death and then spoke about the future, when she will pass them on to her nephews, the shared feelings that will ensue and the existing familial connections that will be reinforced, as well as the new ones that will be created when the diamonds are passed yet again to her nephew's partners.

Because the diamonds have "*absorbed emotional content from the wearer,*" these particular diamonds are the ones that operate legitimately, felicitously, in this setting. Meaning is indexically generated in the creation of a space where familial relationships are remembered, re-enacted and performed. The future passing of these diamonds to her nephews are part of an action that will "do things," namely forge relations between herself and her nephews, between her nephews and her mother, and between herself and her nephews fiancées.

Mary Sue's diamonds provoke memories of the past and hopes for the future whose content emerges in concert with, but is far from overdetermined by, the "diamond is forever" campaign. Her imputation includes the association of diamonds with glamour, as well as the knowledge that they can be used to legitimize a proposal, but for her, they first and foremost provide a link to her mother, and a means by which to underscore existing relations and participate in the formation of new ones. Because she believes that diamonds absorb emotions from the wearer, these particular stones and no other, are the authentic repositories of memory and enactants of kinship. The authenticity of the stone, as she defines it, is a felicity condition allowing the stone to act performatively.

Shifting Performances

Diamonds operate in imaginaries of future generations, as glamorous accessories or as rainy-day savings accounts, but imaginaries are dynamic and respond to changing

circumstance. Interpretation adapts as circumstances change. Narratives of acquisition and dispossession are negotiated, renegotiated and then rehearsed as visions of the future become honed, or are transformed over time. For example, during a casual conversation with Valerie, she told me that her engagement stone was re-set in a necklace when she divorced; Valerie now wears it as a fashion accessory rather than as performance of marital commitment.

In another example of how diamonds' meaning can change with circumstances, a pair of large diamond earrings, a former souvenir of Katherine's marriage to her ex-husband Marc, have been aestheticized. The diamonds' former significance has given way to one revolving around the appearance of diamonds and looking special and fashionable: Kate explained: *"I re-set the diamonds in a ring with a sapphire and I wear it to parties and on other dressy occasions. Mark always hated to get dressed up and do any thing social, so now I use this diamond when I want to look special. You see I had a friend who was wearing a sapphire and diamond combination, now hers were huge and the sapphire was about as big as my head and mine is much smaller, but I love the colors together and I wear it a lot. It goes with a lot of things and it always looks nice and crispy."* It is through the possession, display and imputation of significance in response to changing circumstance upon specific diamond commodities, and others like them, that consumers like Kate successfully perform themselves into the play of today's, yesterday's, or tomorrow's.

Agency

Some influential treatments of consumerism, by, for example Bourdieu (1984) or Baudrillard (1981), do not fully address subjectivity and/or agency. But consumers are

idiosyncratic and creative their encounters with commodities. In even a very conservative analysis, I would argue that consumers demonstrate agency: individuals, within the context of a specific cultural milieu, make decisions and judgments against structural determinations.

Bourdieu's work on the relationship between taste and class posits a theory of exchange dynamics in which a variety of knowledges or abilities, "capitals" (cultural capital, economic capital, social capital, educational capital and aesthetic capital), are cast as mutually redeemable. Based on two large sample surveys in which respondents were asked about preferences in a variety of arenas (food, music, etc.), Bourdieu posits a practice based notion of class reproduction made manifest partly through consumption habits (Bourdieu 1984). This conclusion operates on a principle of correlation, and while taking sign value seriously, does not delve into subjective notions that make consumption a meaningful practice. There are no doubt structural constraints having to do with one's socio-economic position which influence attitudes towards or thwart access to pricey goods such as fine diamonds and the idea that diamonds are a status symbol has robust purchase in American society, but these facts do not necessarily determine consumption as meaning production.

Baudrillard's focus on the sign value of commodities takes signing practices through commodities to its logical limits, positing that consumerism is a frenetic panoply of symboling dynamics (Baudrillard, 1975). Baudrillard, writing against what he calls Marx's "production bias", inverts rather than escapes the basic structuring of society as developed by Marx by positing that signing activity rather than relations of production has become the fundamental formative principle in capitalist society. Baudrillard,

however, maintains class as the primary unit of social analysis and does not manage to break away from a fundamental lack of agency implicated in his understanding of the sign. In such a scenario, subjectivity is enshadowed if not erased.

In moving towards an analysis with more narrowly construed social units as the basis for analysis, researchers have looked at subcultural consumption, where commodity usage is identified as innovative or “oppositional,” in a form of social manoeuvring that is cast as “resistance” to mainstream society (see Hall and Jefferson 1975). This work on helps explicate the reproduction of class structures and the potential political significance of commodity use. Relatedly, studies exploring the construction of identity through consumerism focus on the symbolic nature of commodities and correlate the meaning of certain goods with membership in particular social groupings.

But there is more to the story: while commodities can signal membership in identity groups, they are also used to develop individuated narratives which may or may not be embedded in the display of identity in terms of larger scale social aggregates such as race, class, nationality, gender, or ethnicity. For example, this research, specifically designed to investigate through a fine grained perspective the individuated aspect of diamond consumption, revealed that some consumers actively refused to participate in the diamond industry, or in class or identity groups. This refusal was sometimes cast as an act of resistance, but more simply as individuals who “*do not want to be dictated to by advertising*”, social norms or conventions. Actively rejecting diamonds and marketing, these people expressed tendencies to prefer ethnic jewellery, or opaque semi-precious stones such as lapis, malachite, or onyx over diamond.

Resistance to the diamond industry as way to protest the evils of society is not, however, unknown: Ray, a fashion photographer in his late 30's excitedly argued that he would never wear a diamond, nor buy a diamond for his wife, *"No way. I would not support that shit. It's all just soooo boring! People who care about wearing diamonds are boring. Why don't you go ask those Jews on 47th street about dealing with amputee money – I just saw recently photographs of amputees from the civil war in Africa and its like those people are animals – who would do something like that? Children. Arms and Legs chopped off . And its all just about some suburban cunt getting some stupid, ugly jewellery."* For Ray, who sees his refusal to participate as performing a political act, says of his refusal that, *"I, Ray S., give a shit"* about what is happening in the world. For him, *"the three stones are not the future, past and present, - its for no taste, greed and no individuality....So my question is: "Why?"* In fact, several informants stressed that in rejecting industry attempts to pre-set meaning or dictate a necessity for woman to have diamonds, they were asserting their independence from convention and as individual agents. Thus, the refusal to consume diamonds can be performative too.

Spotlight on Individual Actors

My research recovered an agentive, ideolective bent to meaning production where consumers interpret diamond as performative signs. As a paradigm for examining meaning production in material culture, consumer narratives suggest that a linguistic model such as that outlined by Austin can be augmented with a consideration of the individual as a meaning producer. Austin's approach contains an implicit critique of a linguistics of reference: he explores language is a consequence-generating phenomenae, but the model does not problematize the mechanics of meaning. Identifying the

production of meaning as emergent from individual agents who interact with but are not wholly determined by known social codes, as Barbara Johnstone has done in linguistics (Johnstone 2001) captures both idiosyncrasy and convention while maintaining sensitivity the operations of language at the level of social code. Data taken from interviews suggests that people consume diamonds in ways that are similarly varied (sometimes encompassing, and other times rejecting conventional discourse). It seems that meaning production cannot be predicted by reference to at large social codes nor to people's inclusion within cultural categories such as race, class, gender or ethnicity, though ideas and commentary, sometimes quite sharp, about categories such as class and race certainly appeared in narratives, usually with respect to other people.

By taking the individual as the locus of investigation and allowing for subjectivity, ambiguity and negotiation in the "performance" of e.g., gender or kinship rather than in the "construction" or reflection of it, we maintain a greater sensitivity to the impact of individual knowledge, memory, and agency on consumption activities. Performative consumption of diamonds takes place within personalized circumstances and has implications for the reversal of a theoretical movement which starts from society or group and then derives the individual to one which gives the individual and individual differences "foundational status," as a "vantage point from which to consider questions of theory and method" (Hymes 1979:35), though clearly these levels are entangled.

While some define performance as pretending, as in Peruvian vendors at Machu-Pichu (Luciano 2004) or Mayan women in Mexico (Little 2003) who are "performing" (an imagined) traditionalism for tourists through clothing and personal behavior, other formulations of performance, geared to explicate everyday practices, have been adapted

for the study of the “performance” of nationalism, gender, race and class, for example by a Puerto-Rican community in Chicago (Ramos-Zayas 2003) where performance is understood as (re) productive but not particularly creative. Looking at daily activity from a more rarified perspective, De Certeau, through the metaphor of wandering the city, posits that individual practices are private meanderings within an overarching structure which contains but does not overdetermine its subjects (De Certeau 2002). While De Certeau casts the individual as creative and agentive, his “creativity” is not productive. Analysis of diamond consumer narratives in this chapter suggests that individual actors generate interpretations that are both productive and creative.

I hope to have demonstrated that the notion of “performativity” can be expanded beyond the realm of the linguistic to understand the ways that objects of material culture taken as signs, such as diamonds, are wielded in performances by people intending to exert change or create circumstances. This is just one step towards developing an understanding of consumer’s “ideology of the sign” through research on how people think of signs as productive, as “doing things”.

**CHAPTER 9 CONCLUSION - WHAT KINDS OF SIGNS ARE DIAMONDS?
CONSUMERS TREAT DIAMONDS AS SYMBOLIC, INDEXICAL,
ICONIC, POETIC AND PERFORMATIVE SIGNS.**

The Emptiness of Diamonds

The presence of commodities in contemporary American society can hardly be over-stated. Commodities, such as diamonds, acquire meaning and it is by, through, and with commodities that people negotiate their lives. But what do diamonds mean? What is special about diamonds as commodities? What can the study of diamond consumerism tell us about consumerism in general?

What Do Diamonds Mean?

I have examined diamond consumers' narratives and explored diamonds from a variety of perspectives to discover what kinds of signs consumers take diamonds to be. A heading in Chapter One states that "Diamond is a precious gem consisting of pure carbon in regular octahedrons now consumed by Americans in the form of jewelry". To begin concluding this dissertation, this sentence can be parsed into constituent parts.

That "*Diamond is a precious gem*" is the result of historical contingencies, as suggested by the various practices of diamond gemwear and by the rather serendipitous evolution of the diamond industry outlined in Chapter One.

The natural formation, and man-made creation, of "*pure carbon in regular octahedrons*" constituting diamond, covered in Chapter 3, is a geological point of view that underpins the ways in which diamond's "precious" value is constructed and maintained by De Beers, various grading bodies, and merchants around the world who

highlight characteristics such as color and light-play that is later emphasized by consumers in interpretations.

Complementing the task of constructing discriminations in market value between stones that might be otherwise taken to be virtually identical is the “Diamond is Forever” campaign that promotes the consumption of diamonds to “*Americans in the form of jewelry*”. The discourse in this marketing landscape is geared, by De Beers own admission, towards a largely middle-class and somewhat conformist mentality as reflected by consumers commentary on ads (though the notion of class in the U.S., as I have elsewhere suggested, is problematic in its basis in style and in identification by factors often having little to do with socio-economics). It is within this landscape of discourse predicated upon, more directly, notions of glamour, status, romance, and less directly, upon middle-class values, conventionality and whiteness, that New York’s diamond consumers encounter and make-meaning of specific diamonds acquired within individualized circumstances.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 traced the diamond commodity chain in terms of material and ideological production from carbon molecules to graded mineral arrangements to artifacts operating as lifestyle symbols. These chapters also show how consumers selectively use knowledge of such to inform meaning-making. Industry-produced meanings of diamonds (as signifiers of status, glamour and romance) can be understood as Peircian symbols. Besides taking diamonds as symbols, three additional modes of semioses, or meaning-making, emerged from analysis of consumer narratives, showing that consumers take these objects to be/treat them as more than symbolic signs (though clearly a symbolic

potential is entangled within these additional modes of interpretation). These meaning types were: motivated meanings, poetic meanings and performative meanings.

Besides taking diamonds as symbols of say glamour, and usually of far greater import to the consumer, are those interpretations generated, reflexively for the self or directed to close others, as a result of personal circumstance that is at once embedded in a particular socio-historical landscape but is also idiosyncratic, contingent, and unfixed over time. More generally, consumers use a range of semiotic strategies to generate subtle and complex meanings of diamond: consumers may treat a diamond the type of sign that can be understood as a motivated sign (icon or index), as poetic, or as a performative in addition to its well-known symbolic valence. Chapters 6, 7 and 8 detailed the ways in which consumers approach diamonds as each of these sign types.

Taken together (consumer narratives, archival research and cultural discourses), this dissertation illustrates how marketing practices generate symbolic meanings of diamonds which inform the social, moral and political universe in which diamond consumerism takes place. Consumers draw on a repertoire of culturally shared symbolic meanings, but also generate make-meanings creatively, sometimes idiosyncratically, in contexts embedded with personal histories, fancies, and hopes. People produce themselves and others through the incorporation of these objects into their lives in various ways. More generally, I suggest that commodity researchers might benefit from considering a broadly construed “ideology of the object” as suggested by narratives of diamond consumption which mandate an openness to the possibility that commodities are signs, are objects of meaning, that are both referential (symbolic) and/or non-referential (indexical, iconic, poetic and performative) in character.

Diamond as a Member of the Set of Commodities in General

I have used the term “commodity” to mean objects (though of course, services and experiences should be included here as well) that are materially, and/or ideologically produced, usually through mass production, often marketed and/or branded, sold in exchange for cash on the open market. Commodities usually have socially suggested, and sanctioned, but certainly not overdetermining, uses and meanings, even if this meaning is minimal. Most commodities, once taken out of market circulation through purchase, are never re-sold, though there is a robust market for many second hand commodities, such as clothing, books, furniture and cars. The consumption of a commodity is taken simply as the set of practices and uses, including meaning-making, that consumers undertake with commodities once they have them. Diamonds are commodities and the semioses consumers undertake is part of diamond consumption. What lessons might be applied to the set of commodities in general from the study of diamond consumption in particular?

Diamonds both are and are not like other commodities, which might impact the significance of conclusions drawn by this study for understanding consumption in general. With this in mind, four salient issues that emerge in considering diamonds as a member of the set of commodities in general are: authenticity, materiality, luxury, and symbolic load.

- *Authenticity*

Many commodities engender fakes or replicas. “Gucci” watches, “leather” handbags, and gemstone jewelry can all be bought on the streets of New York for a fraction of the price one pays for the “real” goods in a retail store where “authentic” goods are sold. Knock-off designer furniture, clothing and housewares are commonly

available. Consumers frequently remarked upon the fact that diamonds are “*easily faked*” or at least that there are “*lots of fakes out there*”. Some consumers are comfortable with wearing fakes, or even prefer fakes or knock-offs to the real thing. And because diamonds’ authenticity is most verifiable using only sophisticated tools and knowledge, companies specializing in simulated diamond such as Moissanite, cubic zirconium or glass operate successfully and the traffic of simulants in American society is substantial. Profitable production and consumption of diamond-like gems piggy back on the social sanctioning of diamonds as gem-wear, and often cannot be discerned as “fakes” by consumers. The existence of simulated diamonds attests to the power of real diamonds’ meaning, though having an ambiguous semiotic relationship with it. Fakes, for example, can encode a set of commentaries on “real” diamonds through iconic resemblance, or operate as an indexical sign of status, or, on a meta-level, the existence of fakes can work to index of the power and presence of diamonds in America.¹⁶⁶

Industry as well as consumer concern over authenticity is reflected in the professionalization and growth of grading and certification bodies such as GIA. Retailers urge consumers to pay attention to the 5th “C” which stands for Certificate, which, ironically, defines, maps and legitimize evaluation of diamonds on the basis the first “4 C’s”. The trend towards certification also indexes the threat presented to the industry by “good” fakes: to remain in power, the industry must construct and maintain consumers’ belief that the differences between paste and real diamonds are relevant and worth paying for. The industry has even developed responses to the synthetic diamond industry through

¹⁶⁶ The ease with which diamonds are faked speaks to diamonds uneasy relationship with its utility as a status symbol.

promoting the idea that natural diamonds, with their irregularities and flaws, are more legitimate than lab-produced stones with their regular chemistry and lack of mineral inclusions. By calling flaws and inclusions “nature’s signature” at the point of sale, retailers intimate that stones are a one-of-a-kind signed pieces, akin to a great works of art.¹⁶⁷ Laser branding, though virtually invisible, further adds to the sense that the diamond is special, not just one of millions of identical stones. Having a number or a special message inscribed on the stone further heightens the distinctiveness of an object that might appear otherwise as one of many.

It is through industry-sponsored efforts such as individualized certification and branding, that virtually identical mass-produced diamonds are choreographed into greater uniqueness. These activities, in combination with meaning-making by individuals who attribute qualities to their diamonds such as an ability to hold emotions of the wearer, to perform kinship, to mark rituals, and such, come together to generate the appearance of aura in association with a given diamond, such that to replace it with another fake, a synthetic or even another real diamond is unacceptable to the consumer. It becomes unique, and thus irreplaceable. On the other hand, if diamonds are used purely for status-marking, for example, the use of a less expensive but large fake diamond rather than a more expensive, and smaller, real diamond may be preferred. The extent to which, and how, this aura of distinctness is constructed varies, then, from consumer to consumer, depending up the combination of semioses she, or he, is deploying.

¹⁶⁷ In fact, it was this analogy of a diamonds to a great work of art that led to the ad campaign which featured paintings by well known artists such as Picasso and Dali.

The issue of authenticity as it applies to diamonds effects the study of commodities in general on several counts. Certain kinds of commodities are apt to motivate the production of fakes, including material goods, expensive goods, and goods that are truly unique, few or hard to get. Works of art, or antiques, for example often generate reproductions and fakes, while branded goods are similarly “reproduced”, often in ways that are playful and obvious (analogous to giant cubic zirconium jewelry), or in more subtle ways where there is a real effort, sometimes to the point of criminality, to imitate “real” things. The existence of emulatory, iconic, fakes marks or indexes, the established presence of an authentic good, and can in fact challenge the authenticity of those goods whose value may be, ironically, even further enhanced by these efforts.

- *Materiality*

Many commodities are material: furniture, chocolates, handbags, frying pans, stereos, shoes and diamonds are all example of material commodities. Sometimes in studies of commodities, the actual materiality of the object goes underappreciated. Material commodities may be treated as an index through which to investigate labor, political-economy or social relationships of which they are symptomatic. In other studies, an objects’ socially agreed upon (or contested) symbolic value is privileged and investigated. But, I would argue that although symbolic meaning, that is not in any way necessarily related to an objects’ material features, is important, materiality is not necessarily inconsequential when it comes to the study of commodities and their role in everyday lives. One way consumers interpret material goods, such as diamonds, is to interpret goods’ formal qualities: the way something feels, smells, looks or tastes can contribute to what it can be said to mean.

With diamonds, several variables within the fact of its materiality might be considered in interpretation, such as imperishability and size. For example, diamonds are durable, easily maintained, and can last intact over many generations. This imperishability is implicated in the treatment of diamonds as heirloom objects which are sometimes thought to carry memories and generational histories within them. In terms of size, diamonds are small, and very portable, which makes it possible to wear them on the body every day over the course of a lifetime. This makes diamonds a good candidate in what Jane Schneider has called “self-enhancement” (Schneider, forthcoming), the use of material culture to build themselves both personally and interactively. The same could be said of fabric or make-up, or other materials that can be used to generate feelings of potentiality, various emotions, and/or self-confidence. People can use material objects such as clothing or diamonds to encode memory or experience, or as protective amulets, draped around or worn directly on the envelope of the skin in that liminal space which in some ways can be said to become incorporated into the person. Consumer and commodity become one entity greater than the sum of its parts. Obviously, many commodities do not have these capacities: one cannot wear a freezer or pass down a sirloin steak, but the material nature of things can be an important axis whereby people interpret commodities.

- *Luxury*

Luxury items sometimes serve as indexes of class. Diamonds are often portrayed by the media, and echoed in consumer narratives, as luxury items, as very expensive, as things the wealthy or upper classes have. But part of the expansion of the diamond industry in terms of caratage mined per annum, the size and quality of diamonds on the

market, increased availability of cheap production labor has translated into an increased democratization of the diamond for the American consumer. While the price of diamonds has not undergone reduction, greater availability of inexpensive stones has meant that more people can afford to have diamonds. While there is some truth to the idea that only the very elite can afford to purchase, and consume, truly large high-quality diamonds (which are rare and extremely pricey), the combined availability, fakeability and the complicated relationship between style and class in the United States make the taking of diamonds as a luxury item/class marker somewhat ambiguous.

Though some marketing features celebrities, consumers modelled in much diamond advertising appear to be members of the (mainly white) middle-class, often adhering to “family values”. The category of “middle-class” -ness in the United States is itself problematic, however, since there is so much differentiation within it, and those differences are often variably understood and negotiated regionally, economically, behaviorally or stylistically. But in as far as “luxury” cars, branded clothing, and the like are part of the set of commodities that the general middle-class consumes, diamond jewelry fits right in, reflected in the fact that the vast majority of American women own at least one diamond (though clearly not all diamonds are “equal” in terms of market value or potential for status signage).

There is a set of luxury items that can index extreme wealth, but most diamonds do not fit into this set. Though they can be expensive, the idea that diamond can serve as a typical example of a luxury good is somewhat specious.

- *Symbolic Load*

With their long history of highly managed marketing, diamonds are highly symbolically endorsed, a fact not necessarily true of other commodities. The diamond industry spends inordinate amounts of money to maintain the appearance of diamonds in public discourse and is unrelenting in their efforts to fix the symbolic meaning of diamonds. Many other commodities do not fit this profile, at least in degree, though the symbolic load attached to “status” items, may receive similar treatment.

* * *

Because of the impact of these four features (authenticity, materiality, luxury, and symbolic load) in considering diamond as a member of the set of commodities in general, extrapolating lessons about how semiosis takes place in the four modes taken from the study of diamond consumption is probably most justifiable when considering similar entities. Commodities that are perhaps faked or imitated, material, perhaps used in personal adornment or drama, partially considered luxurious even in a mild way, and that carry a high symbolic load will likely be treated as signs of similar modalities. Examples of such commodities include art, branded shoes and clothing, cars, or perhaps some other precious metals or gems such as gold, or pearls.

Implication for Consumption Studies

Interpretive strategies are complex, probably much more so in practice than has been revealed by this project, and meanings are rife with contradictions, incoherencies and irrationalities. Diamonds are configured using an individualized mélange of semiotic strategies: people draw on ideas and interpretations they have been exposed to while also introducing their own experiences, attitudes and ideas. Meanings are unstable, and can

change over time with circumstance or become transformed as one acquires new knowledge or experiences. I found that many consumers struggle with contradictions of such as, “buying into the whole diamond thing”, and wanting a big, gorgeous stone but simultaneously rejecting what they feel is the suburbanism, the conventionality, or the simplistic materiality of it. Themes such as class, gender, suburbanism, sex, style, race, ethnicity, savvy-ness of advertising ran throughout the narratives in unpredictable ways such that to conclude that diamonds for these consumers are primarily any one particular kind of sign that is about any one thing is difficult, if not impossible.

I have argued that the lack of attention to subjectivity, to history and to the situatedness of meaning production that is an inherent part of many consumer studies building from a “culture as text” metaphor is a logical result of using a structuralist-based notion of the sign. That result is caused by three crucial features within the main pillars of Saussurean thought: the lack of speakers in favor of an idealized Speaker, ahistorical systematicity, and an uber code of meaning that exists apriori to individuals. But, diamond consumers, as shown in their narratives, are idiosyncratic, historically and locally situated, creative generators of meaning; methods used to study how consumers interact with meaningful objects, signs, must be open to the dynamics of these characteristics.

Saussure argued that to study language, it was necessary to reconfigure the way that linguists understood it. Saussure had come to the conclusion that “you can see only as far as your model permits you to see; that the methodological starting point does much more than simply reveal – it actually creates, the object under study” (Jameson 1972: 14). Anthropology has used a “culture as language” model for analyzing cultural phenomena,

and in so far as culture does share some traits with language, this methodological starting point has been productive. The model of language used as a basis for this metaphor is one drawn from work of Saussure and his followers, and contains a theory of meaning that can be described as referential. Following Saussure's dictum that analysts see as far as their model allows them to see, use of such a model of language for culture studies results in research that reveals, and perhaps creates, those aspects of cultural communiqué and meanings that are referential in nature. As linguists have pointed out, however, there are important aspects of natural language and communication that cannot be captured by a referential platform, and have begun to take steps to address those aspects at the theoretical level. For example, explaining the context specific use of pronouns, and other indexical terms, requires expansion of the referential model. Other non-referential modes of language use include the metaphor, or the performative. The aim has been, by analysis of diamond consumer narratives through a lens open to both referential and non-referentiality, to show that the language as culture model is fruitful, but it must be done with a model of language that fully accounts for all of, or as many of, the mechanisms of meaning as is possible. By reconfiguring the object under study, consumerism, from treating commodities as symbols, to an inquiry of commodities as various types of signs, a fuller breadth of how commodity objects such as diamonds are interpreted by people to create, understand, change, react against, participate within or comment upon their social and personal reality.

While I certainly do not claim to be an expert in theoretical linguistics, I have tried to learn from some primary arguments wielded in linguistics by Silverstein, Shefflin, Wollard, Irving, Austin and Gal and to transfer what has been learned about

constructing the linguistic object under study to the anthropological practice of treating culture as text. The traffic of meaning in Language, and its analog, Culture, are comprised of both a referential and a non-referential hermeneutics. I have identified three domains of non-referential meaning in diamond consumerism using insights combined from Peircian semiotics, Russian Formalism's theory of art and literature, and Austin's treatise on language as a launching pad: motivated (icons and indexes), poetic, and performative. I see no logical reason why other kinds of consumerism and the general interpretation of material, or even non-material, culture could not be similarly analyzed.

Linking consumption to identity politics and sharpening sensitivity to matters of social inequality, projects embedded in capitalist critique focus on the symbolic function of commodities in communicating and reproducing social power and differentiation, primarily with respect to communicating purported membership in social categories such as class or gender. Class in particular is an area of vulnerability studies of consumption in the United States, partly due to the fact that class and class differences are themselves very ill-defined. The relationship between "class" and material acquisition is extremely problematic, exacerbated by the ease with which credit is available. There are additional variables that occlude clear recognition of others' class like regional differences, but one of the most confusing factors is style. There is much differentiation in "middle class" diamond consumers' narratives which show that meaning making is in some ways encompassed by a very loose notion of "class" largely based on style but cannot be reduced to it.

New Directions

Diamonds are used in ways that mimic ad discourse but my analysis of consumer narratives, however, suggests that a wider, more nuanced understanding of consumerism requires a methodological expansion in at least three significant directions: towards the individual, towards commodities in an everyday context and, most importantly, towards a greater sensitivity to non-referential commodity meanings.

First, refocusing the emphases of analysis from the use of diamonds by social groups, or as defined in marketing discourse, to a listening of individual interpretations will result in a foregrounding of everyday subjective perspectives without sacrificing a necessary and dedicated awareness of the political, cultural and economic processes in which consumerism is inevitably and dialectically involved.

Second, there has been surprisingly little comprehensive work growing out of empirical observations of the practical relationships between consumers and commodities, particularly once these objects are acquired and integrated into everyday lives (Dant 1996, 2000). I have demonstrated through a semiotic analysis of in-depth interviews some of the multiple ways in which commodities operate in lives, the site in which they become meaningful and impact the everyday.

Third, a methodological zooming in on the encounter between individual consumers and objects in everyday lives illustrates that diamonds are often interpreted as non-referential signs. People report surprising and sometimes contradictory interpretations and attendant emotional responses that are best subsumed under a wide rubric of semioses. I have examined the processes by which people consume objects,

making sense of them, through an identification and analysis of the types of meanings that are being generated as reflected in narratives.

Within the anthropology of consumption, the model that has been most commonly used as a metaphor through which to analyze culture has been one of reference. This practice has produced an “ideology of consumption” in which commodities are thought by social scientists to function essentially referentially. I have tried to show that consumers themselves do not take diamonds to function solely referentially, but their “semiotic ideology” (Keane 2003) includes taking diamonds as indexes, icons, poetically and performatively as well. Pushing referentiality to its logical limits in the context of consumption can result in an approach that privileges meaning in such a way that erases local and contingent aspects of commodity interpretation that I hope to have illuminated.

To sum up

To understand diamond consumerism, I focused on the personal narratives of meaning and how they are variously informed by social discourses. The pool of participants in this study can in many ways be said to represent one of the most highly targeted audiences in terms of advertising and marketing: 25-45 yr old, educated, white middle class consumers. Recurring content within narratives such as the idea that diamonds are expensive, or that they are symbolic of romance or love, reflects the success of the marketing campaign, but people’s interpretations cannot be reduced to such recurrences. In addition to these ideas were wildly individualized and creative interpretations which treat the diamond in ways that cannot be explained by the mechanism of the marketed symbol. Scholars of language have recognized that an ideology of language, an understanding or theory of language if you will, that is purely

referential in nature, that focuses on the referential and semantic dimensions of language excludes the very important poetic, performative and indexical functions of language (see Keene 2003). Likewise, I suggest recognizing that diamond consumers' ideology of the sign includes both referential and non-referential functions, as reflected in narratives of interpretation where diamonds are understood indexically, poetically, and performatively. Further attention to capturing the ideology of the sign as suggested by these narratives will help us better understand how objects are configured through the layering of meaning in everyday lives, and vice versa.

I have shown how social discourse about diamonds affects personal, local meanings, that personalized meanings are generated through, against or in conjunction with social formations, and that meaning types work in concert, in intricate ways. Local, context bound meanings attributed to objects connect people to other people and to the world, and it is through such activities that people live the everyday. While it is possible to make some general essay into identifying trends, such as potential for gender construction, or class distinction, my aim has been to identify types interpretations taking place, to understand what kinds of signs consumers take diamonds to be, and to contemplate what the nature of individual semioses can tell us about how local tethering through material culture takes place. Future projects that place diamond consumerism more squarely within additional ideological or methodological paradigms, while investigating consumer semioses with other commodities will surely reveal an expanded set of conclusions.

APPENDIX I SAUSSURE: A REFERENTIAL THEORY OF LANGUAGE

A Saussurean or “structuralist” model of language has been used in the social sciences as an analogy for culture (See Saussure 1910). Working primarily with phonemes, Saussure defined the study of language as a study in synchronic relationships between the parts of language operating at various levels. Structuralist linguistics constitutes a basis for an “ideology of language,” or an understanding of language, in which language is thought of as being primarily referential in so far as “structural linguistics has generally insisted on one *aspect* of the *communicative* function of language: that of transmitting information, on the ‘representational’ level” (Lepschy 19xx: 27). This ideology of reference, built upon three main ideas, was brought to bear in the study of commodities as part of the culture as language paradigm that was imported into anthropology (largely through the work of Levi-Strauss). Those three ideas have to do with temporarily, the relationship of signs to what they signify, and the extra-individualistic code of meanings.

Temporality: Synchrony and Diachrony

In structuralism, language is understood as a synchronic system. Saussure in drawing a distinction between the diachronic (historical, evolutionary) character of language and the synchronic study of language, was making a radical contribution that went hand in hand with the way that he constructed language as a scientific object of study, and in this sense, Saussurean linguistics is a-historical. Of course, Saussure is not denying the factual existence of linguistic history but excludes it from the list of factors germane to understanding language as a rule based system of communication. The classic

structuralist metaphor is the chess game – in Saussure’s paradigm, at any one point in the game, one need not be at all concerned with how each piece made it to its square, but rather what are the current possibilities for each piece given the parameters of the game. The study of language is properly the study of the rules of language, otherwise known as the structure of language.

How meaning works: Sign = Signifier + Signified

Saussure split linguistic form from content, substance from value, meaning from vehicle, signifier from signified, and then maximally de-emphasized signifier forms (which he viewed as historically, but arbitrarily emergent) in favor of investigating the synchronic relationships of differences between signifieds¹⁶⁸. Signifiers operate as tokens whose form is irrelevant. Forsaking consideration for the form of the signifier becomes a significant theoretical weakness when the linguistic model is used as an analogy for cultural and other sign-rich domains that have a material, 3-D substantive aspect (for example, diamonds are 3-D) as it creates an image of those domains that excludes the formal qualities of things (such as the fact that diamonds are clear, hard and sparkly). Things, such as commodities, are language-like in some respects and the use of a Saussureanesque linguistic model to understand consumption has generated insights and a deeper understand of the role that commodities play in contemporary society. However, commodities as signs are meaning carrying, embodied *things* and so have an ontological ordering and pool of formal qualities that are different than those fully abstract entities

¹⁶⁸ This distinction had been anticipated by Polish linguists Kruszewski and Baudouin de Courtenay when they foresaw the need for two kinds of scientific investigations for poetry: one to explore sound patterns (phonology) and the other to look at meaning (phonemics) (Jameson, 1972: 16).

such as certain words or sounds and as such need to be understood through a semiotic that can capture those qualities. In looking at the meaning of commodities, the model of signification needs to embrace the material dimension of things.

The Code: Langue and Parole:

The sign is comprised of two elements, the signifier and the signified and the relationship between them is arbitrary and conventional. Units of language (phoneme, morpheme, sign, word, sentence) consist of binary, oppositional pairs which exist at the level of *langue* (*system*) and are expressed as manifestations at the level of *parole* (*utterance*). There is a peculiar theoretical implication to Saussure's formatting the study of language as synchronic: parole represents real time, individual manifestations of langue, whereby langue must exist prior to parole. At the same time, there is no accounting for diachronic dynamics, so how langue emerges and changes is underdetermined. Ironically, actual studies of langue must always and can only be extrapolated, back-engineered as it were from instances of parole. But according to Saussure, parole emerges from an a priori system of differences that it lacks temporality and allows no problematizing/explanation for change. *La langue* is a shared, uber code of significance that exists prior to and outside of the individual. Saussure dismisses variations in parole as imperfections in articulation, and promotes langue as the correct object of linguistic study.

In the Saussurean model, linguistics is properly a synchronic study of an abstract system of differences. Signifieds are connected in a network of differences represented by signifiers whose forms are totally arbitrary: there is no space in such a platform for "motivated" signs in which the form of the signifying vehicle should be considered. In

terms of language, these claims are not completely acceptable. For example, explaining instances of i.e. onomatopoeia (/rib it/ in English refers to the frog's song), which appear to be partly conventional (the frog's song is /gwak/ in German) but are partially motivated by the signified to which they purport to refer, would require some modification of the overall platform. Context specific signifiers, words such as "this" and "that" or pronouns, are also underexplained by the Saussurean notion of code.

The efficacy of language in this model is contingent upon its users sharing a code of signification. Because Saussure was working at the level of defining the proper object of study for linguists and then working out that definition at the level of phonemes, issues related to the application of his work to more complicated linguistic entities such as a poem or a novel were left for others. It cannot answer such questions as to what extent are linguistic codes actually shared? How can idiosyncrasy and innovation be explained? How can new, creative, even revolutionary texts be produced, much less read and understood? As a model, structural linguistics has generated insight: influenced by Durkheim, Anglo and French structuralists and post-structuralists (Barthes 1957, 1983; Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Levi-Strauss, Sahlins 19xx) privilege the ways in which the meanings of objects can be understood by virtue of shared codes of oppositions.

Post-structuralists have addressed some of the limitations associated with using structuralist linguistics as a model for culture such as its ahistoricity, overly narrow dualism, and lack of capability to deal with political inequalities, and responded to these deficiencies by investigating and reformulating the basic terms of the Saussurean sign. Post-structuralist scholars have made much of the issue of meaning assignment, that is to say the way in which hegemonic parties may attempt to, successfully or not, fix meaning

of signifiers (one of the primary activities undertaken by the advertising industry). Recognition of the slippage that exists between signifier and signified in structuralist theories of language, theories of language which are predicated on the idea that language is a referential activity, has brought to the fore a number of important advances having to do with language and relations of power, temporality and the construction of the subject.

APPENDIX II “GIRL’S BEST FRIEND,” BY JAY-Z

The lyrics to An ode to Diamonds by Jay-Z plays off of “Diamonds are a girl’s best friend.”

Jigga man Swizz Beats
History in the making part three
Lights out ladies!
Chorus: (2x)
C'mon here baby you drive me crazy (to all my baby thugs)
Don't want nobody but you my baby (and all my ladies sing)
Hold me tight and call me your lady (say it louder)
Let me scream your name
I took ya outta Jacob's in clusters
Busters they wanted to rush us
Love the way you sparkle when the sun touch ya
When you blush you turn blue if your grade is right
You can light up the whole room, turning day from night
When the summertime is in and the tops are down
With you around my neck we lock the whole block down (that's right)
It took shortsleeves and loungin' to understand
The reason they call you ice, everybody freeze
Ain't a pendant in the sun who can shine like you
And that platinum in the charm who can blind like you
The direct reason why niggas do they crimes they do
I used to snatch the necklace right off them reckless fools
Just I was jealous that they was so next to you
So I devoted half my time to invest in you
The other half was spent on protecting you
Cause you belong to me, now sing ya song for me
C'mon
Chorus 2x
I'm often with you so they wonder bout the juice I got
I took you from the projects and an abusive pops
From the bottom to the top
The skateboard to the drop
From the nada to the Prada
I got ya like I got ya
From the first time I put you round my neck and locked ya
It was then I knew everywhere I went you'd follow
Soon I spent every dolla you became my habit
other brothers bites was smoke, mines was carats
The more checks I got the more I laced my crew

The rocks got bigger, watch face got blue
Tricked a little bit, shit I lace my Boo
Fuck it, my mistress I laced her too
Cop my jewels twice, like deja vu
If they ever met in the mall, it's ova ya'll
Just the way I do, and either way you win
I mean the thugs love ya when your girl's best friend
Chorus 2x
And the wedding band you love
In the gold chain you thug
Sometimes you given just because
And the tennis bracelet means they want relations
Know that they wanna fuck the only reason they give you up
In the hands of goldiggas you never enough
Rings, things, just never enough
With me and you together gon shine to the end
I mean the thugs love ya but ya girls best friend
Chorus til end

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