Love®: Kevin Roberts’ *Lovemarks* as a Critical Reading Engagement

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Abstract

Critical Management Studies challenge the ‘received’ knowledge contained in the texts on which established management theory and practice is constructed. Much of critical management is perceived to be ‘difficult’ — esoteric and complex — by our colleagues of a more technical/positivist bent, not to mention the problems manager/practitioners have in accessing our material. Yet managers are text dependent: the theory they enact draws on both popular and academic texts; and texts, written and spoken, are what managers do. Our paper argues that if managers were offered accessible strategies of textual interpretation they would be empowered in two ways: they would more readily recognise the differences, exclusions, ambiguities, hegemonies and hierarchies that language (and visual strategies) betray; and if cognisance leads to an enriched scope of perceived responsibilities then management practice would become more balanced and ultimately more ethical.

Working with a scriptive reading method (Monin, 2004), and having selected a sample text for analysis, Global CEO of Saatchi and Saatchi, Kevin Roberts’ recent book on branding strategy Lovemarks (2004), our paper demonstrates the deeper and/or alternative sense-making that scriptive reading supports. Scriptive reading works with a 3-step approach to text analysis: a first, dominant or standard, reading is followed by a critical reading (based on any one, or a combination of, a variety of epistemological approaches to text-interpretation) of the same text, and the process is completed by a reflexive commentary on the text and subtexts uncovered in the first two readings. We follow this process as we read and re-read the same text, noting and
highlighting the basic principles of defamiliarisation that we have employed; the strategies that enable readers to ‘stand back’ from the text and view its potential meaning from different perspectives. We include in our scriptive reading process a satirical re-write of the original text in which we demonstrate how exaggeration, juxtaposition and wit highlight aspects of sub-texts and surface meaning.
Introduction

Critical Management Studies challenges the ‘received’ knowledge contained in the texts on which established management theory and practice is constructed. Much of critical management is perceived to be ‘difficult’ — esoteric and complex — by our colleagues of a more technical/positivist bent, not to mention the problems manager/practitioners have in accessing our material. Yet managers are text dependent: the theory they enact draws on both popular and academic texts; and texts, written and spoken, are what managers do. Our paper argues that if managers were offered accessible strategies of textual interpretation they would be empowered in two ways: they would more readily recognise the differences, exclusions, ambiguities, hegemonies and hierarchies that language (and visual strategies) betray; and if cognisance leads to an enriched scope of perceived responsibilities then management practice would become more balanced and ultimately more ethical.

Our paper demonstrates a method of textual interpretation that enables readers to distinguish three of the levels on which we can probably agree that textual interpretation engages. We work with the notion that our first, spontaneous reader-response is emotionally geared to the rhetorics playing through the text, and so we expect that most other readers will casually concur with our first interpretation. Moving to our second reading, we bring in critical theory that suggests aspects of the text that we could usefully unpack, and then explore the subtexts, assumptions and ideologies that our theory exploration has pointed to. In an attempt to dramatise the insidious power of these partially concealed messages we offer a re-presentation of the original author’s intended meaning-making in which we exaggerate the emotional manipulation in contention here. In a third and final exploration of our reader-
response, we reflect on the meaning-making that we, as individual and to some extent unique readers, have contributed to our critical analysis and reconstructed text.

We have chosen to subject Kevin Roberts’ (2004) recent book on marketing strategy *Lovemarks: The future beyond brands*, to this reading strategy. We chose Roberts’ because the author is the CEO (Global) of Saatchi and Saatchi (S & S), an influential marketing firm that has recently rebranded itself as an ‘ideas company’. In this best-selling business book Roberts argues that some products are loved and that organizations need to develop a relationship with their consumers based on this product-love. If Roberts’ thesis marks out a moment in the development of symbolic economies - the commoditization of love itself as something that can be bought and sold on the market – then it deserves some serious critical attention.

But we are also targeting this book because as critical management academics, we aim to demonstrate a method of critical practice that enables managers and management students to engage with the technical discourse of management in a way that develops critical thinking. We see this engagement as a move towards more reflective and ethical practice by managers. More precisely, we hope to show that critical management scholarship can be made accessible to management practice.

Because our paper is structured around the 3-stage scriptive reading method (Monin, 2004) outlined above, we have selected one sample chapter from Roberts’ book for analysis. We first offer a dominant or standard interpretation of it, a reading with which we would expect non-critical readers to be in accord. When we move to our second, critical, reading we focus on alternative approaches to understandings of ‘love’ in contemporary society, underpinned by some critical reading on the subject of love. Because the type of love under consideration here is the love for objects, and because the Lovemark is said by Roberts to have properties of ‘mystery, sensuality
and intimacy’, (Roberts 2004:74) we discuss Marx’s thoughts on commodity fetishism and Freud’s on sexual fetishism. Before concluding this section we offer a reconstruction of the central theme of Roberts’ text, a romanticisation of the love of objects. Our re-write is a satire in which we play with exaggeration, juxtaposition and wit in order to pull up aspects of the sub-texts buried in Roberts’ chapter and surface meaning. Finally we provide a reflexive commentary on our critical reading and reconstruction. Here we note and comment on the basic principles of defamiliarisation that we have employed; the reading strategies that have enabled us to ‘stand back’ from the text and view its potential meaning from a different perspective; and we share a little of our experience of working with this critical method. When guiding students across the straits dividing critical theory and management practice we have worked with defamiliarisation as a developmental strategy because we have found that humour in the classroom encourages a simultaneous distancing and identification. We have often been delighted by their carnivalesque re-presentations of familiar texts, and so we share some examples of their inventions before concluding the paper.

**Lovemarks: A Dominant Reading**

*Lovemarks* has been both aggrandised and vilified in the popular press and by marketers (Dixon, 2004, "Lovemarks", 2005- see the Lovemarks website for media coverage of the book’s launch in various countries around the globe; Moore, 2004; Wilson, 2004). Kevin Roberts is an Englishman who, though he originates from Manchester, and now works in New York, calls New Zealand home. His book is a blend of “autobiography and self-help business guide” (Dixon, 2004), and in it he
discusses his vision of a world where consumers are no longer motivated by brand loyalty, but by “lovemarks” – emotional attachments to products and services.

Basically Roberts’ argument is that there is a high degree of similarity in terms of quality of goods and services produced by contemporary organizations. In the future therefore the distinguishing feature of successful products and services will be an outcome of the ability of the organization to engender a genuine, emotional, consumer attachment to the product. A successful emotional attachment will be denoted a lovemark. The core component of the lovemark is ‘respect’, without which there is no chance of a love relationship, and the hallmarks of a lovemark are ‘mystery, sensuality and intimacy’. Examples of lovemarks provided by Roberts include Marmite, Cambridge University, Nike, Starbucks, Lego and McDonalds, and he explains that any product or service can be assessed by its location on a love/respect axis. Goods and services having low love, low respect ratings are commodities; those with low respect and high love are classified as fads. High respect and low love products are brands. But, if your product is high in love and high in respect then it has the status of being a lovemark (Roberts, 2004, p. 146 — 149).

So, the idea behind the lovemark is fairly simple and straightforward. In what follows we look at one page from Chapter 7 of the book, ‘Beautiful Obsession’. On this page (see Illustration 1) Roberts outlines his concept the Lovemark and identifies its components. The chapter opens with a colourful picture of a young European man, wearing glasses and looking nerdy, trimming a topiary with a pair of tiny scissors. The man is peering intensely at the green luscious bush. On the next page the chapter’s text begins: “Lovemarks made immediate sense”. Previous chapters have provided the ‘story’ of how the idea of lovemarks came to fruition, and so this paragraph continues: “Every person we deal with is an emotional human being and
yet business had been treating them like numbers. Targets. Statistics.” Roberts is making an obvious statement — we are all emotional - but he changes tack in the middle of the sentence. He detaches himself from previous business practice (not marketing note) to draw attention to the distance that separates the emotional and the technical. In the past, he asserts, business (not marketers) have treated the consumer with disrespect. The imagery is of the dead consumer (targets), completely passive and inert (statistics). The consumer has been nothing but numbers and objects in a callous business discourse.

The second paragraph begins, “Respect was something that Saatchi and Saatchi understood”. Here S & S are drawn as an organization worthy of long-term love and this is reinforced in the second sentence also, “Over the years we had put a lot of time building our clients’ products into some of the most highly respected brands in the world”. Roberts’ association with Saatchi and Saatchi is crucial and throughout the book his own role as a hero in the building of brands and S & S’s ‘premier’ place as a creative ideas firm that had gone ‘beyond marketing’ is emphasized. Roberts builds his own reputation along with that of the company as he continues to tell a story in which he and his company are mythologised: “Now it was time to focus on what made some brands stand out from the crowd. What made some brands Loved”, for the inspirational stories of loved brands are about S & S clients. Love is capitalised.

In the next paragraph the three characteristics of the Lovemark are centred and colourfully placed in the middle of the page with a generous amount of white space around them. The large typeface emphasizes the aesthetic properties of the words and concepts: “Mystery, Sensuality, Intimacy.” Again, the difference between brands that are Lovemarks and ‘the others’, those which are not lovemarks, is
emphasized. But lovemarks are also surprising, “These didn’t sound like traditional brand attributes”, for the quality of being ‘surprising’, is an essential quality for a ‘living’ relationship, and of mystery: “they captured the new emotional connections we were seeking.”

Absolute belief is also an essential component of love — the wild leap of faith that goes beyond logic is an essential component of Roberts’ argument regarding Lovemarks. No doubt is allowed — there is only absolute certainty. So the next paragraph is in larger type face and bolded to make it also stand out from the page, and from the rest of the text: “Lovemarks are not owned by the manufacturers, the producers, the businesses. They are owned by the people who love them.”

Here again we are faced with another flip from the logical expectation built into the previous paragraph where we are told that Lovemarks originated at S & S and with Roberts. Apparently not. In direct contradiction and denial of this expectation, we are now told that the idea originates with the consumer, the sovereign democratic and impartial bestower of value in consumer society: “From there it was easy to agree that you only get to be a Lovemark when the people who love you tell you so. But just sitting around waiting for consumers to tell you you’re a Lovemark could mean a very long wait”.

What? Yet another flip in logic? but as Lovemarks are beyond logic, this too is not surprising. We were told in the previous paragraph that consumers bestow the Lovemark, but now the consumer’s passivity is implied. We are now to see the consumer as passive, for “Love is about action”, and the action must come from the business.

This is clearly a masculine style of love. The male must make love to the supine and uninterested female. “It’s about creating a meaningful relationship. It’s a
constant process of keeping in touch, working with consumers, understanding them, spending time with them.” And in the final coup de grace the word ‘marketers’ appears: it is the role of the organization to be the lover “And this is what insightful marketers, empathetic designers, and smart people on the checkout and production line do every day.” The scene is set and Roberts has readied us “to create our principles”.

The next pages of this chapter continue to develop the ‘principles’ underlying the Lovemark: “Be passionate”, “Involve Customers”, “Celebrate Loyalty”, “Find, tell, & retell great stories”, and “Accept responsibility”. In the story that he tells in this chapter, Roberts asks his own question “What makes a truly great love stand out?” and then answers it: It has three characteristics, mystery, sensuality and intimacy and to each he assigns properties.

**Mystery** consists of great stories, mystery involves the past, present and future, mystery taps into dreams, myths and icons, and mystery provides inspiration. It is seen as being an important component of love because when you know everything there is nothing left to discover. Mystery keeps you going back for more and “keeps you guessing” (Roberts, 2004).

**Sensuality** consists of sound, sight, smell, touch and taste. It is “the fast track to human emotions” and the design, sensual aspects of objects are overtly exaggerated above and beyond the use aspects of the object “…it makes sense that the crucial elements of design, scent, texture and flavour — things that appeal directly to the senses — will influence your response over and above the more ‘rational’ product arguments (better, stronger, newer, cheaper …) (“Lovemarks”, 2005).

**Intimacy** consists of commitment, empathy and passion. For a Lovemark to have the capacity to bring intimacy to its relationship with the consumer the
organisation must demonstrate commitment, empathy and passion and touch “directly on the personal aspirations and inspirations of consumers” ("Lovemarks", 2005).

The remainder of this chapter and the rest of the book provide many examples of ‘inspirational’ stories about products and services and further development of this key idea. The tone of the chapters is excitable, and the book uses a variety of visual strategies (including many photographic images of iconic people, products and places) to bring attention to its message. The medium is the message (McLuhan, 1964/1994), but Roberts himself gets so excited at one point he free associates, claiming:

“This was exciting. If Lovemarks could step up to this level, they would become the ultimate premium-profit generators. Darwin would have got it right off. Fish to lizard. Monkey to man. Brand to Lovemark. An evolutionary stairway to heaven.” (p. 78)

With marketing or advertising elevated to the status of demigod, we can really read no further. It is time to fall back into a critical frame. We have more than enough to work with.

INSERT ILLUSTRATION ABOUT HERE

Illustration 1: Page 74 Lovemarks: The future beyond brands
Love: A Critical Reading

There are so many sorts of love that one does not know where to seek a definition of it. The name ‘love’ is given boldly to a caprice of a few days’ duration; to a sentiment devoid of esteem; to a casual liaison; to the affections of a ‘cicisbeo’; to a frigid habit; to a romantic fantasy; to relish followed by prompt disrelish; yes, people give this name to a thousand chimeras” (Voltaire cited in De Rougemont, 2003)

In Lovemarks, love of the object, characterised by mystery, sensuality and intimacy, draws on a discourse of physical romantic love between people. Our critical discussion of Lovemarks begins with a discussion of romantic love, and then moves to an exploration how we conceive of our feelings (including love) towards objects. Because the love of objects (and we do not wish to deny the gorgeous lovability of many beautiful things) is imbedded in a commodity culture of conspicuous consumption, we then move on to argue that Lovemarks is not just shallow in its conception of love, but is disturbing. In doing so we draw on writings about love that discuss the sensuous, mysterious and intimate attributes of objects, but we also rely on the critical theories of Marx and Freud when writing about commodity fetishism and sexual fetishism. In this discussion we attempt to pull up into view the ‘secret’ qualities of the fetished desirable object, and in the final section of our critical reading, we reconstruct, as ‘unmanageable consumers’ (Autonome-afrika-gruppe, 2002; Gabriel & Lang, 1995), our own mythology of a Lovemark product. The focus of our reconstruction is that most fetished desirable object of them all: the shoe, and we do so in the form of a Dear Abby letter.
Romantic Love

Love is surely the most complex, intriguing and puzzling of our emotions. Philosophers, artists of all persuasions, and scientists (social and biological), have all tried to explain love, and evoke it. According to De Rougemont (2003) there are five distinguishable groups of ideas which have been called ‘love’ in philosophical discourses in western civilizations. These are: first, that love is the generative principle of the Cosmos, hence the very being of God and creativity; second, that love is friendship, an attachment to other creatures and a yearning for others which can be benevolent, educative, transformative, admiring, or exalting; third, that love is an emotional attraction where love is a ‘power’ which ‘possesses’ a person with physiological, psychological or mythical force; fourth, that love is the torment of a wilfully chosen passion involving eroticism and desire; and finally, that love is an instinct — it leads to sexual relations and is prompted by the instinctive desire to procreate.

For the ancient Greeks, love was about the passion for ideas amongst men, and love with women existed only outside of marriage (an institution reserved for state sponsored procreation). Love can be seen to be intrinsically caught up with ideas about death as illustrated in the mythical tale of Tristan and Isolde, and in Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet; but death and love are still recognizable in our attitudes to and experience of love, marriage and courtship. There is also a relationship between love and hate as Freud points out: love makes us vulnerable to loss and to our dependence upon another — someone who is ‘not me’ and who has the ability to take love away. So, at the height of being in love “the boundary between ego and object threatens to melt away” and along with this comes an unconscious fear
we have about the annihilation of life (cited in Gilmore, 2005, p. 88). Merging with ‘the other’ is like death, involving as it does the loss of the self in the anticipation of the other. Barthes, when describing how someone prepares for a romantic encounter, evokes this seeming contradiction wonderfully:

Because of the forthcoming encounter – one I anticipate with exaltation – I dress very carefully, I perform my toilet with every scruple …. [like] the preparations given to the prisoner condemned to death before he his led to the scaffold … [like] the transparent and oily membrane used by butchers to cover certain cuts of meat … As if, at the end of every toilet, inscribed within the excitation it provokes, there were always the slaughtered, embalmed, varnished body, prettified in the manner of a victim. In dressing myself, I embellish that which, by desire, will be spoiled. ((1977, p. 127)

There are numerous great stories about love which seem to blend many strands of spiritual, erotic, romantic and intellectual experience and the pain and suffering that often accompanies love. In their 12th century letters Abelard and Heloise evoke fierce intelligence, devoted spirituality and wild eroticism. Heloise refused to marry Abelard, preferring to remain his mistress and lover and bore him a baby. Eventually they did marry, but Flaubert, Heloise’s uncle and Abelard’s mentor, furious at the thought that Abelard had abandoned his niece, ordered Abelard castrated in a historical act that has made every man in the world wince since. Yet their love endured. Heloise went to a nunnery (a good choice for a smart woman in those days), and they continued to write and profess their somewhat truncated but still vibrant love until they died.
In comparison, in this century, we are inclined to try and explain love with science. Fisher (2004) has shown how love makes our brains literally light up. Using brain scans and by showing subjects photographs of their loved ones, the parts of the brain associated with love can be mapped. Apparently we remain ‘in love’ for an average of 17 months and then we progress through to the kind of companionable love that might possibly last. We can minimise the negative effects of unrequited love (what do we do when our objects don’t love us back?) by such techniques as displacement and exercise.

So, love is manifested in great stories about love, in poetry and music, and in science. But the most outstanding feature of the love featured in Lovemarks, is that it involves the love of objects, and it is to the discussion of how we feel about things that our discussion now turns.

The Love of Objects

In a recent special edition of Organization on objects Engeström and Blackler (2005) centre objects at the heart of organizational studies. Using Thompson (1979), who discusses the cycle of the object from commodity to rubbish, the authors’ communicate the transitional life of the object and the interdependence of the social, the material, the psychological and the cultural. Objects, in short, are animated by us, and ‘live’.

It would, in short, be churlish to dismiss Roberts as a masturbatory marketing madman as one of his advertising colleagues has recently done (Moore, 2004). There is a germ of truth in what he says: objects are seductive, we do feel passionate about them, and we have social relationships with them. But, there is something — something perverse — about the way Roberts worships and eroticizes certain objects
(clients of his company’s in particular — Tide Washing Powder for example), that needs to be carefully critiqued, preferably with one’s tongue in one’s own mouth.

The thesis that we have social relations with things is not new (Appadurai, 1986; Baudrillard, 1996; McLuhan, 1994/1964) but, the way we relate to objects in contemporary, ‘postsocial knowledge cultures’ may be. Knorr-Cetina (1997) has argued we have a type of object-relationship that is different from the major kinds of object-relations that have existed previously. Objects are sources of the self and of social integration, and can even have erotic properties. Theory lags behind practice in this area as ever: designers and producers have always been making things desirable — even ravishable (Barthes, 1977). The creation of things is an act of love — we beget both objects and children (Scarry, 1985). We imbue our objects with our feelings when we create them (Guillet de Monthoux, 2004; Norman, 2004; Scarry, 1985): when we create a chair we make it to fit our body to alleviate the pain of standing; or a pair of scissors is created as an extension of our hand — a sharp cutting prosthesis.

Objects are not separate from our bodies, but co-extensive with them (Haraway, 1991). We imprint our objects with ourselves: we leave shadows of ourselves on them. Things leave their impressions on us also. The permeable barrier between things, people and their unconscious is often best evoked in art, literature, music and poetry which seems able to summon into our perception emotional, psychological and memory images in more meaningful ways than the rational logic of science. Scarry (1994) for instance, has written of the ways that Thomas Hardy (and other British writers, Charles Dickens for example) and the painter Jean-François Millet, show how man/woman, work and the physical world leave etchings on each other, figuring the inter-lacings of the natural world with the natural labouring body.
In symbolic cultures, our desires and anxieties about our bodies and their extensions can give rise to monstrous suggestions and fears. Recent work by Lefebvre (2005) shows how our anxieties about consumption and capitalism exists in our imaginations in stories of the fetish cannibalism of serial killers, beginning with Jack the Ripper. Love with objects, as with people, can bite us back and involve hate, death, sadism, guilt and the rest of the gamut of human emotion without which life would be impoverished (Baudrillard, 1996; Fitchett, 2004).

We have now arrived at the point where fetishization has come up to our door and knocked very loudly. We must let Marx in. Marx himself turned to literature, Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe (where we also meet cannibalism) when discussing commodity fetishism, and it is to fetishism that our exploration of the love of objects now leads.

Fetishism

Objects that circulate in a capitalist commodity culture, and commodity fetishism, are at the heart of Marx’s analysis of capitalism. We are critiquing the commodification of love, Love®, and Marx in his writings mused on commodity fetishism because he saw it beating at the ideological heart of the stability of the capitalist system (Willis, 2001):

A commodity is … a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men’s labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of the labour … a definite social relation between men … assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things. Fetishism … attaches itself to the products of labour (i.e. capitalist production) and converts every product into a social hieroglyphic. (Marx, cited in Willis, 2001, p. 53)
Marx clearly recognized the symbolic (hieroglyphic) nature of products and their ‘mysterious’ qualities, much as Roberts has done. But, Marx recognized that this ‘mystery’ was problematic, not seductive. When a commodity is met on the market, it is naked, a simple object for sale. “Its smooth surfaces show no sign of the social relation of exploitation which produced it, not of the labour embodied within it which gives it exchange value on the market. It might have fallen from heaven” (Willis, 2001, p. 52). Furthermore, “commodities are alienated from one another, alienated from prior meaning, alienated from human processes and the relationships which produced them. They seem to exist only in and for themselves; they are fetishized…” (ibid). Marx’s use of the term fetish had nothing to do with the sexual meaning that it now has. He used the term to draw attention to ways consumers mistook the good for the representation of it: Marx’ use of the term fetish was more in line with the idea of the sacred (primitive) icon and the excessive, but mistaken, desire for it (Brydon, 1998).

But because the full-blown sexual fetishism of products and services is apparent in Robert’s treatise, we need to acknowledge the development of fetishism since Marx. Historically the word fetish arose from Western misunderstandings of sacred West African objects and came to signal the irrational in the wider discourse of the Enlightenment. Marx, as noted above, used the term commodity fetishism to emphasize the tension between the product and its ‘hieroglyph’ or semiotic meaning, but since his time the idea of fetish has become entrenched in psychological discourse to mean sexual deviance from the norm. A fetish is an object that is needed to stimulate sexual desire and because original desire (between persons) is displaced
through an object, the fetish, harmless and playful though it might be, is considered abnormal.

Fetishism begins with a singular moment, a powerful coming together of chance events to produce a singular, transfiguring moment which associates first sexual desire with a specific object. Although the original moment is forgotten, it is endlessly reproduced through the fetishization of the object. (Brydon, 1998, p. 14)

Most fetish objects represent parts of the woman’s body: feet, eyes, the head, and hair are the most common fetish objects. Only men, in Freud’s original view, could be fetishists. Freud saw castration anxiety as arising from the son’s recognition of his mother’s missing penis and apparently female fetishism is not conceivable for this reason. But, women readers may or may not be pleased to learn that although Freud did say women could not be sexual fetishists, we are more inclined to be shoppers, that is, to be commodity fetishists (Steele, 1996). Of course despite Freud’s contention, women can do anything these days, and women are capable of some rather interesting, surprising (and no doubt pleasurable) fetishes (Steele, 1996).

We do not intend this discussion of fetishism to be read as trivial or frivolous. When someone says in a best-selling business book that the key to profit-generating is the mysterious, sensuous and intimate properties of an object, we see some sort of subliminal fetishism at work and we don’t believe it is ours.

So, returning to Marx, we contend that we must not ourselves become so transfixed by the onslaught of sexual meaning pumped into everyday objects that we wait like stunned opossums in the middle of the road, staring into the oncoming headlights of that which will destroy us. If we are transfixed by the commodity, if we are held in thrall by its beauty, then we must reach through the mystery, and dig into
the core meaning of the commodity. The commodity obscures and communicates — it obscures what made it a sign. When the product is promoted on the market there is a ‘forgetting’, and it is “this forgetting [that] produces a fascination in commodities and their own glistening forgetfulness and mysterious self-absorption” (Willis, 2001, p. 58). Where the labour of production is obscured, Willis argues that there is a central tension between fetishism and usefulness which are ‘unifyingly opposed’, in the cultural commodity. The cultural commodity has an elusive quality of unstable stability, always teetering on the edge of meaning — they are ‘quasi-modo commodities’ (Willis, (2001, p. 58).

The mysterious ambiguous properties of the consumption object are irresolvable — like the nature of love itself. We have no quarrel with the love of objects but believe what Lovemarks provides is a fetishism of production, as well as objects of consumption. Roberts is concerned only with selling and as any adman knows, ‘sex sells’. But, sex has been selling products for quite some time. Demoting love into the role of a profit-generating pimp extends this marketing abuse. And making respect a precondition of the love generated by lovemarks doesn’t ameliorate the abuse. Does the precondition of respect before seduction remind you of something? It reeks of the timeless appeal of the about-to-be seduced woman, “Will you respect me in the morning?” Of course the seducer will say yes: he is about to get laid. Lovemarks is about a relationship with an object, a relationship that Roberts’ marketing discourse presents as possessing all the mystery, sensuality and intimacy of a human love relationship, and with all the persuasive subterfuges of the would-be lover. Narcissism? Or perhaps the rampant promiscuous fetishism of the marketer tempting consumers to follow his bent?
A Satirical Re-presentation

So far in our critical reading of Lovemarks we have simply theorised its commodification of love in commentary on the love of people and of objects. We have argued that there is something profoundly disturbing about a portrayal of love which tangles with both commodities and sexual fetishism. We have targeted a simple book with a simple if confused message, but we have relied on some heavy-weight theory to support our critical interpretations. To ask management practitioners or non-critical students to engage in the same way is a lovely but impossible dream. They might well prefer to read Lovemarks, and find it somewhat seductive, but ultimately harmless. Perhaps they might buy it, put it on their bookshelves, and occasionally, struck by its lipstick redness, even consult it.

But the call for papers for this theme asked us to focus on the ‘technical’ and we interpret this as a challenge to demonstrate what we can effectively 'do' with critical theory (to change the world, or at least the way a few managers/students see the world and think about it). We see the convenors call for papers as a call to action, action that makes critical theory and practice both easily accessible to those who are relatively unacquainted with it, and also action which is provoking enough to spark interest and inclusive discussion in our classrooms and amongst management practitioners.

In our own classroom practice humour and satire achieve these ends. Humour provides the comfort of both distance (our re-presentation is a fictional nonsense) and identification (there are elements of this scenario that relate to everyday life as we know it), while satire allows us to exaggerate elements of the subtexts that our critical reading has surfaced in a ridiculous and yet still recognisable form. As with a satirical
cartoon, one of two features of the subject text are so ludicrously enlarged we are permitted to both laugh and be morally outraged at the same time.

Thus what follows is our own satirical reconstruction of the text we have been critically commenting on. Recalling the mystery, sensuality and intimacy that Roberts claims are the hallmarks of a lovemark, and remembering what critical theory has to say about commodification and the love of objects we present two letters. The first, addressed to ‘Abby’, the agony-aunt columnist, is from a confused consumer, one who has fallen for a lovemark, a shoe. The second is written in the voice of Abby and purports to extend the proselytising of Roberts, the marketer of lovebrands.

Dear Abby

I am really confused and I need your help. I have always loved shoes and could never stop buying them. But now I’ve fallen in love with just one pair. I walked into a shop and they were glittering at me - I felt they were whispering sweet nothings just to me. I sank my foot gently into them and they felt just fantastic, the way they move around my feet enfolding me, so I stole them from the shop. They are those naked kind of strappy sandal Versace knock-offs from the 2004 range, with fabulous beading detail all over them, in a luscious golden-green colour and satin straps that go all the way up my calves. They make my legs look fabulous and you know how shoes can be cut to show the bit between your big toe and the next one and it is really naughty and delicious. I have a lover, but he doesn’t understand my need to wear my shoes all the time, even at the most intimate times. Frankly the whole sex thing is now just not the same without them (the shoes that is). Do you think that one day I’ll meet someone who shares my passion, or will at least enjoy mine? I think my problem is getting worse as I can’t just can’t stop wearing them now and people are beginning to stare and maybe they even smell a bit. What should I do? I am desperate.

Please help me, Irene

Dear Irene

Your poor thing! Your guilt-ridden angst is just sweating off the page. But guilt is destructive. It is the curse of the modern woman. For you it is ruining what could be the most beautiful relationship you will ever experience. Your shoe is a lovemark, so be brave! – and take your secret love out of the closet. Walk proudly down any street, through any door, and into any bed you choose with your lovemarks on your feet,
There are people like you everywhere – shoe-lovers who fear to name their kind of love. But a lovemark is a wonderful, special thing, and we should all be allowed to indulge in one. The possessors of lovemarks must learn to speak out with pride and courage – so free your love from the bonds of social mores. Look to history for your role models. Sylvia Pankhurst threw herself under a horse to free her sisters from the bondage of a male dominated world, and Cinderella’s sisters cut off their heels and toes in a desperate attempt to wear a glass slipper. The women of China tortured their feet into a stink of crushed bone and rotten flesh bound into tiny embroidered shoes for the delectation of their lovers. The women of the world are with you, so speak out! Run a campaign, get a placard, start a street protest! Name your love, indulge it, and above all OWN your lovemark.

Yours truly, Abby

‘Τέχνη’ as the Art of Critical Practice: Reflexive Reading

In the postgraduate critical management paper that we teach we introduce students to our critical method, scriptive reading, early in the course. We explain it, demonstrate it, and set formal exercises in which students practice it. Within about eight weeks we generally find that students have grown sufficiently in confidence and critical awareness to read critically and enjoy doing so. They then welcome the challenge to re-present a familiar text in a form that enables them to invert the dominant and subtexts. The objective of this exercise is to make one particular interpretation of a discovered subtext immediately accessible to others. In student-led presentations and seminars, each presenter, having selected a popular management text as subject, surfaces the subtext they have explored and presents it as the dominant reading. This is most easily achieved in a satirical, often farcical, re-presentation of the original text.

To stimulate creative thinking and demonstrate what satire and comedy can contribute to participative audience engagement, identification and recognition, we usually read/view and discuss examples of political satire (e.g. Swift’s ‘A Modest Proposal’), popular comedy (e.g. a scene from ‘The Office’) or cartoons and comic
strips such as Dilbert. We emphasise the role of exaggeration in highlighting targeted features of the subject. We also provide examples of re-presentations of management theory and discuss both the critical interpretations that have inspired them, and what we perceive to be the intended audience response.

Examples of comedic presentations and student-led seminars on critical readings of management texts include the following:

- **Anita Roddick’s *Body and Soul*** reinterpreted as a hagiography: a biography of ‘St Anita’. The presenter was offended by the ‘holier than thou’ tone of the author, and her self-aggrandisement. She staged her presentation as a story-book reading to very young children. She sat on a low stool and made the class sit cross-legged around her.

- **BPR** reinterpreted as a Reengineering Tool-kit by a student who had explored the mechanical rhetoric of BPR and its emphasis on systems over people. The toolkit, featuring a very large hammer, was promoted in a show staged as direct selling from a TV screen.

- **Change Gurus** were reinterpreted as ministers in the Church of Change. A group of students focussed on the assumption that change *per se* is good. This presentation was staged as a gospel-singing congregation chanting the slogans of change along with Alleluias and choruses in which the class all participated (the presenter was a charismatic singer, performer and TV Show host from the deep south of the US).

We do not pretend that our method is subtle or that this is a subtle paper; but we hope that over-playing our hand in at least two ways has been a demonstration of what a critical reading followed by a satirical reconstruction can achieve. We are fully
aware that we could be accused of both targeting an easy, even an unworthy, subject (a business book written for profit, author-aggrandisement and popular consumption), and of moving from satire to farce in our reconstruction. But we do have excuses for these indulgences. We intend our messing about with *Lovemarks* to express our own delight in the processes of deconstruction and reconstruction, because we think that fun is crucial to learning, especially learning that sticks. We recognise that it is often difficult to be critical and have fun at the same time so we have marked out a path that we think management practitioners could comfortably follow. We know that our paper is of itself another kind of playing about with satirical comedy, but our intention has been to emphasise the effect that defamiliarising a text can have on reader-response.

We live in a world where positive thinking is associated with success and doubt with failure, so as ‘professional doubters’ we are in a double-bind when it comes to promoting critique. Management practitioners and students are filled with doubt, but we do not, in the main, feed this doubt in a way that makes it feel OK. Our challenge is to make doubt seem possible, constructive and even positive.

In our re-presentation of a lovemark experience as a ‘Dear Abby letter and response’ we have aimed to demonstrate how we doubt playfully. Our own students have been delighted by their experiments with playful re-readings of familiar management theory, and we hope that others will extend the repertoire of re-writings that we are building. But we also wonder if ours is a peculiarly Kiwi response to what we perceive to be bombast, ego-tripping and ultimately a commercially motivated attack on all that is essentially good and beautiful in our love relationships, our shopping expeditions and our delight in objects that admirably complete our expectations of their roles in our lives.
Roberts calls himself a New Zealander and the authors of this paper are both New Zealanders who are deeply attached to the Kiwi iconography he shamelessly pillages in his book. Here in New Zealand we are often accused of chopping down our tall poppies, but we are also known for our deep dislike of cant and puffery, and for our sense of ‘fair play’. The former trait probably sparked our critical reading and the latter prompts us to acknowledge that Roberts himself recently commented that his book just promoted an idea and inferred they could do what they like with it ("Lovemarks", 2005). In a free-floating flat world of possibilities where we can select and discard at will, cycling a commodity, we have done just this. He has provided an idea, we have pointed out that it is far from original, and we have messed about with it.

**Conclusions**

Lovemarks is not of itself, a management text that intrinsically merits the time and attention we have devoted to it. But it is a useful example of the way in which marketing and management persuasions about how we should all think and feel creep into our everyday assumptions and emotions if we do not challenge them. If we are to challenge effectively then we need a critical armoury of accessible critical methods, and our paper suggests that scriptive reading is such a method. Scriptive reading provides us with an opportunity to share an interpretation of the selected text which is inclusive of the majority of readers. On this common ground, the dominant reading of the text, we can establish a rapport, an interpretive community (Fish, 1980) which, as trust builds, will be more inclined to engage in radical, critical rereadings of the same text. We expect that our second, critical, reading will be contended and that dialogue will surface more of multi-layered, plurivocal meaning otherwise buried below the
dominant meaning. In a third reading we give ourselves an opportunity to reflect on, and share with our readers, what as we see it, we have been about here. We take account of our own biases, life experiences and proclivities as we set out to assess the extent to which the combined impact of all of this has influenced the position we have taken up. In this paper, because our classroom practice suggests that humour and especially satire contribute to effective critical learning, we have emphasised the role that burlesque plays in making critical thinking accessible to all. Sometimes, though we have not had the space here to comment on it, we also ask students to find a text that offers an alternative reading to that of the critiqued text, one that captures a thought, an image or an emotion discussed in the critical sessions in a way that they can deeply identify with. So here is our ‘other’ text.

It is a poem about love and about shoes written by a New Zealand poet Elizabeth Nannestad. We think that in a haunting echo of a memory imprint it evokes a different kind of love from the love that is travestied in Lovemarks.

Shoes

From A PORTRAIT OF MY MOTHER

In her memory

Shoes, shoes, how mother liked shoes
and hats and gloves and lacy stockings.
She always had. When she was very young, six or seven,
and her mother took her to buy shoes
she tried on every shoe in the shop
and sat in the centre
with them all around in a circle

Mother swore allegiance to the four inch heel.
Through thick and thin she was faithful.
She turned her nose up at the outdoors generally
but I do remember her once
walking along the beach in her heels.

My mother did not give in to the mere nature of things.
Not anyway to sand.
References


