

“LEARNING TO BE MODERN”: MASS MEDIA AND IDENTITY IN KATHMANDU

Mark Liechty

In the early 1990s it was common to find middle-class young people in Kathmandu peppering their everyday Nepali conversations with an assortment of English words. Much of this new English lexicon referenced the flood of consumer goods that had inundated the country in the previous decades: words like “television” and “VCR,” or “jacket” and “jeans.” But other English words seemed to have a more curious place in Nepali speech, words for which exact Nepali equivalents apparently existed. Of many such words, a few of the most interesting were “body,” “face,” and “love.” In this article I trace these three English words—and the complex image worlds that they signal—from their origins in commercial mass media into the everyday lives of young people who used them to speak and act themselves into new ways of being. In particular I am interested in how modern media become resources for constructing cultures of gender within Kathmandu’s new consumerist middle class.

Following a brief analytical introduction, the article moves through three ethnographic sections focusing on cultural practices associated with these three English words. The first, entitled “building body,” considers new understandings of maleness and the ideal male physique that derive from commercial sources. In the second, “making face,” I look at an analogous development in the construction of new understandings of femaleness and feminine beauty dependent on a host of new commodities and commercial regimens. For both women and men these new understandings of the gendered self and other signal what I call new consumer identities. In the third section, entitled “doing love,” I consider what I call commercially mediated relationships; that is, relationships that occur between persons enacting these new gender identities in the contexts of commercial, or commercialized spaces. The conclusion considers how media provide consumers with new ways of seeing, or new modes of cultural logic, that become central pillars of local class-cultural process.

The Ethnographic Context

All of us experience identity in the context of communities, but the factors that shape those identities now increasingly transcend the

boundaries of locale. We learn and experiment with ideas of who we are in local contexts like home, school, or neighborhood, but to the extent that we engage with modern commercial forces like mass media, advertising, and consumer commodities, our understandings of self are placed within larger and larger frames of reference. Nepalis have always been aware of an “out there” beyond their local world of lived experience, but it is only very recently in Kathmandu that this non-local “other region” has become filled to overflowing with images of other worlds, other ways of being, other “possible lives” (Appadurai 1990:9). For young people in Kathmandu—the capital of a nation labeled “least developed” by a global ideology that upholds a particular vision (or version) of “modernity”—the local can begin to feel like a wasteland, even a prison (Liechty 1995, 1996). It is not surprising then that young people often experiment with identities that link them to the imagined worlds beyond the locale, or that commercial interests (both local and transnational) are eager to assist in their increasingly global imaginings.

What may be more surprising is that Kathmandu—a site unsurpassed for romantic exoticism in the Western imagination—is indeed firmly linked to the new global capitalist cultural economy of consumer images and desires. Since 1951, when a democratic uprising put an end to a century of dictatorial, isolationist rule, Kathmandu has launched itself into a new world of global trade, mass media, telecommunications, mass tourism, international aid, and rapidly expanding labor and commodity markets. With the arrival of video technology (in the late 1970s), national television (1985), satellite TV (1991), and (from the mid 1990s) FM radio, Kathmandu now enjoys a full compliment of mediated windows onto global consumer modernity, even if Nepal’s position on the political-economic periphery guarantees that few Nepalis ever engage the new cultural economy beyond the levels of image, imagination, and longing.¹

1 This article is based on research carried out between 1988 and 1991, with comparative perspectives derived from subsequent visits in 1996, 2001, and 2004. Among many important shifts that occurred in Kathmandu between the early and late 1990s the one most relevant to this article concerns developments in the city’s media culture. From a middle-class media market dominated mainly by national television and imported video cassettes (Liechty 1996), by the late 1990s the addition of satellite television, local FM radio, the internet, and other digital media had greatly expanded both the channels and the scale of media exposure. While this

Because of the remarkable speed with which "modernity" arrived at its doorstep, Kathmandu and its inhabitants face extraordinarily intense historical and cultural crosscurrents. Seen from the air Kathmandu resembles a fried egg: a dark center marks the old city with its densely packed traditional architecture (once surrounded by a wall) while the sprawling ring of unregulated post-1950s "development"—farmland now covered by commercial districts, public buildings, roads, concrete homes, and factories—stands testimony to new movements of goods, people, and cultural sensibilities. Similarly, for many urban Nepalis a set of core socio-religious values (often experienced in terms of caste and kin affiliations) are engulfed—and sometimes overwhelmed—by a transformed cultural context awash in transnational currents: new ideologies of education, progress, and change, new labor and economic relations, a new universe of material goods, and new arenas of public display. As Kathmandu residents navigate through a range of built environments with vastly different histories and meanings, they must also negotiate a range of competing and co-existing systems of value and meaning.

One of the most insistent of these new meaning systems is the fast-growing local market for consumer goods. From Hong Kong and Singapore, the Gulf States, Europe and North America, as well as China and India, goods from around the world pour into Kathmandu to be sold everywhere from glitzy elite boutiques and malls, to makeshift sidewalk stands.

Among the most important products that flood Kathmandu's new consumer market place are mass media. In many ways videos, pop songs, magazines, and TV shows are no different from the countless other goods that compete for the consumer's money. But in one crucial way media commodities are perhaps unique, namely, in their ability to exhibit, enchant, and tacitly advertise countless other consumer goods through their vivid representations of consumer lifestyles and their dramatic narrative depictions of consumer desire. Whether in cinematic representations of romance, adventure, or luxury; in advertisements for soft-drinks or cigarettes; or in shop windows filled with consumer goods

article is clearly based in media experiences from the early 1990s, my sense is that many of the media-influenced forms of identification described here continued, though with some modifications. Among these are the much greater opportunities for interactive media experiences made possible by the explosion of locally produced FM radio shows from 1995 onward (e.g., Kunreuther 2004; see also Onta 2002, Humagain 2005).

depicted in these same films and in advertisements, the world of commodities and commercial representations forms a cross-referencing, mutually reinforcing realm of images and imagined ways of being. Mass media—in tandem with other commodities and other forms of commodity promotion—produce an imagined space, or space for the imagination, that increasingly beckons consumers to enter, experience, and live as their own.

The dimensions of this imagined space extend from the global to the local though in markets like Nepal—where an average annual per capita income of only around 200 U.S. dollars attracts few multinational investors—the actual marketing of *global* commercial images is often between *local* producers and consumers. To be sure there are multinational commercial players with direct interests (and large advertising budgets) active in the national market (Tuborg, San Miguel, and Coca-Cola to name a few). But for the most part the commercial visions that populate the local commodity realm enter Kathmandu through gray markets that weaken, if not sever, the direct extractive links between First World producers, and Third World consumers. For example, as an important node in vast Asian networks of pirated video films, audio cassettes, and CDs² Kathmandu business people offer consumers direct access to the latest First World commercial images and products even if the profits made are largely local.

In turn, other local entrepreneurs—from barbers, tailors, and poster merchants to film makers, musicians, and manufacturers—learn to capitalize on the financial opportunities offered in the new domain of commercial images and image making. In local processes of status negotiation and class formation these new image goods offer new modes of claiming and maintaining social distinction. Even as they are embedded in historical and on-going local cultural economies of prestige and honor, these images literally become a major new form of social currency, especially for an emerging middle class seeking to produce its own class culture. Because access to this new *social* currency is predicated on access to *financial* currency—cash in hand—the new realm of consumer images and goods provides the middle class with a means of both producing and policing its own distinctive class practice.

2 For a discussion of media piracy in Asia see Wong 1995.

Class, Gender, and Embodiment

This essay is part of a larger project that explores processes of mass media consumption, consumer culture, and class formation in Kathmandu (Liechty 2003). In that project my aim is to present class not as a thing, or a set of characteristics to be defined and measured, but as practice and process. In particular I am interested in how an emerging urban middle class *creates itself as a cultural entity*, contests its terms of membership, and constructs boundaries between itself and its class others (above and below) *in and through cultural practice*. This approach to class-culture-as-process goes beyond understandings of class as *prior to* or *outside of* discourse, to view class as an *emergent cultural project* within specific historical and local contexts. I am concerned with how people integrate new regimes of commercial value and desire (such as “fashion” and “progress”) into cultural paradigms with deep roots in Nepali society (such as those related to prestige, orthodoxy, and propriety) as they attempt to speak and act themselves—and their new socio-economic existence—into cultural “reality” or coherence. This larger project traces the cultural experience of an emerging urban middle class (of civil servants, office workers, business people, and other “white-collar” or “tertiary” salaried laborers) as they struggle to carve out what they believe to be a legitimate cultural space between the vulgar (impoverished) urban masses and the wealthy (and morally-suspect) urban elite.

My focus in this article is on one part of this class-cultural experience in Kathmandu: how media and other commercial forces figure in projects of constructing class and gender identities. Here I am less interested in describing a local media culture in any detail,³ than in considering how people use media consumer experiences to speak and act in everyday life. As media scholars have known for some time (e.g., Custen 1987), when groups of people consume the same media product, they are less likely to talk among themselves about the actual movie, TV show, or what-have-you, than to use their shared media experience as a way of talking about their everyday lives. Within groups of media consumers, media products are not simply things to think about, but to think with. Shared media experiences provide consumers with mirrors or frames of reference that begin to shape the dimensions of what is possible, or even thinkable. Media serve as imaginative resources for making sense out of life and ultimately, means to interpret and even represent life. This article follows

3 See Liechty 2003, chapter six, for a detailed discussion of mass media consumption in Kathmandu.

media images into the mediated imaginations of young Nepali consumers who jointly use these images to speak and act themselves into collective ways of being. Specifically, the vernacular use of the English words “body,” “face,” and “love” offers insights into how Nepali young people link the image worlds of mass media and consumer desire to their own lives and bodies.

One of the first things to note about the linguistic practice associated with these English words is that in actual Nepali speech each foreign noun is paired with a Nepali verb: “building *body*,” “making *face*,” “doing *love*.”⁴ Significantly, this linguistic pairing transforms the mediated *object* (signaled as *foreign* through the use of English) into a *local practice*. In so doing, people speak of these media-inflected objects not so much as things to individually possess, but as practices to collectively pursue. By emphasizing their *doing* rather than their *having*, young people point to the importance of these mediated images in the collective performance of middle-class culture.

Beyond the dimension of basic *discursive practice*, how Nepalis use the English words “body,” “face,” and “love” also offers important perspectives on *embodied cultural practice*. These words signal new kinds of gendered bodies as well as relationships between them. Most notably, all of these bodies (or their relations) are imagined as sites for the active production of desired outcomes through consumption. Unlike the meanings of the Nepali words for “body,” “face,” and “love,” the English words refer to gendered objects or attainments available only through the goods and services of the local consumer market. In other words, these three words signal ideal gendered bodies imagined and produced in the context of a culture of commodities including the media products themselves. As the meaning and experience of gender becomes increasingly framed within commercial ideals, gender identities increasingly become consumer identities available, for a price, in the market. What this new consumer-gender practice shows is how class is mapped out not only in divisions of labor, or distinctive goods, but onto the body itself. By reconstituting the ideal gendered body within the consumer domain—the “democracy of goods”—the middle class can not only naturalize, but actually embody, its class privilege.

4 Here, and in quoted material to follow, words or phrases appearing between asterisks designate English words used by Nepali speakers in otherwise Nepali speech.

Turning to Kathmandu in the 1990s we can begin to see how these new gendered consumer identities were engaged, enacted, and embodied in a local cultural context where daily experience was increasingly measured against the images, ideals, and ideologies of a now-global media/commodity realm.

Building "Body"

One afternoon while waiting in the crowded courtyard of a popular movie theater in Kathmandu, a boy standing next to me observed the mad crush of young males struggling to make their ways to the ticket window and sighed:

You know there are no rules here for how to get the tickets. There's no control. So since they're strong and we're not, we can't fight it out. They have **body** and we don't have **body**.

Speaking in Nepali, he used the English word *body* to describe what he lacked in this context. People who are "strong" and can "fight it out" have "**body**."

Similarly, a few months later, in the course of an interview, one of my co-workers asked another young man from Kathmandu about his preferences in films. When the young man responded that he preferred "**English**" films to those made in India or Nepal, my co-worker asked what kind of English films he liked best. At this the young man (a nineteen-year-old college student) paused, and then explained in a rather irritated voice:

Well, among **English** films I like the *Rambo* type of films. I've seen all of them, parts 1, 2, and 3.

I mean, just *look* at my **body** and you can *see* that I'm interested in that kind of film. If you *look* you can tell what kind of film *I* like.

Here again the speaker chose the English word *body*. Unlike the Nepali word for body, *jiu* (a gender-neutral term), for this young man the English word obviously carried the meaning of a certain physique—a muscular, powerful, and very male physique—firmly associated with the action film hero Rambo. Indeed, in his mediated imagination, the body style he cultivated through a regimen of martial arts and bodybuilding, should have communicated *visually* the fact that he preferred "the *Rambo* type of films." For him film preference and body style were so inseparable that either one should have clearly signaled the other. Arjun Appadurai identifies this kind of "mass mediated imaginary" as one of the hallmarks

of capitalist modernity (1996: 6). In this section I want to consider what this young man's mediated fantasy body means for our understanding of middle-class cultural practice in Kathmandu.

As a body-builder and martial arts practitioner this young man was far from alone. Bodybuilding clubs, fitness centers, and martial arts studios are common all across greater Kathmandu. One could argue that similar kinds of male physical culture were nothing new in the city. Troops of wrestlers (as entertainers) were long a part of elite Nepali court life.⁵ Yet the kind of popular, community-centered wrestling tradition associated with the north Indian *akhara*, or wrestling gymnasium (Alter 1992, Kakar 1996, Kumar 1988) does not seem to have developed in Nepal. Nevertheless, in recent decades, non-South Asian styles of male body culture have become tremendously popular. Already in 1962 Dara Singh, "a former world professional [wrestling] champion from India" was giving exhibition matches in Kathmandu (Kheladi 1993). In the tradition of Hulk Hogan, this type of "professional wrestling" combines bodybuilding with dramatization. While wrestling (of any sort) is still not notably popular in Kathmandu, bodybuilding clubs and gyms are common, and competitions attract many contestants and large audiences.

The city's annual "Mr. Kathmandu" bodybuilding championship dates from 1973.⁶ Since that time the sport's most well-known proponents, and prominent title-holders, have been local Newar men. Sportsmen in Kathmandu estimate that by the early 1990s there were more than thirty bodybuilding clubs in the city. The 1992 "Mr. Kathmandu" championship—sponsored by the Kathmandu Jaycees and financed by Iceberg Beer (a local brewery)—filled the Kathmandu City Hall auditorium, one of the city's largest indoor venues seating well over a thousand people. The event was noteworthy for several reasons. First, in addition to being large and enthusiastic, the audience was almost entirely male; there were fewer than ten women in attendance. And second:

During individual posing with music, which constitutes one segment of a body-building competition as per international rules, four body-builders chose music from Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*; one

5 The first known reference to wrestling and wrestlers in the Kathmandu area is in an inscription dated 604 AD which records a charitable grant to a troop of wrestlers (S.R. Tiwari 1990: 14).

6 The information on bodybuilding presented here is taken from an article on sports in Kathmandu (Onta 1993), and from conversations with Pratyoush Onta.

chose a re-rendering of Beethoven's fifth symphony; another a Hindi pop song; and the rest, diverse selections from popular "western" music. (Onta 1993)

Of the musical selections used by the twenty finalists, none were Nepali tunes, and only one was even South Asian.

In spite of a local body-building tradition that goes back more than thirty years, accounts like this make it clear that the sport is still strongly associated with foreign (Western) commercial images and cultural commodities. This same link was also in evidence in the shops and roadside displays of Kathmandu poster merchants which, in the early 1990s, featured large color prints of Rambo/Stallone (shirt-less and pumped-up) and phenomenally-muscle professional body-builders (all of them Westerners, including African-Americans) in various poses, alongside the ubiquitous images of cover girls (mainly East Asian and Western), Hindi film stars, and Hindu deities. Video rental shops too did a brisk business in tapes of mainly U.S. bodybuilding competitions. Two things were clear: that the image of the bulked-up, hyper-male body had captured the imaginations—and bodies—of many local young men; and that this image-body was consistently associated with (mainly Western) commercial media.

The link between carefully produced male bodies and Western mass media was also much in evidence at the periodic rock concerts I attended in Kathmandu. Entertained by local and Indian rock bands playing American and British "classic" and "metal" rock standards, the almost entirely male audiences spent much of their time at these concerts indulging in caroming slam dances and impassioned crotch-thrashing air guitar. Rock concerts were also occasions for displaying what were locally known as male "*punk*" fashions—a version of the now-universal teen "heavy metal" uniform consisting of denim jackets, bandannas, logo t-shirts, and basket-ball shoes (cf. Baker 1989). Police in riot gear were an always visible and vaguely sinister presence at rock concerts—their mission: to head off the aggressive posturing between different neighborhood or school groups before tiffs could erupt in full scale "*gang fights*."

In the public and highly mediated settings such as bodybuilding contests and rock concerts (and on street corners and campuses) male bodies assume the nature of imagined images and objects of public spectacle. In the gyms and clubs of Kathmandu young middle-class men imagine, and then pay to produce, their own spectacular public bodies.

Perhaps even more than bodybuilding and rock music, in the early 1990s the practice most associated with a new media-inflected, hyper-male

body culture was martial arts. From pre-schoolers trading “kung-fu” kicks in the back streets, to world-class Taekwondo champions in major Kathmandu “dojos” or training centers, martial arts had gripped the imaginations of many thousands of boys and young men across the city. Schoolboys saved pocket money to buy “how to” martial arts books and then spent hours in front of mirrors practicing moves. In their teens, thousands of boys enrolled in martial arts classes (with or without their parents’ consent) conducted by “masters” of various levels of expertise. In the decades since East Asian martial arts were introduced into the country, Nepal has become a regional powerhouse in Karate and Taekwondo, dominating the South Asian competitive scene.

One of the most remarkable aspects of martial arts culture in Kathmandu is its link to film. The sport’s phenomenal rise in popularity dates from the “video boom” of the early 1980s when VCR technology—and global popular visual media—first became widely available in the valley. Prior to this time, martial arts training had been limited to police and military personnel; others were forbidden to teach or study martial arts. But with the arrival of video technology, “kung-fu” films from Hong Kong and Taiwan quickly became one of the most popular video genres for young men. By the time the government lifted the ban on martial arts training in the mid 1980s, thousands of young men around the city had already grown quite accomplished from copying the moves they saw in films, and studying the ragged instruction manuals that passed secretly from hand to hand. “Kung-fu” films were so popular that in the 1980s and ’90s some rental shops in Kathmandu specialized solely in martial arts videos.

In a published interview, one of Nepal’s top Taekwondo practitioners (and medallist in several Asian Games) reported that in his spare time he enjoys watching “martial arts movies, especially Bruce Lee’s” (Rimal 2045 v.s.: 33). As for many other young men in his age group (15 to 30) that my co-workers and I interviewed in the early 1990s, studying martial arts and watching “kung-fu” films were almost inseparable activities.

Not surprisingly, discussions of film preferences often led to the topic of sporting activities, and vice versa. For example, in a conversation on favorite sports, a Newar man in his late 20s (the unemployed son of a hotel manager) described how, as a child, his interests had turned to martial arts. Having grown up in the heart of old Kathmandu, this man spent several years in the early 1980s working in an uncle’s “video parlor” (a pay-to-watch private screening room) where he saw hundreds of films, mostly “kung-fu” and English.

Before, I used to play *table tennis*, then *volleyball*, but now it's *martial arts*. I mean when I was a kid I used to play games with my father but then I got interested in all this *martial arts* stuff after watching films, seeing other people doing it, reading about it in magazines, and all that.

And then, you know, all my friends in school were into this kind of *ha-hu*,⁷ *kung-fu*, and all these *martial arts*. So that's really how I got started.

Like many others whose teen years coincided with Kathmandu's video boom, this young man took up martial arts after seeing them all around him: in films, on the streets, in magazines. In his circle of friends (mostly educated, unemployed, and middle-class like himself) practicing martial arts was part of a life-style or image that is more or less "*ha-hu*." Whether or not they are actually involved in delinquent kinds of behavior, martial arts training, public sparring, and a "kung-fu" body are important parts of the "tough guy" public persona that middle-class young men cultivate in day to day lives spent mostly hanging out on the streets (Liechty 1996).

Although men in their late twenties and early thirties represent the first generation of martial arts aficionados in Kathmandu, the interest in films and training extends to new generations of boys. In the course of describing the video-viewing habits of her family, one mother of three told of how her son (then 13) had started karate training before he turned 10 years old.

My oldest son, he's into *kung-fu* films. He doesn't like Hindi movies at all, but he does play *football* sometimes.

Actually he's very good at *karate*. A few years ago he asked us to let him study *karate* but we didn't agree. So he himself went off to his cousin's house [where he practiced], and we later heard that he had been doing very well.

It was good, he was exercising every morning. But then he was told to go on some special diet that he didn't like, so he quit.

Aside from the remarkably young age at which some boys take up serious interests in martial arts, one of the interesting aspects of this mother's statement was the contrast she drew between "**kung-fu**" and Hindi movies. In Kathmandu boys are much more likely to be interested in "kung-fu" and other "**action**" (usually English) films, while girls and

7 The Nepali slang term *ha-hu* denotes rambunctious, ruffian-like, sometimes violent behavior and is usually associated with young men.

young women typically watch Hindi films on their family's home VCR.⁸ To a considerable extent, *watching* and *doing* "kung-fu" are important parts of a middle-class *male* childhood in Kathmandu. Mediated martial arts play an important part in constructing and imagining male bodies and male gender identities in the middle class.

For viewers around the world "kung-fu" films offer up the fantasy of "little guys who win" (Marshall 1979:63), of heroes with great physical prowess derived not from brawn or technology, but from technique, training, and self-discipline. It is not surprising then that while bodybuilding and a certain kind of massive male body have a considerable following in Kathmandu, it is the "kung-fu" body—lithe, compact, and fighting-fit—that even more young men imagine and experiment with.⁹ Both disciplines offer methods for "building" the hyper-male middle-class "**body**," for embodying and enacting the mediated, commercialized, and gendered attributes of a public male consumer identity.

It may be impossible to prove (through ethnographic description) causal links between media images and mediated imaginations, but there are ways of documenting ties between these images and local identities via patterns of self-identification. How do middle-class young men consciously *identify with* media images? By far the most striking illustrations of this mediated self-identification that I encountered were in private spaces claimed by young middle-class males, especially their bedrooms.¹⁰ As creations of their occupants, these rooms tell us something about how middle-class youth use media to construct identity.

The seventeen-year-old eldest son of a mid-level civil servant, Mahesh lived with his parents and siblings in a modern, multi-story concrete home in a recently developed Kathmandu suburb. He attended one of the dozens of private (though not particularly prestigious) "English Medium" high

8 For a detailed discussion of gender patterns in media consumption among Kathmandu residents, see Liechty 2003, chapter six.

9 Phillip Zarrilli (1995) shows how the indigenous South Indian martial art know as *kalarippayattu* is being both revitalized and fundamentally transformed as a result of the huge popularity of East Asian martial arts films and film heroes in India.

10 The very existence of private bedrooms is something of very recent origin in Kathmandu. Along with the rapid growth in middle-class professional or "tertiary" labor since the 1970s, Kathmandu has witnessed the emergence of nuclear middle-class families and their exodus from the compact multi-generational homes of the old city to the sprawling walled compound homes of the new residential suburbs (Liechty 2003, chapter two).

schools that had sprung up around the Kathmandu valley in the 1980s to accommodate the growing middle class's almost fetishized faith in education and especially English language instruction (Liechty 2003: 210-216).

My first glimpse of Mahesh's room left me speechless. Essentially every wall surface, plus some of the ceiling, was covered with pictures, posters, magazine cutouts, or hand-made drawings and signs—all of the images foreign, and/or in English. There were five or six types of commercially produced images. First were the large posters of foreign, usually American film/pop stars: James Dean, Elvis, Schwarzenegger, and Rambo along with other "tough guy" pictures of Clint Eastwood and Charles Bronson. Also in this category were various martial artists like Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan and nameless bodybuilder photos featuring white men with bulging muscles. Competing in number with these macho images was a collection of "Heavy Metal" posters. These included Kiss and Bon Jovi posters full of bizarre clothing and suggestive poses, plus an assortment of Heavy Metal motifs, particularly skulls: skulls with blood dripping knives sticking out of them, skulls with flowers in their mouths, skulls and cross-bones, etc. A third, smaller category of image was the sports hero, here represented by the soccer stars Pele and Diego Maradona.

These assorted hyper-male images were contrasted with a fourth group of images: what might be called "girly pictures." These included various magazine cutouts and posters of Western and East Asian women in swimsuits, but featured most prominently was a large poster of the (surgically enhanced) British pop-singer Samantha Fox captured in the act of pulling off her pants while wearing only transparent underwear. It is worth noting that Samantha Fox, while unknown in the West, is marketed throughout Asia simultaneously as a soft-core porn pin-up girl, and as a singer. Her cassettes feature mediocre cover versions of sexually suggestive pop songs.

Although these "girly" images seem to stand in contrast with the room's more ubiquitous macho male images, as many have noted, both sets represent fantasy bodies produced actively or passively (Ossipow 1983) in the gym (Fussel 1994) or under the knife (Morgan 1991).¹¹ But

11 The growing popularity of women's body building and male "body enhancing" cosmetic surgery (e.g., "pec," thigh, and calf implants) indicate that the active v. passive forms of body modification no longer correspond to male v. female (Bordo 2000).

more important is the fact that practically all of these print images are tied in some way to electronic entertainment media (music, cinema, or televised sport) that play off each other to create a kind of echo chamber where meaning bounces back and forth between the images of (usually sexually charged) bodies and the entertainment value of the “stars” themselves. Indeed, the link between the mass-marketed visual images and the media careers of the individuals represented was often so hard to figure out that, as in the case of Samantha Fox, it was impossible to guess which came first, the ubiquitous soft-porn photos or the music cassettes.

A fifth category of image in Mahesh’s room were what I would call “love pictures.” These were usually small images taken from magazines or commercial greeting cards consisting of soft-focus photos of young Western couples kissing or gazing into each other’s eyes. The photos were often accompanied by a few romantic sentences in English dealing with love, and especially lips and kissing. One picture was captioned; “I dream of your eyes, your lips and mine, slowly meeting.” Finally, the last category of images was an assortment of hand-drawn pictures and signs. In addition to drawings of hearts, skulls, and western-style rockers, there was a series of carefully executed signs on pieces of paper taped together to form long sheets. Hanging across the back wall, with letters written in the style of a “heavy metal” album cover or T-shirt, was long sign with a sentence in English that read “This is my world. Keep out.”

From my perspective, Mahesh’s world seemed like a choppy, shallow sea of flashing surfaces; images repeating and competing in a dull but insistent glare of un-focused desire. What this world meant, I could not say. In fact, Mahesh himself had little to say about it aside from a few comments on where he had procured various items. Yet maybe that, in itself, was significant. The contents of the room (and the fact that it lacked almost anything identifiably “Nepali”) are surely relevant to how Mahesh imagined himself and “his world.” But perhaps one of the most important meanings of these images is simply that they are objects for sale. Like the videos, music albums, and magazines that most of the images reference, the images are themselves commodities. What’s more, to the extent that almost all of the images in Mahesh’s room (along with their corresponding videos, albums, etc.) are pirated goods—produced and distributed in the illegal gray markets of South Asia—in fact these goods are arguably local, even Nepali, products.

My point is that even though these images seem to reference foreignness, their meanings may lie more in their local circulation where they are consumed and traded among young middle-class men as identity

goods. Mahesh’s room signaled that he is very much a part of the urban middle-class cultural and social scene in which shared media and consumer experiences are crucial elements of group membership. The desire that Mahesh’s room manifests is less the desire to be like the images on his walls, than the desire to be like those in his own reference group who have staked their class and gender identities in the acquisition of distinctive goods (including, in many cases, distinctive bodies). Mahesh’s world should not be read as a space of alienation but as a bid to locate himself in the local prestige economy in which middle-class privilege is signaled through consumer identification. Within this local middle-class consumer project, the consumerist body culture that young men pursue allows them to display—and in the case of bodybuilders and martial artists, actually embody—their own class privilege.

Making “Face”

Just as the English word “body” was often used to designate a new ideal powerful male physique, in the early 1990s people in Kathmandu frequently used the English word “face” to communicate a new conception of feminine beauty. Like “body,” “face” was something some people had while others did not. For example people often used “*face*” when talking about film personnel; both women and men would comment on whether or not a particular film actress had “*face*.” People I spoke with would frequently qualify a preference for one actress by saying that they liked her not only because she had “*face*,” but because of her acting or dancing. Or conversely, some people were critical of actresses with beauty and no skills. Said one man of a particular Nepali actress, “She doesn’t have any talent, [she’s] just showing her *face*.” Although it was difficult to determine just what having “*face*” involved, at very least the term meant possessing a certain visual, photogenic, appeal.

A clearer picture emerged from the way women spoke of their own experiences with “*face*.” For women, “*face*” was something one could pursue by oneself, or with the help of a beautician. In interviews conducted by a female co-worker a number of women mentioned that they had started using cosmetics to “make *face*” (face *banāune*) or “give [themselves] *face*” (face *dine*). For women, “*face*” is something to acquire, most often by “doing *make-up*” (make-up *garne*). From Indian films and Hindi women’s magazines, women in Kathmandu learn how to “make *face*,” “do *make-up*,” and more generally, “do *fashion*” (fashion *garne*). For example one Brahman woman in her mid 30s explained that:

After marriage a girl's physical structure becomes a little messed up and doing **fashion** helps to **maintain** that. This is necessary. It doesn't make any difference when you're young, but after you're 30, you should **maintain** your skin, your hair, your body, by doing **fashion**.

For older women, keeping the hair style, either cut, or keeping it long but nice, washing it with good **shampoo** or soap, that's good, and its more healthy too. And **make-up**, and cutting and trimming, these are all necessary things.

All the parts of the body, like your skin, must be taken care of, especially after you're 30. It's just like a plant; it also needs cutting and trimming to keep it looking good.

Whether through clothing, "**make-up**," or skin-care, for this woman it is necessary to maintain "all the parts of the body" and its presentation through "doing **fashion**." For her the body is "just like a plant" but not any old plant. This plant must be "**maintained**," and "taken care of." It must be cut, trimmed, made up, washed, attired in "**fashions**," and kept healthy, all in order to "keep it looking good." Significantly "doing **fashion**" extends far beyond clothing and make-up to encompass the treatment and presentation of the entire body. For this woman "doing **fashion**" is a necessity that involves a kind of self-objectification: a transformation of the body into a visual platform upon which "all parts of the body" are turned into sites for operations designed to make them "*look good*."

Other women also celebrated the new necessity of fashion and the role it played in their lives. One married Newar woman in her early 20s explained that:

Fashion is a necessary thing. It's a must! One shouldn't just sit and do nothing with **fashion**. You should be **active**! I mean **fashion** isn't only **make-up**. **Fashion** is needed to compliment your **natural** strengths. And besides, even little things have now become **fashion**, wouldn't you say?

Now that just about *everything* has caught the fashion bug—has become the subject of fashioning—" **fashion**" is "a necessary thing" so why not use it? She chose to "be **active**" with fashion and use it to "compliment" her "**natural** strengths."

In much the same way as Nepali men used the English word "body" to denote a certain kind of hyper-male, physical maleness, for women the word "face" implied—through its links with a constellation of other

(notably) English terms like "fashion" and "make-up"¹²—a certain kind of very physical femaleness. Like the male "**body**," this is a gendered way of being that is individually embodied through acts of self-production based on consumption. In other words, it is a type of gendered body produced in a context of mediated images of "ideal" bodies, self-discipline (self-objectification), and consumer goods ranging from hair spray to toe-nail polish.

All of this points to new ways in which femaleness is imagined and new ways of constructing gender identities. For example, one young woman noted that,

Fashion is like a new kind of ornament [*gahanā*]. . . . They say that it is a must these days. . . . Being well dressed is a sign of being civilized [*sabhya*].

As this woman recognizes, contemporary "**fashion**" differs from earlier modes of adornment. In earlier Nepali practices of female ornamentation specific types of jewelry, clothing, and make-up served to position individuals meaningfully within family and society (Bledsoe 1984). Ornamentation and particular kinds of marking helped designate what kind of person the wearer was, whether in terms of sexual/marital status, ethnic/caste identity, or social status (Nepali 1965). In this epistemic mode, social meaning resides in the ornaments arrayed on women's bodies.

By contrast, the "new ornament" of fashion—the new practice of fashion—is one in which *the body itself* becomes the ornament. Rather than a vehicle for the display of cultural objects, the body becomes increasingly the object of cultural display (cf. Featherstone 1991). In the newly privileged material logic of consumerism the body itself becomes the locus of social meaning through the embodiment of class. In particular the female body is fragmented into minute parts: parts to be clipped, trimmed, washed, oiled, made fit, "**maintained**," hidden, exposed, enlarged, removed, "**made-up**." Once fragmented the parts are re-produced as cultured objects—marked as signs of a commodity culture—and then re-assembled into the new middle-class, gendered body. For both men and women the new gendered body becomes the new "sign of being civilized" or, the sign of a new consumer civilization.

12 Not to mention other English words like "active," "natural," and "maintain."

Use of terms such as “body” and “face” illustrate how mass media and other modes of commercial representation are powerful means for altering a society’s ideas of salient gender attributes and ideal gender behaviors. Films, magazines, posters, music, and other consumer commodities from around the world constitute part of Nepal’s experience in the transnational commodity realm, a new space of images from which to imagine gendered bodies, behaviors, and identities. One of the powers of the camera is its ability to break bodies into parts which, when blown up, seem to take on lives of their own (Sontag 1973:167, Susman 1984: 282). In film women, and less frequently men, are reduced to torsos, faces, or even portions of faces—hair, eyes, or mouths. Clearly this fetishization of the “body in pieces” (OSSIPOW 1983) has already taken hold of the imaginations of many young Nepali men and women for whom “body” and “face” are increasingly identity components that one purchases in the marketplace. The new demand for women’s cosmetics and the means to acquire the new man’s heroic body are only two signs that point to new middle-class gendered identities, achievable only through consumer transactions.

Doing “Love”

One of the ways in which market forces transform patterns of social interaction is by promoting commodities that act as bridges or channels between persons. In late capitalist societies like Japan and North America, commercial interests have been very successful in interjecting commodities into relationships such that the commodity itself (cards, flowers, stuffed toys, etc.) becomes the fetishized marker of emotions ranging from gratitude to respect, friendship to love.¹³ Relationships are also commercially mediated and ritually celebrated in new consumer holidays such as mother’s/father’s day, and Valentine’s day, in addition to the increasingly commercialized rites associated with birthdays and Christmas. Mass media often play a key role in promoting these new consumer rites. For example, in his book on television viewing in Brazil, Conrad Kottak (1990) describes how mass media increase the popularity of collective holidays—in this case Christmas and Carnival—and use them to promote “mass gift-giving” (1990:177). Says Kottak, “Particularly in cities and among the consuming classes, television has promoted the

13 In India too, as Mark Nichter notes, over-the-counter medicinal tonics are marketed as gifts of love (1989: 251).

notion of Christmas as an occasion for spending large sums of money on gifts and feasting" (1990:176, see also Tauxe 1993).

In South Asia as well mass media promote commercial transactions as signs of intimacy and sociality, though in somewhat different ways. For example a very common feature of Hindi and recent Nepali films is the birthday party, a trendy Western-style bash with store-bought birthday cake, decorations, the latest fashions, and tables laden with wrapped gifts. In the films I saw, birthday party scenes were so common as to be gratuitous. Beyond simply promoting these consumer spectacles as "modern," such films also suggested that in the modern world, caring relationships and even love—between friends and between parents and children—should be expressed through material transactions. Consequently I heard middle-class parents in Kathmandu complain about the new demands for gifts their children made at birthday times, and the pressure they felt to comply because other parents had set the precedent. As a Westerner (and thereby presumably an expert on birthday parties), in Kathmandu I was frequently asked about exactly what one should do at a birthday party, and about what gifts were appropriate to specific relationships (e.g., brother to sister, friend to friend). Birthday celebrations are nothing new in Nepal,¹⁴ but the middle-class practice of birthday parties as consumer rituals is a recent arrival.

Commercially mediated relationships are also at the heart of new understandings of gender and ideal gender behavior in Kathmandu. For example, by the early 1990s the English word *love* has entered colloquial Nepali to refer to a commercially mediated relationship between young men and women.¹⁵ While watching the genre of Hindi and Nepali films known as "*love stories*," young people would point to those segments where the hero and heroine were "doing *love*" (love *garne*).¹⁶ These

14 See Lewis (1984: 208-9) for a description of a traditional Newar birthday celebration.

15 This commercially oriented "*love*" discourse is similar to that documented by Laura Ahearn (2001) in Magar communities in rural central Nepal. The difference seems to be that whereas the young women and men in Ahearn's study locate the new ideal of marital romance within a state-driven development discourse, in Kathmandu "*love*" seems to be both less tied to marriage as an outcome, and more directly tied to consumer/object desires.

16 By contrast "*sex* *garnu*" or, "to do sex" is the vernacular expression used to describe intercourse and other sexual activities depicted in pornographic, and many general-release Western films.

scenes are usually accompanied by an orchestrated love song lip-synced by the young lovers shown gamboling in a manicured garden, riding carefree on a motorcycle, window shopping in a fashionable commercial district, holding hands in a movie theater, or gazing into each others' eyes in a fancy restaurant. Although "doing *love*" is sometimes also associated with natural settings (mountain meadows, etc.), frequently a film's hero and heroine "do *love*" in commercial settings—restaurants, cinemas, shopping arcades—that are "public" to the extent that anyone with money is "free" to enjoy them. In many of these films "doing *love*" occurs within a commercial lifestyle of "free" consumption.

In many South Asian mass-market films this commercial culture of "doing *love*" is also associated with fashionable clothing. Film characters often appear in several different high-fashion outfits in one romantic scene. In one Hindi film showing in Kathmandu in 1991 (entitled "Aanandhani"), this clothing fetishization was truly remarkable; in one scene while the heroine held a fixed pose, the camera cut repeatedly allowing her to go through seven or eight complete clothing changes,¹⁷ each one flashed onto her frozen body as the hero looked on in stupefied but approving wonder. In these films the heroine in particular at times seemed to be playing the role less of a person than of a stage prop. When fashion plays a role in and of itself, clothing—not the actress—seems to be the star attraction.

In another Nepali film (entitled "Jivan Yātrā") fashions take on a similar romantic role. Set entirely in rural Nepal, the hero and heroine wear "traditional" village attire from start to finish *except* in the romantic interludes. For example, in one scene the hero rests on a mossy bank and dreams of romance with the heroine. Strangely, in his dream both hero and heroine are attired in modern Western fashions. As dream lovers, the hero and heroine are transformed from rustic village folk into high-fashion trendsetters, serenading each other in a luxurious formal garden.

Indeed in Kathmandu—as in many South Asian films—there is a peculiar logic that links cinema, "doing *love*," and fashion. For example, when I asked one young man why Hindi "*love stories*" had become the most popular commercial films in Kathmandu, he responded obliquely:

17 For another reference to clothing changes during song sequences in Hindi film, see Thomas 1985: 127.

Look, now we can get all the *fashions* coming from Hong Kong and Thailand and therefore we young men and women [*keṭākeṭī*] like to go to the theater and watch the *love stories*.

This apparent non sequitur in fact conveys the logic of an imagined world where media shape and promote teenage romantic longing and then associate this desired relationship with a range of consumer activities, commodities, lifestyles, and objectified body ideals. In the minds of many middle-class Nepali teenagers, to "do *love*" one needs "*fashions*" just as it is "*fashion*" to "do *love*."

Sitting in an ice cream shop in downtown Kathmandu, dressed in imported jeans, floral shirt and sporting a pony tail, a young man from a cash-rich Sherpa family explained why he preferred "*love stories*" to other Hindi films:

Look, our age is *teenage*, isn't that right? In this age we're interested in doing *love*. That's the main thing, right [*hoinata*]? I mean like *how to love*, what to do, how can we do *love* at first [start a relationship], how to get a girl,... all of these angles. These new things we must be able to do ourselves so that's why I usually like to watch the *love stories*.

Although he seemed to be slightly unsure of his own statements, for this young man to be a modern "*teenager*" required that one know "*how to love*" and this in turn required the pedagogical assistance of cinematic "*love stories*."

Another young man—the 19-year-old son of a Brahman civil servant—hit upon some similar themes in a conversation with a co-worker. When asked what he thought about the contemporary fashion scene in Kathmandu, the young man replied with confidence:

This is the *fashion age*. If someone isn't able to use *fashion*, he'll be scorned. That's why, it seems to me, so few people these days aren't interested in *fashion*.

At this my co-worker—a student from rural Nepal without much money for new clothes—asked the young man whether he felt contempt toward him since he knew little about fashion.

No, I don't *hate* you. I'm just saying that we have to learn to be *modern*. We have to learn how to *love* girls. So I don't hate people, I only suggest that they do these things. But to be honest, people who know nothing about *fashion*, I tend to look down on.

What seemed remarkable about this conversation was the way in which this young man associated “*fashion*,” “modernity,” and “loving girls.” The three were inseparable in his mind: “doing *love*” and “doing *fashion*” were both fundamental aspects of “learn[ing] to be *modern*.”¹⁸ Learning to do these things is one’s middle-class obligation and those who fail in this commercial project of self-modernization are contemptible.

Even if filmic romances bore little resemblance to daily realities in Kathmandu, for many people these media representations constituted a kind of ideal, or at least a very real point of reference against which to gauge daily realities. In this light the rather boastful comments of one eighteen-year-old Kathmandu woman seemed significant. In her opinion:

People twenty years ago didn’t know what *love* was about because they didn’t have films. But my sister says, “Today’s young people [*keṭakeṭi*] already know everything from watching films.” Before they didn’t behave like this. The older people didn’t have this kind of environment.

Now, because of film, young people know what “*love*” is all about whereas earlier generations, deprived of films, knew nothing of “*love*.” Even if its connotations are less than clear, “*love*” seems to be, at the very least, a firmly established cultural concept among Kathmandu youth. As a cultural category, created and filled with meaning by film, “*love*” becomes a kind of “ideal type”—one possible way of being or behaving—even if not everyone agrees with the young man quoted above who saw “doing *love*” as practically the social obligation of the modern youth.

18 Mass media also validate consumer identities by plugging them into the highly charged national discourse of modernization, development and progress. Commercial media portrays “doing *love*” and “doing *fashion*” as natural, inevitable parts of the “modern” world; its consumer logic is conveyed as though it were natural law, or simple observation of fact (cf. Barthes 1983: 272, Sontag 1973: 168). Thus while the state and international aid agencies promote progress and change as incontestable, almost religious ideals (Pigg 1992), it is media that have free reign to create the imagined landscapes of the modern world in peoples’ minds (Liechty 1995).

Conclusion

In this article I have suggested that the use of English words such as "body," "face," and "love" in colloquial Nepali marks out a new space of imagination (alongside others) in the minds of young people, a space heavily mediated by commercial forces. Needless to say, members of earlier generations in Kathmandu were not without understandings of bodies, faces, or relations of love. Nor were they without specific regimes of embodied gender practices. Thus what this *new English usage* signals is how young people's imaginations have been colonized by commercially mediated consumer idea(l)s, and how certain people use these "imaginative resources" in new projects of distinction; in this case, projects of producing and embodying middle-class culture via gendered consumer identities. What these voices demonstrate is how young people in Kathmandu actively *use* mass media and other commodities to imagine and produce certain class and gender components of their social identities. But they also point to ways in which capitalist market forces *insert* consumer values and consumer behaviors into the core of class cultural practice. Like a retrovirus in a host DNA molecule, capitalist consumerism is knitted into the very fabric of identity, and therefore into social production and reproduction. Consumer agency and consumer cooption are but two sides of the same capitalist coin.

What do these middle-class voices from Kathmandu tell us about the role of mass media in processes of identity formation and class practice? On the one hand it is clear that media help to provide images and scripts for constructing selves in new ways. From "Rambo" and kung-fu bodies, to the new "necessity" of make-up, to the imperative to "love girls," young people use commercial media as guides to "modern," and therefore valued, lives and embodied lifestyles. In the middle-class project of producing a new class culture, media and other consumer goods serve as important means of distinction.

But beyond their roles as purveyors of narratives and representations, commercial media may be just as, or even more, important as what might be termed "technologies of surveillance." If surveillance means to bring into vision, perhaps one of media's most powerful effects is to bring the experience of meaning and reality increasingly into the domain of sight. In other words, media provide viewers with not simply new things to see, but new ways of seeing; the mode of representation may ultimately be more significant than the content. A key pedagogical function of commercial media may lie in their ability to open up to vision dimensions of experience that had previously been negotiated mainly in

other domains of judgment. Although it has not been the subject of this article, urban Nepalis continue to derive powerful identity experiences in the dimensions of ethnicity and caste, as well as diverse religious, linguistic, and regional affiliations. But the voices in this paper suggest that the new mediated and vision-based disciplines embedded in the discourses of “body” and “face,” “fashion” and “love” now play crucial roles in constructing and communicating identity in a new culture of class and consumerism.¹⁹ When the young Rambo aficionado implores us to “look at my *body*” in order to situate him in the new class-contesting world of mass consumption, or when other young people imply causative links between wearing the latest Hong Kong fashions and watching Hindi cinematic romances, we have entered a new cultural space where vision and visions (self image and commercial image) merge in processes of identity formation. The disciplines of vision conveyed in commercial media help promote a consumer epistemology that equates being and seeing.

This idea of a new mediated culture of vision helps us understand how modern commercial media bring with them not just *new objects of desire* (goods or lifestyles), but *new modes of desire*, or new means of achieving or producing desired results. That the young people whose voices are recorded here speak of the desire to be known in culturally valued ways is surely nothing new. What *is* new are the cultural logics by which people pursue their wishes to be known, and the commercial image worlds (signaled by words like “body,” “face,” and “love”) that their desires reference. What is fundamentally at stake is the re-imagining—the re-imagining—of gender subjectivity as an experience of bodily objectification, and of gender relations as a domain of object relations.

19 This is not to say that identities such as caste and ethnicity did not, or do not, have visual markers. Yet the conventions of dress and adornment associated with, for example, caste in the Kathmandu valley serve a relatively simple indexical function of marking identities determined in the more fundamental, or framing, realm of kinship. Of course contemporary consumer goods and lifestyles also serve to index social status, in this case class. Yet the indexical function is much more complex because a) class is a more fluid and contested/contestable category than caste, and b) in a market context of “free” labor and “free” consumption, class privilege denies the indexical utility of its own distinctive (and distinction-producing) consumer practice.

Distinguishing ways of desiring from things desired contributes to a theoretical understanding of culture as practice/process, rather than culture as content. In a time when the same Schwartzenegger poster adorns adolescent boys' walls from Uruguay to Uganda, Ukraine to Urumchi (Baker 1989), it is easy to be dazed by the monotony of a now global consumer veneer (as was Iyer 1988). But focusing on cultural process can help cut through the facade of global cultural homogenization, allowing us to explore the locally produced meanings of contemporary modernity. In this article I have argued that young people in Kathmandu use translocal resources in local cultural projects of identity formation. But I have also suggested that it is impossible to separate these locally deployed commercial cultural resources from now global capitalist commercial epistemologies through which they are conveyed. A global cultural economy does not imply a common cultural experience. It refers instead to a world in which common cultural processes inflect day-to-day lives around the world. In the words of one of the young men quoted above, he and other members of the new Kathmandu middle class "have to learn to be *modern*." It is the imperative to "learn modernity" that this young man shares with many others across the globe, even if, as a locally based class project, the contours and content of that modernity (and its corresponding "tradition") is uniquely Nepali.

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