

Alchemy of cultures:

From adaptation to transcendence in design and branding

by Mario Gagliardi

In this comparison of Western and Asian perspectives, Mario Gagliardi analyzes differences in each culture's understanding of uniqueness, copying, the integration of external influences, and the inclusion of consumer perceptions within the design process. Insights such as these become important as corporations try to create products and brands that have meaning—functional, cultural, mythical, symbolic, and ethical meaning—around the world.



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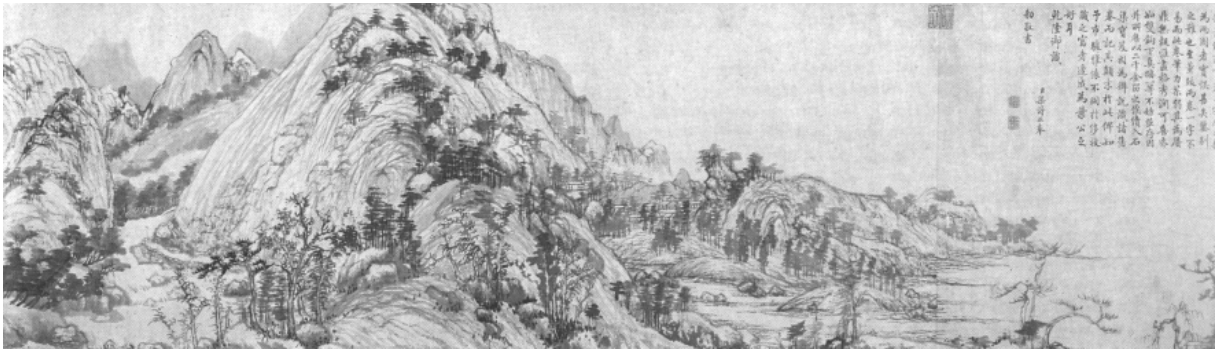
“It may be that I am the only one who sees the sky black at night and the stars white, and everybody else sees the sky white and the stars shining black. And I say the sky is black, and they say the sky is black; but when they say black they mean white.”

Charles Cogsworth, the hero of R. A. Lafferty's story “Through Other Eyes,” goes on to try out his invention, a cerebral scanner that can connect two brains so that he can truly see through others' eyes. Until this stunning machine has been invented, we can only speculate about how that would feel. But this has been a preoccupation of humans for decades. Goethe said that in encountering the “other,” one sees a mirror of oneself. For his part,

Oscar Wilde once wrote that if an artist wants to achieve a “Japanese effect,” he should not act like a tourist and travel to Tokyo, but instead study the masters of Japanese art at home. Once the artist has done that, he will be able to see a Japanese effect while sitting in a park or strolling down Piccadilly. If he can't see it then, says Wilde, he won't see it anywhere.

And the philosopher Jean Baudrillard reminds us that the other is not so much a problem of distance as of crossing a border—which can be entirely imaginary and invisible.

No matter how it is encountered, however, the other can only be imagined, seen, or transformed through our *own* eyes.



Huang Gongwang, a master artist during the Ming Dynasty.

The brand we present is all about us

Current discussions about making brands work in other cultures assume a range of taken-for-granted assumptions: that a brand will work anywhere if it is sufficiently adapted and stays sufficiently unique; and that this job is the exclusive province of the brand creators and the designers. This approach largely ignores the fact that a brand is a genre—that it reflects the values and beliefs of the brand originator, who is rooted in a particular culture.

When we present a brand, that presentation is all about *us*—about what cultural theorist Pierre Bourdieu calls our *habitus*—a set of values and attitudes determined by our own culture, which influences our practices.

It exposes not only what we say, but also what we *want* the story to say. Brands are not isolated from other communication genres—we employ our knowledge of other forms of communication to make sense of brands. Thus brands may also expose what we want them to hide—remember the flap over Nike’s third-world labor policies and the furor over Shell Oil’s attempt to sink its Brent Spar drill platform?

Communication always draws upon previously learned meanings and contexts, which are different from culture to culture. Consumers in other cultures are quite creative in recontextualizing brands and products in meaning and use. For instance, McDonald’s hamburgers are a hip “prestige” food in Russia. TV sets are a prestige item in large parts of India, though they’re widely used as a babysitting device in northern Europe. In another example, Electrolux found out that its prototype of an “Internet refrigerator” was used as a central point for the family to exchange messages—not as a device for ordering food or looking up recipes, which was the origi-

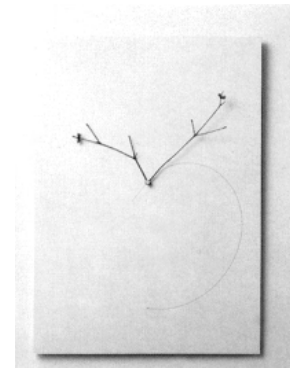
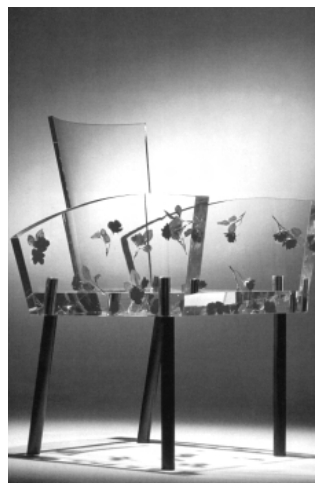
nal concept behind that product.

This kind of creativity does not lie in creating something entirely new, but in altering what already exists to fit it into cultural and functional frames of reference. Creativity is therefore not a protected domain for professional designers; it is a human factor shared by all cultures.

The uniqueness trap

Our conception of creation is aggravated by our understanding of *uniqueness*. In the nineteenth century, for instance, the separation of applied art and fine art was accompanied by the bourgeois invention of the artist as a representative of the spiritual value of life, the genius delivering replacement ideals for the masses. The artist at that time was supposed to deliver new ideals that would gradually replace the diminishing ideals employed by court and church with those of the emerging middle class.

Authenticity was bound to the single, ideal-



Left: “Miss Blanche” chair, 1988. “I feel attracted to transparent materials because transparency doesn’t belong to any place in particular, and yet it exists”—Shiro Kuramata, *Domus* No.694, April 1984. Right: “Just in Time” watch by Shiro Kuramata.



Wang Yuanqui, a master during the Ching dynasty. The landscape is a Bang painting in the style of Huang Gongwang.

ized, artistic individual. The “original,” embodying the mythical genius of the originator, increased in value, while reproduction was devalued into the new category of applied and decorative arts. This divided what was originally a holistic notion of art through its invention of a myth that defines one thing as superior to another thing. The definition of “fine” art as superior to “decorative” art required the invention of the “genius” artist who is superior to the decorator and craftsman. Generally, claiming

superiority through self-defined classifications is a tactic to create power for the ones who classify.

Autographs on painting were not originally intended to confer uniqueness in the sense of unique genius. Art historian Gerald Reitlinger describes in *The Economics of Taste* that autographs were the idea of sixteenth-century painters, who bought each other’s studies “either in disinterested admiration or in order to borrow from them.” One of the first to do this was Vasari, who collected some of the drawings of the painters whose lives he described.

It is important to realize that the practices of contemporary branding and design are still largely influenced by the bourgeois myths of the nineteenth century. Uniqueness, or rather our understanding of it, is seen as a precondition to differentiation, a core element of economic survival. That’s why marketers and designers insist that their brands should be “unique”—while at the same time assuming that other cultures will have difficulty understanding them.

Consequently, brands have to be adapted for other cultures—essentially a repair of an otherwise untouched value apparatus that has to be consistent to claim hegemony. It is this inherited paradigm that contributes to inhibiting the development of alternative branding and design concepts that could more effectively respond to the needs of a global economy in the twenty-first century.

In fact, differentiation and communication with different cultures do not have to contradict each other.

It is common knowledge that design is a process. More important, however, is the realization that the designed product, and the way people in various cultures make their own creative sense of it, has to be an integral part of the same process. This requires us to redefine our notion of uniqueness, which connects to the idea of the artist-designer as the sole originator. Other disciplines—marketing, anthropology, psychology, trend research—contribute to the designer’s output in creating brands and products that must answer the needs of the market. However, at some point in the process, the designer or design team is left alone with the task of creating something out of the varied—but not unique—insights of these other disciplines. It is here, where the designer’s creativity is demanded, that he or she ultimately draws on creative influences



Left: Taiho Shrine: Guardian Lion Sculpture, 13th century. Center: Sony Aibo entertainment robot. Mechanical dolls have been in existence in Japan since the Edo period, influenced by watch mechanisms brought from Europe. Right: Westinghouse Sparky, a robot dog exhibited at the New York World's Fair, 1939.

whose scope is determined by the designer's own cultural *habitus*. This occurs in the beginning phase of the creative process, before images of products or brands are formed, and remains implicitly embedded throughout the rest of the process. The request for creating something unique as a cultural myth leaves the designer restricted to his *habitus*, since he is coerced by the mythical ethos to create out of his genius. This is not to say that there is no genius in design; however, it depends upon one's viewpoint whether you describe genius as creating something out of what is already there, or out of things yet undiscovered, or as a creation out of an idealized nowhere. In the end, the designer may come up with something that, though not unique in the strictest sense, at least *looks* different (an increasingly difficult task given the sheer number of signs, trademarks, and designs existing and added to every day for copyright protection). The Western notion of uniqueness is a mythical-cultural process trap, reducing the creative options of the designer to his *habitus* and inevitably separating the other from oneself.

In Asian culture and especially in Japan, the myth or "virus" of originality, as Baudrillard puts it, does not exist. It is taken for granted that *everything* comes from somewhere else, because everything and everybody is part of a greater whole, out of which everything can be taken, assimilated, and remade even while it retains its own cultural origins, core, and code.

From copy to synthesis

This typically Asian process is often misunderstood as copying, mimicry, and imitation, deno-

tations that themselves are cultural inventions. Peter Drucker calls it "creative imitation," which connects to the Aristotelian notion of mimesis, a *conditio humana* of learning. Mimesis includes the identification of one person with another and is different from mimicry, which has a physical, but no mental, relation. It is a creative process that springs from the *habitus* of others.

Mimesis is, however, only the beginning in a process of wider scope—what Wilde was describing when he explained how to see a "Japanese effect"—which, for instance, Chinese artists have described as being composed of three distinct steps:

Im, the artist copies the work of the master on a technical level.

Mo, the artist is required to understand the mind of the master and to depict this in a way that blends his own style with the style of the master.

And *Bang*, the artist interprets the mind of the master in his very own way: The artwork might look entirely different from the master's oeuvre, as long as it embodies his spirit. In addition, the Chinese highly valued the art of their literati, who without vocational training in art transferred their imagination into the fields of painting and calligraphy. In Western art, at least at one time, the premier way of learning

In Asian culture and especially in Japan... it is taken for granted that everything comes from somewhere else, because everything and everybody is part of a greater whole

was also through copying the master. The “originals” of Rubens or Rembrandt we see in museums were in fact made by their disciples; in a modern sense, we could describe the classic painters as creative directors.

The Chinese vocational art system, to a point, inhibits radical innovation in questioning the foundations of art, a task accomplished in parallel by “amateur” literati. On the other hand, breaking the rules of the master has been, since the turn of the century, increasingly demanded from the artist in the West.

The design training offered in most schools gives the aspiring designer some insight into art and design history. The learning process, however, stops after school, when the Western designer-artist is required to be an instant genius even in the service of “learning organizations.”

In contrast, the Japanese process explicitly keeps the culture, and thus the designer within, open to and indeed actively seeking out other cultural influences. Thus not only the design process, but also every design result is just another transient, ephemeral step in an ongoing process of embracing, learning, playing, and synthesizing. Meanwhile, the Western-assumed *ultimate* result from the collaborative efforts of design genius and science is frozen in time, even when that result is valid for only a moment before the competition introduces the *next* ultimate result.

One feature of Japanese culture is the embrace of the different in order to rejuvenate itself. There is a built-in cultural hegemony in Japan. This is unlike the Western notion of cultural protectionism, which ultimately extends to the Western understanding of consistency in brands and design. The Japanese concept creates hegemony out of the other, maintaining a Japanese cultural core. The hegemony and con-

sistency needed for the success of brands and product identities is created not by the protection against, but by the assimilation of, the “other.”

The other, in Japanese culture, is also a *floating signifier*—that is, a concept that acquires its meaning through attachment to other concepts. A floating signifier can be attached flexibly to different conceptual entities, resulting in different meanings. This can be seen, for instance, in the Japanese embrace of newer myths such as high technology, in the phenomenon in Japanese youth culture of trans-gender styling, and in other figures in Japanese popular culture such as the characters in *manga* comics, which change often from machines to humans and from robots to animals. They are hybrids of old and new, Eastern and Western mythologies.

Creating a new element

Baudrillard states that the miracle of otherness lies exactly in realizing that it comes from somewhere else.

Japanese, more than others, learned the trick of incorporating ideas of other cultures into their own by a process of domestication. Like Chinese lettering and Korean pottery, Western concepts have been domesticated to the point that Japanese now regard Austrian *wiener schnitzel* (*dongatsu*) and pizza as parts of their culture. Similar processes happen in every culture, but it is most apparent in Japan. In eighteenth-century Europe, for instance, Japonaiserie was a most fashionable style of decorating, but it never became assimilated as something European.

This is not to say that there is no distinguishing aesthetic core in Japanese culture. The arrangement of rocks in a Zen garden or a Japanese ink painting well represent the Japanese



Left: Sendan Katsubal, an exorcist from Japanese mythology. Right: Daigenko, a hybrid manga hero.

emphasis on the minimal, the detail as part of the whole, and the ideal moment of creation finding the perfect transient place and shape in space.

And this is not to say that there is no intercultural design inspiration in the West. Certainly, American designers draw inspiration from Achille Castiglioni, and French designers from Bauhaus. Design ideas are exchanged, altered, and domesticated in different cultural frameworks, supporting images that change, as well. The crucial difference is that Asian art and the Asian artist are aware of the interplay of influence and one's own creation to a rather defined degree. A Japanese designer knows when he works on cultural terrain that is not his own. For instance, there is a Parisian cultural hegemony on fashion.¹ To work in these fields and be successful in the West, a Japanese designer has to understand the Paris fashion habitus. Yet Kenzo's and Miyake's designs are anything but copies. They are syntheses that transcend cultures to create entirely new viewpoints.

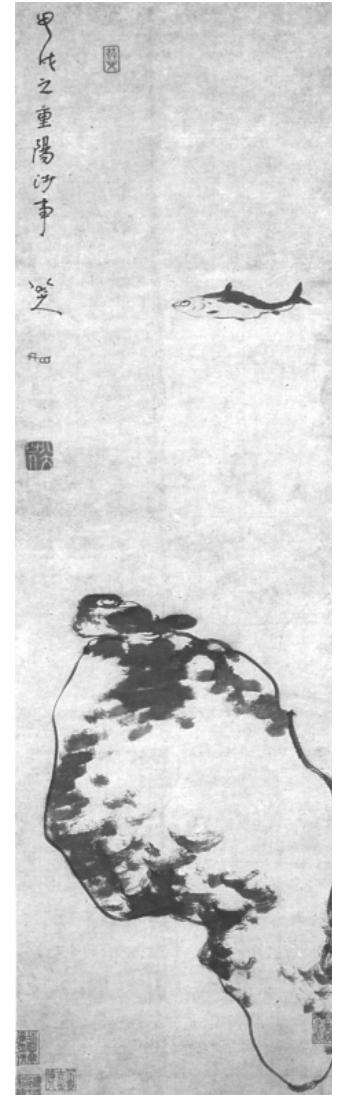
This point of highest refinement creates a chemical change in the elements of cultural influence—a combination that creates a new element. In contrast, the Western approach of adaptation or repair creates a physical change by adding elements that can be subtracted again: a mixture, not a new element. The Sony Walkman, for example, is a synthesis of Japanese aesthetic-cultural traits expressed in functional miniaturization and the inclusion of emerging Western consumer trends toward mobility and independence. Since 1979, Sony has designed more than 600 variations of the Walkman, constantly recreating the product and brand culture it founded by including new technologies and lifestyle trends from different destination cultures and segments.

Conclusions for design management

I do not intend to state that the West should imitate the Japanese approach. Neither is the Japanese approach in practice free of contradictions and fallacy, nor can a *habitus* be truly replicated since it is a deeply embedded cultural factor. However, what can be learned from the Japanese model is an attitude of embracing other cultural fields and an awareness throughout the design process of these as something valuable. And this is recognized not as a series

of strokes of genius, but instead as a process of ongoing learning from and playing (as part of learning) with influences and notions, with the goal of continuous improvement through strategic creative stretch. Design management must deliberately expand world-views, and one way to do this is to make the Japanese process explicit and transparent. It should be seen as a learning process that has the advantage of building in the elements of the other as benchmarks for one's own—starting with mimesis and leading to interpretation, synthesis, and the possible creation of a chemical change, a “new element.” As a welcome effect, it can communicate to the other by inclusion.

However, the Western approach of searching for the radically new by breaking old rules is also essential for innovation; it is a process that has to be made explicit instead of being ousted into a creative reservation for indigenous designers. Moreover, the domain of the design process has to be extended. The creativity of the recipient—the consumer, if you like—in changing contexts and meanings has to be included as a part of the design process, to be fed back to the design creators, supporting a double-loop



Zhu Da, an avant-garde master of 1697; he was not influenced by previous masters.



Zen garden in the Ryoan-ji temple in Kyoto, founded 1473.

1. Dorinne Kondo, “Aesthetics and Politics in Fashion,” *Re-made in Japan*, ed. J.J. Tobin (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 178.

An analytical framework for cultural fit

Styles of recontextualization vary from culture to culture, depending on the differences between the culture of the design origin and the culture of destination, as well as social trends and larger patterns of history and power. Stories abound of brands and products whose names had a negative meaning in another country or whose colors did not appeal to other cultures. These effects are, however, only a fraction of the mayhem that can happen when design crosses cultural borders. Checking a brand presentation for possible incompatibilities with other cultures will, of course, help to make it more adaptable. Bear in mind, though, that because cultural assumptions are built implicitly into the core of a brand, you may have to go deeper, into your own worldview, approach, and practice, to truly arrive at a solution.

The framework is a system divided into five basic and interacting levels: functional, cultural, mythical, symbolic, and ethical. However, all these levels are subject to other contexts of power and history, time aspects (trends), marketing (perceptions of customer segments), and individual psychological aspects. Generally, though, technical and aesthetic patterns are more easily adopted by other cultures, while customs and moral concepts, including concepts of what constitutes norms and values, are more resistant to acceptance.²

2. J. Eicher, "Dress, identity, culture, and choice: The complex act of dress." In C. M. Ladisch, ITAA Proceedings, International Textile and Apparel Association, 1995, pp. 8-11.

Analytical framework for cultural fit

Level:	deals with:	Analyze:
Functional	Technological function Aesthetics Situation Buying power	Is it working on a technical, ergonomic, aesthetic, situational and economical level?
Cultural	Norms Gender issues Value systems	Is it compatible with customs, norms, values and widely held beliefs ?
Mythical	Beliefs about function and look, prestige, culture of origin	How is it believed to work and look? Does it have prestige? Does its culture of origin have prestige?
Symbolic	Degree of brand awareness	Does it possess an occupied value set which is replaced by itself ?
Ethical	Ethical stance	Does it respect environmental, socio-cultural and local cultural values?

creative learning process. The design process thus ends with the creativity of the consumer in a given culture, not with the *habitus*-determined creativity of the professional designer, making designer outputs—products and brands—parts of the design process rather than ultimate results.

Charles Cogsworth, the fictional hero of "Through Others' Eyes," needed six weeks in a sanatorium after having tried his cerebral scanner, so shockingly different was the world as seen through other eyes. In order for his machine to be mass-produced for the commercial market, he finds he must build into it a filter to soften the shock of understanding his fellow humans. R.A. Lafferty ends his story by saying: "There is something shattering about sudden, perfect understanding." ■

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Suggested Readings

Baudrillard, Jean, and Guillaume, Marc, « L'autre, ailleurs », *Figures de l'altérité* (Paris : Edition Descartes, 1992).

Lafferty, R. A., "Through Other Eyes," in *Nine Hundred Grandmothers* (Gillette, NJ: Wildside Press, 1999).

Schirato, Tony, and Susan Yell, *Communication and Culture—An Introduction* (New York: Sage Publishers, 2000).

Tobin, Joseph J., *Re-made in Japan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992)

www.kozen.com: Fashion designer Kenzo's Web site, a synthesis of design and culture

The functional level

This level determines if a product is working in technical, aesthetic, situational, and economic terms in another culture. Shampoo, for instance, comes in small sachets in the Philippines, where the average consumer has a low buying power, and in large bottles in Korea, where consumers are affluent and want quantity and quality (economic and technical factors).

While Filipinos prefer bright colors, Koreans prefer more subtle tones (aesthetic factors). In Japan, quality is associated with small and expensive packaging in pure colors (economic and aesthetic factors). Make-up cosmetics for Japan and Korea have to emphasize paleness, which is considered to be the ideal of beauty there, while for pale Europeans they have to emphasize a slightly tanned look (technical and aesthetic factors). Shops in developing countries are often lacking space. Here it pays off to deliver an appropriate, eye-catching display for your product (situational factors).

The cultural level

This aspect of the framework determines whether there is a cultural compatibility with the culture of destination; it deals with deeply engraved social and cultural patterns, gender issues, customs, and rituals, which change only over the course of generations. An important influencing factor is field dependence, which determines the degree to which people in a given culture refer to significant others in society for referencing appropriate beliefs and behavior.

In the example of Wella, a globally operating German hair-care company, the global marketing center carried out extensive market research for a new hair-color product for men that can be easily washed out. While it worked well in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, Spanish and Portuguese markets were not as receptive. American men were also rather lukewarm to the product, and in Asia and South America there was no interest at all. What were the reasons?

South America's macho culture eschewed the notion of dyeing hair. A man is a man, and dyeing hair is considered to be a female pastime. In Asia, where older men regularly dye their graying hair severely black, the product was considered not strong enough. In the US, where Bill Clinton was president, gray hair had become a sign of sophistication.

The mythical level

The mythical level determines if a product is believed to look good, to work well, or to be so superior as to have prestige value. The perceived image of the culture of origin is also important here. A Mercedes, made in Germany, is believed to work reliably and to have prestige value, all of which is compressed into a symbolic value that transfers easily to other cultures. A lesser-known Japanese electronics brand is believed to work well, even though it has less prestige than other brands and no symbolic value. Chinese-produced electronics do not yet offer much mythical value in other cultures. In the longer term, however, Chinese design may accrue its own value and accumulate prestige, just as Japanese design has since the 1950s, and thus be elevated on the mythical level.

The symbolic level³

It is possible for an organization over time to create a brand that replaces previously defined value sets with itself, thus becoming an entity that is most resistant to different value perceptions in different cultures. Lexus cars, for instance, did not replace other luxury brands, but were able to occupy a value territory close to (among others) Mercedes-Benz—though only in the US. In Europe, apparently, the symbolic brand value of Mercedes-Benz is more resistant to attacks.

A symbolic brand does not necessarily have to be prestigious, as long as it successfully occupies and defends a defined value territory. For instance, McDonald's occupies a value set that could be defined as "American fast food that is a good value for the price, reliable, and of consistent quality." Still, this value set is sensitive to interpretations by different cultures. McDonald's is a "prestige" food in Russia. Occupation and defense of a value territory is not easy, as for instance the success of Lexus in establishing itself in the densely populated luxury-car category shows. A territory in the value landscape can also become obsolete with shifts in technology and culture, thus devaluing any brand that cannot transfer its bonus to the new landscape.

It should be noted that any one of the levels in this framework can be overruled by others. The French farmer who attacked a McDonald's outlet in France became a national hero when he protested against this alleged ignorance of the local community (ethical level), supported by the proud French food culture (cultural and mythical levels). Kikkoman, Japan's premier brand of soy sauce, is much boycotted in Korea, which still suffers from the memory of Japanese military occupation (here, negative historical connotations in a larger context destroy value on the mythical and cultural levels).

The ethical level

This level concerns consumer perceptions in different cultures. Brands are more likely to be valued and regarded when the organization behind them shows responsibility toward socio-economic, cultural, and environmental issues, and can lose value when organizations have problems with these issues. Augmented values, or the "glow" of brands—what the novelist Neal Stevenson calls *loglo*⁴—can become powerful enough to make branded goods into fetishes. Witness, for instance, Nike sneakers that are targeted at black kids whose parents sometimes cannot afford them. They can even affect cultural habits, as McDonald's has effectively done by changing the eating patterns of South Africans.⁵ These effects embody serious ethical problems in dealing with certain customer segments and the increasing homogenization effects of globalization.

3. Brands on this level are often referred to as "iconic" brands; however, I prefer to call them symbolic, according to Peirce's definition of semantic terms. I think that's an important point, as semantic terms are often confused when it comes to branding.

4. Neal Stevenson, *Snow Crash* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), p.7.

5. Steve Jones, in R. Clifton & F. Maughan's *The Future of Brands* (New York: McMillan, 2000), p. 43.