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You've Always Got Time: (Disposable) Coffee Cup Litter as Discursive Regime(s)

Marc Ouellette

Quick, convenient cups of coffee from the seemingly infinite number of outlets might fuel a nation('s workers) but once the liquid has been consumed little can be done with the supposedly disposable paper, fibre or styrofoam cups. Even though the cups cannot be recycled they do not necessarily find their way into the trash – at least not immediately. The coffee's convenience and the concomitant (alternative) disposal methods of consumers have produced a discourse in litter by virtue of the places and positionings – that is, the practices – through which what I will call “discursive littering” occurs. Once the liquid has been consumed, many coffee drinkers place the disposable cups in an equally convenient and often indoor location, especially the ubiquitous Tim Hortons variety (at least in the Canadian context). However, this practice often differs from the traditional, stereotypical conception of littering as an act of callous carelessness, or what I will call “common littering.” Therefore, this essay, the photographs it contains, the comments of some litterers, along with the readings available to observers, will not be a direct critique of contemporary consumerism, the cultural status of Tim Hortons – the dominant brand – or the ethics of non-recyclable yet supposedly disposable materials. Instead I want to conceptualize the method through which the litter appears as a (form of) language which itself serves as a critique, whether one is intended or not, of contemporary consumerism through both its manifest and its latent meanings.

One may find the disposable cups placed carefully and consciously in a manner consistent with the contemporary popular usage of

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“ironically,” or in a manner which might suggest ironic humour. Additionally, the pieces function as a version (of simulacra) of a recognition/witness that the (former) bearer had been in that space. In combination, the two primary functions of discursive littering – ironic and recognition/witness – suggest at once a need for attention and with it a sense that the possibilities for and likelihood of gaining attention in our culture are limited at best. For the discursive litterer, recognition is endlessly deferred. That is to say, the litterer wants or needs someone to see the handiwork and yet disavows the act – and therefore the gaze – through the anonymity of the act. Herein lies a(n instance of) recognition of the dissonance produced by our culture’s calls to consumption and to celebrity, of homogeneity parading as free choice. Discursive litterers seem to know that littering is wrong and that they are unlikely to be recognized as the litterer with the sense of humour. However, their acts are not about the littering, but are about finding a meager yet obtrusive voice. Given the right context, the discursive littering, unlike people, cannot be ignored.

Regardless of the intent of the person who discarded the cup, the positionings immediately lend themselves to readings which span the familiar categories of “preferred,” “negotiated” and “oppositional” – both for the encoder and for the decoder of the sign. The most optimistic among us might suggest that the language of litter demonstrates creativity and resistance by appropriating corporate signs and institutions through a combination of what some of us might recognize as resembling a *dérive* and an exercise in *détournement*, complete with the full *pro-situ* toolkit of bricolage, pastiche, parody. Here I am reminded of the coffee cup which found its way on top of the clock in our campus theatre.

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Someone, presumably a student, must have spent considerable time tossing the cup so that it came to rest, on its side, on top of the clock stationed roughly five meters above the floor of the room. This ultimately reminds us most obviously of the centrality of the spectacle, but also of the instability of art and of aesthetics. My sincere fear is that discursive littering speaks more deeply of the very limited prospects for such an exercise and the extent to which any such exercise is always already circumscribed by the corporate capital represented by the omnipresent brand logos whose advertising (and brand “saturation”) is reinscribed immediately by any such act and the retail space (and place) in which the acts almost always occur.

Rather than discarded so as not to attract attention – a typical feature of common littering – one may find empty coffee cups in easily observed public spaces. Indeed, this study drew its initial

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inspiration from two seminal sightings. First, a quiet, reflective moment in a hospital chapel was somehow cheapened by the presence of a singular Tim Hortons cup that had been placed on the table/altar. Since there was a rather

significant gap between the rows of chairs and the altar, as well as a step up, the person who discarded the cup had to make a rather conscious decision to place it there. There are myriad readings of such an act, all of which involve the sanctity of the place. The second sighting similarly suggests an “ironic” placement. While helping a family friend fill her wedding registry at one of Toronto’s largest downtown department stores, I noticed a Tim Hortons cup on a display shelf among a set of crystal champagne flutes. My readers will have to accept my version of events since I was not able to record them. In the latter case, at least, I have been able to find analogous placements in other stores’ stemware and kitchenware displays.



However, these two chance encounters, which occurred within the space of two weeks, reminded me that such sightings had become a commonplace, at least in my current experience, in the Greater Toronto Area.

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Since then I have endeavoured to bring a digital camera to help me record the variety and volume of discarded coffee cups, especially those left indoors and in highly visible locations. My students, upon learning of the project, have helped me to catalogue the instances and to decipher the language of the litter. A corollary of the project has been its value as a topic during class discussions of post-modernity, urbanization and the place of creativity in our daily lives.

I quickly concluded that the littering was neither random nor thoughtless. This conclusion is supported by the relative absence of empty aluminum cans and plastic bottles in similar locations. My conclusion was confirmed by my students, many of whom admitted to littering as a way of making a statement and of marking their presence. Since it is doubtful that people have stopped drinking the products sold in these containers one might conclude that recycling programs are working. As well, the demographics represented by the coffee vs. soft drink consumers suggest that the latter are younger. In other words, those committing the act of littering might be assumed to know better. The sightings which occasioned this study further problematize the common sense conception of littering as an act of wanton carelessness. In the first instance – as with many which follow – the act immediately violates a conventionalized “sacred” place. Admittedly, common littering occurs in similar places. I would include national parks, zoos, museums and other, similar, venues in the list of sacred places where common littering is (sadly) not uncommon. However, in the instance I describe, the juxtaposition of the object in a place of (at the very least) repose conjures multiple readings regardless of its intent. Any observer with any hint of religious upbringing will recognize the cup as a potential simulacrum for a chalice. Here, the grail intertext serves either as an atheistic slur or as a comment on contemporary “godlessness.” Both readings are available simultaneously, depending on the positioning of the receiver. In an “ironic” reading the critique of godlessness, combined with the litter, offers a critique of

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contemporary consumerism by suggesting that this (the branded disposable object) is your/our god. Regardless, the coffee cup interrupts the schema of the place and its placement calls attention to the act.

Similarly, the paper coffee cup, placed on the top shelf of a display of crystal glasses, disrupts the visual display of its surroundings and offers several readings to passers-by. An observer need not be a student of Cultural Studies to conclude that a statement about class and consumption patterns can be derived from almost any available reading of the juxtaposed vessels. The non-recyclable paper cup will theoretically last just as long, can hold the same liquid(s) – often more of it – but costs pennies per unit sold. In contrast, the flutes represent the usual suspects of any material critique: ornament, taste, distinction and the commodity fetish. The coffee cup serves as a leveling sign, of sorts. In contrast to champagne, coffee is seen as an “everyman’s” drink, with Tim Hortons representing “everyman’s” brand, and might even be considered something of a necessity. Further, the area was not off-limits to a coffee drinker nor is the item unattainable to anyone with the disposable capital to purchase the flutes. One might not be able to afford the entire lifestyle, but one can afford the look. Even the most facile semiotic reading of the scene leads quickly to myriad analyses of marginal utility, use value, especially if we do consider the necessity of coffee as a source of the caffeine which enables many workers to meet the growing demands on their time and on their bodies. Scholarly types perhaps might consider the political economy of the contemporary wedding as a signifier which is completely detached from the signified idea of marriage. Given the careful position of the cup, I am certain it was placed there with a basic form of comment in mind and that the comment involved the promised opulence of the crystal. At the very least the cup invites the contemporary version of “ironic” through its very juxtaposed position in the store. Moreover, it was clearly meant to be seen. Therefore, the depth of the reading depends not on the amount of thought one can attribute to a litterer but on the readings

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available to the decoder of the sign.



The issue of intent raises some interesting questions about the very practice, however. Beyond the rather tenuous “humour” and “irony” present, the conspicuous locations of many of the cups stand in contrast to the more common understanding of

littering as an act people attempt to hide or to disguise. Generally, people know that littering is not a socially acceptable disposal method. The act is socially distasteful enough that most people, even if they do litter, will do so only if they will not be seen – or at least identified – doing it and so such that the litter is as unobtrusive as litter can be. There are, of course, exceptions to the rule; exceptions which seem to state “I was there and I didn’t care.” In other words, there is something of a placebo effect to the sort of attempt at rebellion or at lawlessness which is inherent to the act. While lawlessness may be the case, or even the motivation, for any form of littering, the discursive littering



represents a particular case. Anonymity remains as a goal of the person littering, but the pleasure for the discursive litterer rests in the knowledge that the object will be seen and that its presence violates social convention. A typical

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“hiding” spot for coffee cups is among the canned goods on grocery store shelves.

A noteworthy instance occurred when we found a coffee cup in a formerly empty slot in a tray of 2L soda bottles. This example likely falls into the humour category, as well, insofar as someone may find it funny. A coffee cup in the middle of a parking lot has a more complex status.



Its companion, the coffee cup placed upside down on top of a car antenna, represents a feeble attempt at humour and a call for attention. My students quickly recognized these as familiar acts. The cup in such cases presumably states “I was there. I left that.” They cited the humour, but told me that the fact that the cup would be recognized means that the litterer would be recognized.

One example that seemingly stands out as an example of an attempt to hide the litter to an extent is the figure of the container in the middle of a skid of evergreens. As with most of the others, there was actual effort involved in placing the coffee cup in this location. It was surprising to find it there, yet it did stand out among the trees; a strange sort of “Easter



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egg,” as it were. However, the cup stands in stark contrast to the usual intent for being in the shrubbery section of a typical big-box home improvement store. My students commented the juxtaposition as intentional, especially when they saw further pictures of a cup I found in the “organics” section of a grocery store and another in a camping store.

The person buying “organics” supposedly “cares” about the environment, as does the camper, yet the cups disrupt the schema of their surroundings in a thematic as well as an aesthetic fashion. The cup becomes a talisman of recognition, at least in the mind of the litterer.



Perhaps the most poignant example is the cup on the fence outside the Tim Hortons near Gore Park, in Hamilton, Ontario.

While this example did not occur inside, it falls into the general rubric of

discursive littering and its proximity to the retail outlet lends itself to commentary. The cup appears to be resting – perhaps tilted jauntily as if to say “cheers” – but it has been spiked on the fence, literally poking holes in the cup which stands as a metonymy for the chain but also for the fast-food model of contemporary retail and consumer cultures. Since it appears to be a blatant send off to Tim Hortons (and to its drinkers), the source of the discord is called into question. If discarded by the drinker, the cup likely stands as protest against the anti-smoking policy of the chain. Conversely, it might also be someone disgusted by the omnipresence of discarded cups saying, “here, take it back.” It

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does not really matter who bought the cup; its presence is



unmistakable – someone wanted it there – and meanings are derived from its presence. The cup’s placement, outside a Tim Hortons, emphasizes and reinforces the disdain while simultaneously offering commentary on the limits of expression,

which is the primary tension in the act of discursive littering.

In the course of the study we found disposable coffee cups outnumbered other drink containers by a ratio greater than ten-to-one. Recyclable containers – aluminium, recyclable steel and plastic – seem to find their way into the appropriate dumpsters. Coffee cups predominate and the Tim Hortons variety leads the way. It was very common to find Tim Hortons cups in locations which actually feature an outlet for a competitor’s coffee. For example, The Second Cup has locations inside Home Depot stores to the exclusion of others. McDonalds has a similar deal with Walmart and Great Canadian Bagel can be found in Rona stores. Regardless of the “official” coffee outlet located in a particular store, the most common variety is the Tim Hortons cup. This is not to suggest that discursive littering is the only mode of expression available but the very fact that it exists as one reminds us of the limited possibilities for expression, of the lack of actual public spaces, the psychogeographic effects of contemporary urban centres, the omnipresence of branding and advertising and the dominance of contemporary consumerism.

However, as my students relayed, one of the prime motivations behind discursive littering is advertising is the belief that the advertising is for the self. First, the cup of Tim Hortons (or other

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branded coffee) is an inherently social act which implies a particular lifestyle. In the case of Tim Hortons, the brand has been



portrayed as being the quintessential Canadian icon and in a nation bereft of patriotic acts – as evidenced by the purported patriotism in drinking coffee whose production and profits remain in the United States – and so the act carries further significance.

Indeed, there are stories, true and embellished, that Canadians abroad have been recognized because of their (reusable) Tim Hortons cups. Herein lies the purchase of discursive littering: recognition. There is a sort of celebrity attached to discursive littering. As one of my students explained, the carefully and comically placed cup states “I was here” or “I did that.” The cups, then, function as something akin to the Inukshuk, which has itself become a popular Canadian icon. The Inukshuk, an impromptu sculpture of piled rocks and used by the Inuit people to mark direction, hunting grounds and waypoints, has been adopted by Canadians as something of a pastime. The mascot for the 2010 Winter Olympic Games is a cartoon Inukshuk. Such is their popularity that National Parks with rocky areas are littered with them. Now, I find piles of cups in stores, libraries and other places where people want to add their “voices.”

This picture was taken while students studied in our campus centre. There was litter practically everywhere, but only the coffee cups were so piled. Admittedly, the foam containers and plastic bottles do not lend themselves to piles, but in both cases – the rocks and the cups – the intent of the person placing the pile is to

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say “I was here,” if only to mark a study location for friends to find, for the self to find following a trip to the cafeteria or restroom. As well, the similarity continues since both make use of their meagre surroundings. The traditional Inuit version is made of the few rocks available and it stands out against the sparse landscape. The discursive litterer is making the same statement about the availability of modes of expression, the possibilities for creativity and is making the statement within contemporary urban settings. The difference is that one passes as a land of limitless choices.

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