

The Lowest Common Denominator: Consumerism, Branding, and Definitive Dissatisfaction in Stéphane Dompierre's *Un Petit pas pour l'homme*

Kelly-Anne Maddox

Volume 34, Number 1, 2009

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl34_1art05

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Maddox, K.-A. (2009). The Lowest Common Denominator:: Consumerism, Branding, and Definitive Dissatisfaction in Stéphane Dompierre's *Un Petit pas pour l'homme*. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 34(1), 81–98.

The Lowest Common Denominator: Consumerism, Branding, and Definitive Dissatisfaction in Stéphane Dompierre's *Un Petit pas pour l'homme*

KELLY-ANNE MADDOX

WINNER OF THE 2005 GRAND PRIX de la relève littéraire Archambault, Stéphane Dompierre's debut novel *Un Petit pas pour l'homme* (2004) garnered much critical acclaim; Hugues Corriveau writes in *Lettres québécoises* that "Stéphane Dompierre a du talent à revendre. Son premier roman . . . le prouve hors de tout doute. Son écriture est alerte, précise, pleine d'un dynamisme entraînant, convoquant avec brio le monologue, le dialogue et la description bien tournée" (20). Dompierre's fast paced, cynically comic narrative begins with the main character, Daniel, having decided to leave his girlfriend of six years. Disappointed by love, bored with his job in a Montreal record store, Daniel contemplates his own life and keenly observes that of others in a Plateau-Mont-Royal neighbourhood dominated by music, e-mail, the Internet, television, and especially by a plethora of references to popular culture and consumerism.

Beneath Dompierre's humorous depiction of the plight of the single male lies a sharp commentary on today's society. Although published several years before the American subprime mortgage crisis and the market crash of 2008, the novel documents the culture of decadence, consumption, and excessive credit characteristic of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and which has ultimately led to global economic meltdown. Benjamin Barber describes this culture in an interview on the CBC Radio program *The Current* on 28 November 2008, that is, "Black Friday," the most important shopping day of the year in the United States, a day which encapsulates today's hyperconsumerist lifestyle:

it's called Black Friday . . . because it's supposed to be not a red day for stores, but a black day, a day in which people spend more,

shop more, go to the malls more than on *any other* day of the year. I'll be very curious, at the end of the day, to know how people did because, of course, we are now in a global economic crisis brought on by what? By hyperconsumerism, people buying what they can't afford, spending . . . for needs they don't really have, and being talked into wants that are manufactured, rather than real.

Everything and everybody in this novel is driven by, influenced by, and obsessed with consumerism. Most of the characters work in either the retail or the service sectors: Daniel is the manager of a record store and defines himself vis-à-vis his work as a salesperson, his colleagues are a group of women he labels his “disquaires-amazones,” and Nancy, a woman whom he dates briefly, works as a waitress in a restaurant near the record store. Consumerism is so pervasive in Daniel's world that banal objects become consumer products; in the barbershop across from Daniel's ex-girlfriend's apartment, literally *everything* is for sale, even the chairs on which the clients are sitting, and the barber spends his time not cutting hair, but searching out, acquiring, and selling junk: “Son activité favorite consiste à rôder dans les rues de Laval, la fin de semaine, pour repérer les ventes de garage, acheter quelques machins un dollar ou deux et les revendre dans sa boutique à vingt dollars ou plus. Je ne l'ai jamais vu couper les cheveux. Personne ne l'a jamais vu couper les cheveux” (185).

The candid style and first-person narration of the novel allow Daniel to talk about his life without censoring himself, and he overtly critiques the world around him, openly expressing his disdain for, and frustration with, consumer society. Yet, although Dompierre's work offers a very real, very pertinent, representation of consumer society, the author does not issue a call to action against the pejorative and homogenizing influences of consumerism. Rather, the novel explores the inherently apathetic attitude of citizens within an increasingly individualistic society, and exposes the personal and collective stagnation arising from such a generalized culture of complacency. **Through the portrayal of consumerism, and the ways in which consumerism dominates life in the new millennium, Dompierre's character comes to exemplify the current vacuous status of his generation, as “L'auteur . . . observe assez bien ceux et celles de son âge qui, n'ayant pas d'idéal, ne vont nulle part et n'approfondissent rien, réduisant la vie à des phases comme le circuit de la lune, d'où sa prévisibilité . . . et sa monotonie”** (Karch 14). This

article proposes to study the role of consumerism in *Un Petit pas pour l'homme*, and will focus on mass media and advertising, the implications of consumerist dissatisfaction for personal relationships and the quest for happiness, and the reduction of cultural, personal, and artistic identity to the lowest common denominator.

Mass Media and Advertising

Jean Baudrillard writes in *The Consumer Society* that mass communication, mainly through television, is one of the defining characteristics of consumer society (34). Daniel points out that the youth of the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century see television as a ubiquitous fixture, constituting an intrinsic presence in his own life even well before he was born, since he was conceived in July 1969 while his parents watched the Apollo moon landing on television. Years later, after his breakup, Daniel moves into a hotel for several days while looking for a new apartment; as he mindlessly watches television from his hotel bed, a myriad of images spews forth:

J'ai réussi à caler la télécommande sous le matelas et toutes les deux secondes on passe à la chaîne suivante. Quarante-quatre chaînes en boucle, quatre vingt-huit secondes et tout recommence. Il y a de la musique country, du techno, du rétro francophone, deux films avec Bruce Willis, un feuilleton pakistanais, on me donne la météo une chaîne sur sept, je peux acheter des voitures, des bijoux, six appareils de musculation différents, j'ai les nouvelles des sourds, Rita McNeil en concert, un massacre, un déraillement de train, un écrasement d'avion, un bon paquet d'enfants disparus, un Michel Drucker, une opération à cœur ouvert, la vie secrète des tigres, la vie secrète des araignées, la vie secrète de Guilda, Bruce Willis qui vend des appareils de musculation à cœur ouvert dans un feuilleton pakistanais. (27-28)

Through television advertisements, consumerism transcends the boundaries of public space to constantly and persistently infiltrate private space, permitting commercials and product promotion to passively enter Daniel's existence, making it practically impossible to escape the world of consumerism.¹ According to Rip Cronk, the combination of television and advertising is overwhelming and convinces viewers to buy products they do not need; in his online essay "Consumerism and the New Capitalism," he writes: "The American public has been inun-

dated by an unending parade of commodities and fabricated television spectacles that keeps it preoccupied with the ideals and values of consumerism.”

In her groundbreaking work *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*, Naomi Klein remarks that current advertising and marketing practices are based on the concept of branding. According to Klein, the most successful products are not commodities, but rather those that represent a specific lifestyle promise (21) and evoke for consumers a precise and positive sentiment (29); Starbucks founder Howard Schulz claims that the coffee giant offers not just beverages, but also “the romance of the coffee experience, the feeling of warmth and community people get in Starbucks stores” (qtd. in Klein 20). Similarly, no longer a shoe company, “Nike . . . is leveraging the deep emotional connection that people have with sports and fitness,” according to Scott Bedbury, vice-president of marketing for Starbucks and former head of marketing at Nike (qtd. in Klein 21). Daniel takes advantage of the trend towards branding in order to sell records, playing on the customers’ sense of nostalgia associated with the sale of vinyl (54). In Daniel’s opinion, everything in the world of sales is about image, and a flashy, attractive record cover is more readily marketable than an ordinary one (56). The importance of branding is obvious in the following excerpt:

Nous sommes sur la Métropolitaine et nous filons à toute allure (5 km/h, embouteillage) vers le Super Club Mart Dépot™ et c’est là, tout à coup, que m’arrive le petit éclair . . . Je ne suis plus un mec de trente ans dans une Écho grise surchauffée, parti s’acheter soixante-huit rouleaux de papier cul quadruple épaisseur, jumbo, molletonné, nouveau et amélioré, écologique, biologique, recyclé, recyclable, hypo-allergène, anti-bactérien, non testé sur les animaux, doux comme un petit chat tout blanc tout mignon™. (19)

The inclusion of specific brands, e.g., the Super Club Mart Dépot™, the Echo, and the kitten toilet paper™, effectuates a modification in the symbolism of the generic image of a thirtysomething couple driving to a big box store to buy toilet paper. The products mentioned all speak to a certain lifestyle; as Toyota promoted its Echo several years ago, television ads showed hip and beautiful GenXers storing a multitude of diverse objects in the hatchback (including a rapid tire-change team in one ad), implying not only practicality for the yuppies of the twenty-first

century, but also freedom, individuality, and, of course, sex appeal. An Australian ad, in which the Echo, like the Pied Piper, leads other makes of cars to jump off a cliff, touts the brand's supremacy by implying that the Echo is a smarter, if not the smartest, car. The "cute, white, little kitten" transforms the mundane, essential household item by playing to the sympathies of the consumer, who is no longer buying toilet paper but rather, connecting with a lifestyle and even an emotional experience. Recent ads for the kitten brand toilet paper feature two young children playing joyfully with fluffy young felines while their father naps on the sofa; the toilet paper is invested with connotations of not only softness but also a middle-class, familial lifestyle. In buying such goods, Daniel lives the branding experience, since "advertising and sponsorship have always been about using imagery to equate products with positive cultural or social experiences. What makes nineties-style branding different is that it increasingly seeks to take these associations out of the representational realm and make them a lived reality" (Klein 29). For today's "bobos," as David Brooks refers to "bourgeois bohemians" (qtd. in Barber, *Consumed* 171), having the right brands, even down to the right brand of toilet paper, is primordial. Yet, this example also reveals the failings and the ridiculous excessiveness of branding, for, despite the Echo being an identity symbol, a "reflection of you," as a 1999 ad suggests, in Daniel's world, the Echo is unable to bypass traffic jams, and the cute, eco-friendly, recycled kitten toilet paper is literally being flushed down the drain.

Since the turn towards marketing and brand promises leads to the assumption that the right product can change one's life, and excessive consumption gives the impression of not merely existing but of being truly alive (Baudrillard, *Consumer* 43), characters aim to create a certain branded, and unique, image through the accumulation of consumer goods. As Barber notes in *Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole*, "If brand name can shape or even stand in for identity, then to figure out 'who you are' you must decide where (and for what) you shop" (194). Consumerism and self-esteem are thus intricately connected, and in reaction to his friend Nicolas's panic attack about becoming a father, Daniel's immediate advice is, "Un peu de magasinage rue Saint-Denis, ça va te remonter le moral, tu vas voir!" (175). When Daniel feels down and needs to boost his morale, the obvious outlet for him, as for a large number of people

in contemporary Western society, is to partake in a little “retail therapy.” Unhappy with his job, his immediate impulse is to consume, in the double sense of the word: “Attention, possibilité de déprime passagère. Remède miracle: acheter un pot de crème glacée au café pour ce soir, ressortir *La Salle de bain* de Jean-Philippe Toussaint de la bibliothèque et m’installer sur le divan avec une couverture douce jusqu’à ce que le sommeil arrive” (142-43). Surrounded by an overabundance of products, consumers are led to believe that these goods define who they are, and that their purchases are invested with the power to not only ameliorate but radically change their lives. This is the case for Daniel, who decorates his new apartment in order to create his very own “baisodrome,” that is, his 1960s-style bachelor pad/love shack, with the hopes of carefully and prolifically honing his seduction skills (30).

Definitive Dissatisfaction

The impulse towards acquisition and accumulation has brought about a change in the way Westerners view consumerism, and consequentially has effected a shift in the relationship of society to objects and to money. Contemporary consumerism is based on a sentiment of “definitive dissatisfaction” (Baudrillard, *Consumer* 62), a sentiment which pushes consumers, ever unsatisfied with what they have, to constantly and frantically shop, continuously moving from one object to another, stockpiling a myriad of useless goods. As Barber notes, most First World citizens, controlling sixty percent of global consumer spending, no longer have genuine needs, but rather have wants that are disguised as needs and are enticed to spend more and more on bigger and better things (*Consumed* 10-11). Daniel’s friend Alex understands that needs are manufactured and is capable of selling practically anything by artificially creating for the consumer a need, which he then “satisfies” with an unpopular record that wouldn’t otherwise sell (56). Daniel also takes advantage of customers and changing trends simply in order to move records, convincing his clientele they absolutely *need* that very product: “J’empoigne une compilation de groupes inconnus avec une jolie pochette d’inspiration minimaliste-sixties, et je vante ce truc comme si je l’avais écouté. . . . Je n’ai aucune idée de ce dont je parle, mais les gens trottent vers la caisse, convaincus qu’ils ont entre les mains le disque du siècle” (137).

In the 2008 Massey Lectures, Margaret Atwood underscores the consequences of this shift in consumerism, noting that “The first credit card was introduced in 1950. In 1955, the average Canadian household debt-to-income ratio was 55 percent; in 2003, it was 105.2 percent. The ratio has gone up since then. In the United States the ratio was 114 percent in 2004. In other words, a great many people are spending more than they’re earning” (8). As Daniel remarks, one of the drastic consequences of overconsumption is that credit and debt are both intrinsic aspects of his generation (176); in order to create his new “single guy” image, Daniel goes into debt by buying furniture he cannot afford: “Je m’offre à crédit un mobilier vraiment *cool*. Et vraiment au-dessus de mes moyens. Cet appartement sera dédié à la baise, il se doit d’être attrayant” (26). Baudrillard points out in *The System of Objects* that today’s consumers have come to see credit as an economic *right*, and no longer as a privilege (169), much like Daniel, who describes his new furnishings as if he actually deserves them. Furthermore, the prevalence of credit brings about a modification in consuming habits; consumption now precedes production, objects are now ahead of us in time, and thus, consumer goods are automatically perceived as future debt (Baudrillard, *System* 171); Dompierre’s novel reflects the dilemma of a generation who, through its pursuit of trendy and hip images, and having amassed insurmountable debt, has ended up creating a society where “*We are forever behindhand relative to our objects*” (Baudrillard, *System* 171). Daniel and his contemporaries think nothing of ruining their finances in their quest to create an identity based on the perfect image, and, in so doing, their main function in life becomes not only to buy and create an identity, but also to reimburse images; such characters are mired in debt, consumed, and ravished by “le monstre de l’endettement inutile qui nous dévore par en dedans” (176). Ironically, the perceived need to consume leads not to the lifestyle promised by advertising, but rather enslaves consumers to big corporations and to credit collection agencies. Cronk writes, “The traditional values of Western society are degenerating under the influences of corporate politics, the commercialization of culture and the impact of mass media. Society is awakening from its fascination with television entertainment to find itself stripped of tradition . . . and bound to the credit obligations of a defunct American dream” (“Consumerism”).

One of the most dire side effects of consumerism is its influence on interpersonal relationships, since consumer society has led people to surround themselves less and less with other people and more and more with objects: “Their daily dealings are now not so much with their fellow men, but rather . . . with the reception and manipulation of goods and messages” (Baudrillard, *Consumer* 25). Dompierre portrays a society in which the object, and the purchase of objects, such as Daniel’s lava lamp and collection of books and CDs, along with the purchase of clothing and records, takes precedence over human relationships and personal development. People are distanced from each other through consumerism, with relationships taking place in the virtual world, since “Modern media and our increasingly virtual lives are . . . defining features of late consumer capitalism” (Barber, *Consumed* 191). The computer, an essential aspect of Daniel’s work life, a necessary tool for consumerism and capitalism, is simultaneously an instrument of connection and of distance, as it allows him to communicate with friends via email, yet this communication takes place in the virtual realm. Moreover, relationships themselves behave as commodities, motivated by the same sense of continual dissatisfaction that drives consumerism. Just as consumers constantly move from one commodity to another, so too the various characters all move from one relationship to the next, the novel opening with Daniel’s expression of dissatisfaction vis-à-vis his relationship with his soon-to-be ex, Sophie; like the customers in his store, Daniel notes that he too is looking for something new and exciting (22).

Relationships are also described in terms of models, and Daniel refers to his typical relationship pattern as the *modèle Fiasco*[™] (218). With the exception of slight individual differences, these models all echo the pattern laid out in *L’Étude des cycles*, a fictitious self-help book cited in excerpt at the beginning of the novel which delineates a relationship pattern progressing from week one, spent enthralled in passion, up to year five, which culminates in a sentiment of banality, an attraction to other people, and eventually separation. The trademark sign underscores the transformation of relationships into consumer products, evident when Daniel, during one of his post-breakup forays into the singles scene at a local bar, says “Ça fait un bail que je n’ai pas été disponible sur le *marché* de la chair et de l’amour, je ne me sens plus vraiment dans le coup” (32; emphasis added). Furthermore, human relationships can be bought

and sold, as Daniel symbolically sells the remnants of his relationship with Sophie to the barber for five cents, and when his friend Nicolas expresses his trepidation at the news of his wife's pregnancy, Daniel uses consumer rhetoric to talk about becoming a parent, saying that a child does not come with a satisfaction or money-back guarantee. Such rampant commodification ultimately has the effect of breaking down human relationships, and Daniel is alienated not only from himself but also from the other. As the novel draws to a close, Daniel sees his new love interest through a dirty window, yet the novel ends there and they never intersect beyond this moment, symbolizing their current estrangement and foreshadowing their future, inevitable, separation (226).

In the fictitious pop psychology excerpt at the beginning of the novel, Dompierre critiques the contemporary dependence on self-help books and popular psychologists *à la* "Dr. Phil." At first glance the excerpt appears legitimate, given the seemingly credible and realistic nature of the bibliographical information; the author is a certain Dr. Maurice Liebert, and the book was published in 1972 by "Mondes Visibles" (9). However, Dompierre's adept use of parody quickly indicates to the reader that this book is, first of all, not real and, second, definitely not to be taken seriously. After an apparently well-founded three paragraph preamble describing the research and the subjects on which the book is based, the fictional author discusses the five post-breakup stages: "Phase 1: phase dite du *taureau relâché*, connue aussi sous le nom de *phase du caniche en rut zignant sur la jambe du monocle habillé propre qu'on ne voit pas souvent*"; "Phase 2: Phase dite du *bébé phoque impuisant faisant des petits yeux tristournets à la télé pour attendrir les vieilles madames et faire pleurer les petites filles qui tiennent un journal intime*" (10), and so on. The entire novel can effectively be read as a parody of the stereotypical breakup experience, since the five chapters of the novel correspond to, and are given the titles of, each of the five phases described by Dr. Liebert. The novel ends on an ironic note, since the last chapter corresponds to the fifth phase of *L'Étude des cycles*: "Phase dite du *lemming qui se balance en bas de la falaise comme tous ses amis lemmings, prouvant ainsi qu'il n'a rien compris dans la phase 4*" (12). Stewart Justman writes in *Fool's Paradise: The Unreal World of Pop Psychology* that pop psychology is a self-referential, closed system, deferring only to other works of pop psychology or to itself (6-7). According to the excerpt from *L'Étude des cycles*, after arriving at the fifth phase, the cycle

starts all over from the very beginning with the commencement of a new relationship; despite finding new love with his colleague Eve at the end of the novel, Daniel will obviously have learned nothing from his experiences and will continue to make the same mistakes, according to the pattern laid out in the fictitious self-help text. Dompierre clearly mocks such a system, and this *mise en abyme* is a blatant negation of popular psychology, insinuating that its proponents are principally interested in continuing the cycle of treatment and care (Justman 6). Such a vicious cycle can only lead to the sale of even more books and even more television shows, perpetuating not only self-help culture but also consumerism itself.

The movement from one product to another, from one relationship to another, and the turn towards pop psychology as a remedy for life's difficulties, is inextricably bound to the quest for happiness. In *Un Petit pas pour l'homme*, happiness is a consumer product, as Daniel says of the door-to-door salespeople who come to his apartment: "Il doit y avoir en ce moment des dizaines de gens qui se bousculent à ma porte, soucieux de m'apporter le bonheur, et moi, l'ingrat, je les fuis" (81). The permanent dissatisfaction inherent in consumerism impedes the characters from ever achieving a state of genuine happiness since, as a consumer product, the only type of happiness possible is an ephemeral, fleeting state based on the whim of changing fashion; the old adage is true, money can't buy happiness, and, as Baudrillard indicates, the accumulation of consumer goods does not lead to true satisfaction, for in searching out happiness in objects, consumers are doing little more than accumulating the "signs of happiness" (*Consumer* 31). Daniel himself believes there is a displacement of the quest for happiness in contemporary society, and he admits to not understanding the true meaning of happiness: "Il y a sûrement quelque chose que je n'ai pas encore compris, côté bonheur. Je me retrouve à trente ans incapable de m'engager dans quoi que ce soit, sans fric, sans amour et sans projets. Mon boulot de disquaire m'évite de prendre des décisions compliquées, pas assez de fric pour élever des marmots, trop de fric pour me plaindre d'être exploité, juste assez de fric pour rester au milieu de nulle part" (81). Daniel defines his concept of happiness using financial discourse and concentrates especially on how his (lack of) money and his (non-existent) purchasing power contribute to his current sense of stagnation. In investing his search for happiness in money and consumer goods,

Daniel, like the other characters, ends up trapped in an in-between state, which ultimately equates to being nowhere. According to Joseph Epstein, more and more adults today enjoy a sort of “perpetual adolescence, cut loose, free of responsibility, without the real pressures that life, that messy business, always exerts” (qtd. in Barber, *Consumed* 16); such a manchild, Daniel remains in an infantilized mode of being, liberated from obligations and accountability by a culture that markets to children and to the child inside the adult.

The Lowest Common Denominator

A myriad of intertextual references seem a priori to enrich Dompierre’s narrative, and once Daniel renounces television, he begins voraciously reading; his selection of reading material, works by authors from home and abroad like Eduardo Mendoza, Fernand Montagne, and Rainer-Maria Rilke, reflect the contemporary cultural *métissage* of Quebec society, especially evident in Montreal. These books, as well as Daniel’s choice of music, underscore a certain pluricultural consciousness. The music Daniel plays in the record store crosses genres and cultural boundaries; he not only listens to francophone Quebec music, but the book also speaks to Italian culture through classical music and opera pieces, Spanish culture through flamenco music, and Mexican culture when Daniel plays the *Amores Perros* soundtrack. In addition, Daniel listens to Lenny Kravitz’s 1999 remake of “American Woman” by the Guess Who, thus referring to a *mélange* of African-American culture and anglophone Canadian culture, a *mélange* inserted here into francophone culture. Through multiple references to literature and music, Dompierre portrays popular culture as an opening of Quebec culture on a worldwide scale, signalling a collective consciousness receptive to both national and international cultural production.

“Yet,” as Barber notes in his discussion of the homogenizing influence of branding and consumerism, “the differences over which ethnic nationalities and religious and racial factions continue to murder one another around the world are treated by consumer commerce as faux, while the common commercial identities marketers are trying to establish are treated as real” (*Consumed* 170). Consumer culture attempts to erase real-life cultural, social, and ethnic differences, positing in their place an artificially manufactured consumer identity, and thus the cultural richness noted above, translating a cosmopolitan Quebec universe,

is subordinated by consumerism. Daniel and his colleagues play with the promotional cutouts in the store, with the following result: “Je le retrouve [le balai] derrière le Pavarotti grandeur nature en carton, sur lequel nous avons collé la tête de Céline Dion™. Un monstre” (90).² A hybrid of male and female, Québécois and Italian, opera and pop music, such an image is not only incongruous but, just as the music played in the store is meant to entice customers to buy what they are hearing, the cutouts are promotional items, designed to sell Pavarotti and Dion records. Despite the obvious positive connotations that such multicultural and heterogeneous influences lend to contemporary Quebec, these references are inserted into consumer society; both the music and the cutouts are removed from their cultural context and replaced within the context of consumerism; their identity is no longer a cultural one, but a consumerist one.

The transformation of cultural production into consumer objects results in the depreciation of cultures and places them on the same level as other commodities, as in the earlier example of Daniel watching television. The continual back-and-forth movement between programming and advertising creates a rapid displacement between one image and another, between a here and an elsewhere, invoking a certain cultural banality, as television lends human dramas and tragedies the same worth as a Rita McNeil concert or a Bruce Willis film, or as a commercial for weightlifting equipment. The result is an interminable cycle of confusion between images in the last lines of the excerpt: “Bruce Willis qui vend des appareils de musculation à cœur ouvert dans un feuilleton pakistanais” (28). Barber notes that “What was once the Fourth Estate — civic journalism’s critical role vis-à-vis the three traditional estates or classes of the political realm — is now little more than real estate, commodity capitalism selling infotainment in order to maximize advertising revenue in order to satisfy corporate stockholders” (*Consumed* 181). The alternation of world events with random advertisements has the effect of trivializing news events and transforming them into objects of consumption due to the juxtaposition and combination of signs; according to Baudrillard, this not only suggests that world history is “immaterial” in relation to consumer objects, but that “The real effect is more subtle: it is the imposition upon us, by the systematic succession of messages, of the *equivalence* of history and the minor news item, of the event and the spectacle, of information and advertising *at*

the level of the sign" (*Consumer* 122). The transformation of news into advertising devalues world events of meaning, as Baudrillard underscores in *Simulacra and Simulation* when he writes, "Today what we are experiencing is the absorption of all virtual modes of expression into that of advertising. All original cultural forms, all determined languages are absorbed into advertising because it has no depth, it is instantaneous and instantaneously forgotten" (87).

The novel also sheds light on a contemporary bourgeois disregard for cultural identities, most notably in the following dialogue between Daniel and a woman looking for a "flamingo" CD:

— Du quoi?

— De la musique flamingo, ça vient du Mexique, vous connaissez pas ça? J'écoutais ça dans mon voyage à Caillot-Coco. Il y a de la guitare dedans. Du monde qui crie en tapant avec des robes pis des moustaches. Vous connaissez pas ça?

— Désolé, ma p'tite madame, Flamingo, ils vendent de la dinde, pas de la musique. Par contre, je peux vous montrer notre section de musique flamenco espagnole.

— Non, merci, c'est pas DU TOUT ça que je cherche, monsieur!
JE VAIS ALLER AILLEURS. (95)

Daniel clearly pokes fun at the woman, as the author lends another definition to the word flamingo than that which the woman means, and which is also different from that which the reader would expect (that a flamingo is a bird, not a Quebec poultry company). Furthermore, Dompierre shows here that multiculturalism is subordinated to consumerism, and even if Daniel attempts to correct the woman's error, she continues to insist that he is wrong; the discrepancy between what the woman asks for, (and what she believes to be certain, i.e., that "flamingo" is a musical genre) and the truth which both Daniel and the reader know is certainly amusing, but it also camouflages a more serious issue, that of the woman's cultural ignorance — an ignorance of which she, as a consumer, is fundamentally unaware.

Cultural production and art, as commodities, are also reduced to the lowest common denominator. Through reproduction and distribution, art on the one hand becomes accessible to the general public (Baudrillard, *Consumer* 111), exposing a mass audience to cultural phenomena. On the other hand, reproduction can be considered a form of kitsch, which vulgarizes art and detracts from its aesthetic qualities (e.g.,

Beethoven ringtones, Monet umbrellas, Van Gogh coffee mugs, etc.); Baudrillard writes that “It [kitsch] can best be defined as a *pseudo-object* or, in other words, . . . a simulation, a copy, an imitation, a stereotype[,] . . . a dearth of real signification and a superabundance of signs, of allegorical references, disparate connotations[:] . . . a glorification of the detail and a saturation by details” (*Consumer* 110). Mass production, in this case, denigrates and voids the creative impulse; Ikea, one of the principal symbols of kitsch in *Un Petit pas pour l’homme*, is portrayed as impeding and even suppressing artistic creation. In place of creativity, it posits an aesthetics of reproduction; as Daniel reflects on his adolescent dream of becoming a comic book artist, a dream lost to the machinations of adult life, he considers the plight of a friend who renounced his art to go work at Ikea: “J’ai cessé peu à peu de dessiner, ne sachant pas du tout à quoi tout ça pourrait me servir. Je constate que ça ne m’aurait probablement servi à rien, un des plus doués de la bande travaille depuis des années dans l’entrepôt d’Ikéa, il a un je ne sais quoi de désespéré dans le regard et plus de cheveux” (84).

Just as consumerism has the potential to empty art of meaning, so too it creates empty vessels of consumers, and personal identity is solely invested in images that become “identity signifiers from the outside because the inside is empty” (Barber, *Consumed* 194). Much like in Lise Tremblay’s 1999 novel *La Danse juive* where the narrator says of her mother, “Elle s’est endormie dans les musiques sirupeuses des centres commerciaux qu’elle a trop fréquentés” (51), consumers in Dompierre’s work are like sheep, led passively through reality by advertisements and branding such that they become gullible, naïve, and incapable of thinking for themselves; Barber writes that, “For all the power of marketing, consumers are too often willing subjects of manipulation. It is less the efficacy of advertising than the frailty of shoppers that renders resistance so problematic. For in the absence of real wants and genuine needs, consumers often seem to invite the producer of goods and services to tell them what it is that they want” (*Consumed* 291). Daniel and his colleagues play their favourite game and exploit their customers’ blatant credibility by rapidly throwing incongruous words, such as “similicuir,” “monokini,” “fugace,” “sphinx,” and “daltonien,” into conversations with consumers: “Ce disque rappelle tellement l’été qu’on se mettrait en *monokini*. Il a beau être mystérieux comme un *sphinx*, ses chansons restent faciles à comprendre. Un album si coloré que même un *dalto-*

nien le voit en couleurs!” (200); and: “Fugace. ‘L’écoute de ce disque ne laisse qu’un souvenir fugace.’ Aouch. J’ai gagné, mais le client n’a rien compris de ce que je lui racontais” (200). Through such word games, the author exposes consumers’ complacency, even stupidity, showing that they appear to be in a consumerism-induced coma (41). In the case of the “victims” (41), the situation is at once humorous and disturbing, given that the customers appear oblivious to the game the salespeople are playing at their expense; intent only on buying things, such consumers never once question the use of these words, even if they seem not to understand their meaning or context.

Consumers are also seen by salespeople, by advertisers, and by producers in this novel as stereotypical prototypes; when a father comes into the store to find a birthday gift for his daughter, he has only to describe her appearance for Daniel to grasp her musical preferences: “Si votre fille avait les cheveux courts teints en bleu, je lui aurais donné un truc punk ou alternatif, mais je vois tout de suite que c’est une fille de bonne famille [because she wears her hair in a ponytail] et qu’elle ne s’est pas encore révoltée, alors hop! *Boys band!*” (101). According to Baudrillard, identity in consumer society is no longer singular, specific, or original, since “The general process [of personalization] can be described historically: it is industrial monopoly concentration, which, *abolishing the real differences* between human beings, homogenizing persons and products, *simultaneously ushers in the reign of differentiation*[;] . . . *it is upon the loss of differences that the cult of difference is founded*” (Baudrillard, *Consumer* 89). Daniel notes that people of his generation all go to work every morning to pay for their “Ikéappartements, [leurs] reproductions de Klimt, [leurs] vêtements neufs vieillis et froissés à l’usine et [leurs] bouteilles de vin hors de prix” (54). No longer is it enough to keep up with the Joneses, but one must now have more, and have better than the Joneses, as a sign of bourgeois social standing; customers thus no longer consume objects *per se*, but rather, “The principle of analysis remains as follows: you never consume the object in itself . . . ; you are always manipulating objects . . . as signs which distinguish you either by affiliating you to your own group taken as an ideal reference or by marking you off from your group by reference to a group of higher status” (Baudrillard, *Consumer* 61). Despite the fact that “in the postmodern form of consumer identity, appearance is everything” (Barber, *Consumed* 194), mass production eliminates any true distinc-

tion between individuals; “As a result,” remarks Baudrillard, “to differentiate oneself is precisely to affiliate to a model . . . to a combinatorial pattern of fashion, and therefore to relinquish any real difference, any *singularity*, since these can only arise in concrete, conflictual relations with others and the world” (*Consumer* 88). Thus, by attempting to create a unique expression of identity through the purchase of Klimt reproductions, of furniture from Ikea, and of prewrinkled jeans, the characters ultimately buy exactly the same things as everyone else. In aiming for distinction, they end up resembling each other, and instead of expressing their individual identity, they all live in replicas of the same Ikea showroom apartments decorated with the same items of furniture which Daniel calls the *Bagossen* and the *Inutiliten* (96).

Conclusion

By the end of the novel, the reader is left with a sentiment of disappointment, for even though Daniel critiques the inherent problems of consumerism, he does absolutely nothing to retaliate against them or to propose an alternative model. Unwilling to overcome his complacency, Daniel never truly revolts against consumption; on the contrary, he continues to buy the very same products he criticizes, and to actively participate in consumerism. Daniel ultimately remains a citizen of consumer society, creating his own branded identity to market himself as part of his job search: “J’allume l’ordinateur, je balance mon manteau dans un coin, fiévreux, et je me compose un curriculum vitae de type ‘cinéma américain’: près de la vérité, mais revu et amélioré. Quelques tournures habiles suffisent à se rendre plus intéressant auprès d’un eventual employeur. Après dix ans passés dans la vente au détail, je devrais bien être capable de me vendre aussi” (144). Furthermore, he literally sells himself to his boss at the end of the novel, becoming himself a product and joining the “commodity sphere” (Baudrillard, *Consumer* 188); after quitting his job, the owner of the record store lures him back with the promise of a new and improved manager’s position, a position which goes hand in hand with more money.

Daniel’s trajectory may be read as a metaphor for twenty-first-century Quebec culture and society. Dompierre’s novel is far removed from such literary pillars of Quebec as the novel of the land and the works of the Quiet Revolution. Whereas fiction from these eras explored the question of what it meant to be Québécois and aimed to define and

establish the primary tenets of Quebec identity, this cultural specificity is clearly absent from *Un Petit pas pour l'homme*; beyond the mention of such superfluous aspects as the names of several Montreal streets and neighbourhoods, Dompierre's novel could just as easily take place in any other record store in any other big city in the Western world. Instead of interrogating a distinct and contemporary Quebec cultural identity, the novel represents a generic, postmodern consumerist world where "the market becomes a setting in which deracinated young moderns look for roots" (Barber, *Consumed* 198). *Un Petit pas pour l'homme* exemplifies the ways in which consumerism contributes to the weakening of not only Quebec's cultural autonomy and the perpetuation of a distinct Québécois identity, but also to the subordination of the numerous, and plural, voices from elsewhere, as cultural heterogeneity is subverted in favour of consumerism. Just like its main character, the novel does not counter homogenization, does not interrogate what it means to be Québécois, and does not search out a new definition for Quebec identity in the twenty-first century. Rather, it perpetuates Quebec's absorption into, and its dilution by, a new consumerist and globalized world order, a world where "There are no global citizens, only global consumers; no global states, only global capitalist firms . . . no global or national identities which are by definition parochial and local, only the new, hollowed-out identity conferred by brands" (Barber, *Consumed* 163).

NOTES

¹ Daniel is also bombarded with door-to-door vendors trying to sell him such things as book club subscriptions, bags of apples, and with telemarketers selling life insurance, warning him that he is in constant danger from omniscient and ever-vigilant, yet vaguely identified, "invaders" lurking outside (80). However, it is the salespeople who infiltrate his private space who are the real invaders, especially since Daniel calls them "les intrus" (80).

² Céline Dion", whose name is always accompanied by a trademark sign in this novel, has become what Klein calls a "superbrand," a term coined by David Falk (Klein 57): that is, a celebrity used not only to sell others' products, but to sell herself as well. Dion's website has an online boutique selling everything from music to mugs, to jewellery, to pen stands, to clothing, to perfume, all bearing the Celine Dion logo. Ironically, Dion was hired to promote Chrysler in 2003, but the endorsement deal was ended after a year, reportedly because Dion appeared to be upstaging the very product she was being paid to promote. Kelly O'Keefe, CEO of Emergence Brand Labs, says: "it can be trouble . . . when you link with such a big celebrity, you run the danger of the celebrity persona competing with and overshadowing your brand" (Kiley).

WORKS CITED

- Atwood, Margaret. *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth*. CBC Massey Lectures. Toronto: Anansi, 2008.
- Barber, Benjamin R. "Consumption." Interview. *The Current*. CBC Radio. 28 Nov. 2008. 12 Dec. 2008. <<http://www.cbc.ca/thecurrent/2008/200811/20081128.html>>.
- . *Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole*. New York: Norton, 2007.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *The System of Objects*. Trans. James Benedict. London: Verso, 2005.
- . *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. Trans. Chris Turner. London: Sage, 1998.
- . *Simulacra and Simulation*. Trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994.
- Céline Dion Official Website*. Céline Dion. 7 March 2008. <www.celinedion.com>.
- Corriveau, Hugues. "Les Deux pieds sur terre?" *Lettres québécoises* 115 (2004): 19-20.
- Cronk, Rip. "Consumerism and the New Capitalism." 1996. *Art on the Rebound: A Collection of Essays on Art and Culture*. 7 March 2008.
- Dompierre, Stéphane. *Un Petit pas pour l'homme*. Montréal: Québec Amérique, 2004.
- Justman, Stewart. *Fool's Paradise: The Unreal World of Pop Psychology*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2005.
- Karch, Pierre. "Roman." Michel Lord, dir. "Lettres canadiennes 2003." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 74.1 (2004-05): 1-24.
- Kiley, David. "Chrysler Bets Big on Dion's Endorsement Deal." 6 August 2003. *USA Today*. 10 March 2008. <http://www.usatoday.com/money/advertising/adtrack/2003-06-08-dion_x.htm>.
- Klein, Naomi. *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*. Toronto: Knopf, 2000.
- Tremblay, Lise. *La Danse juive*. Montréal: Leméac, 1999.