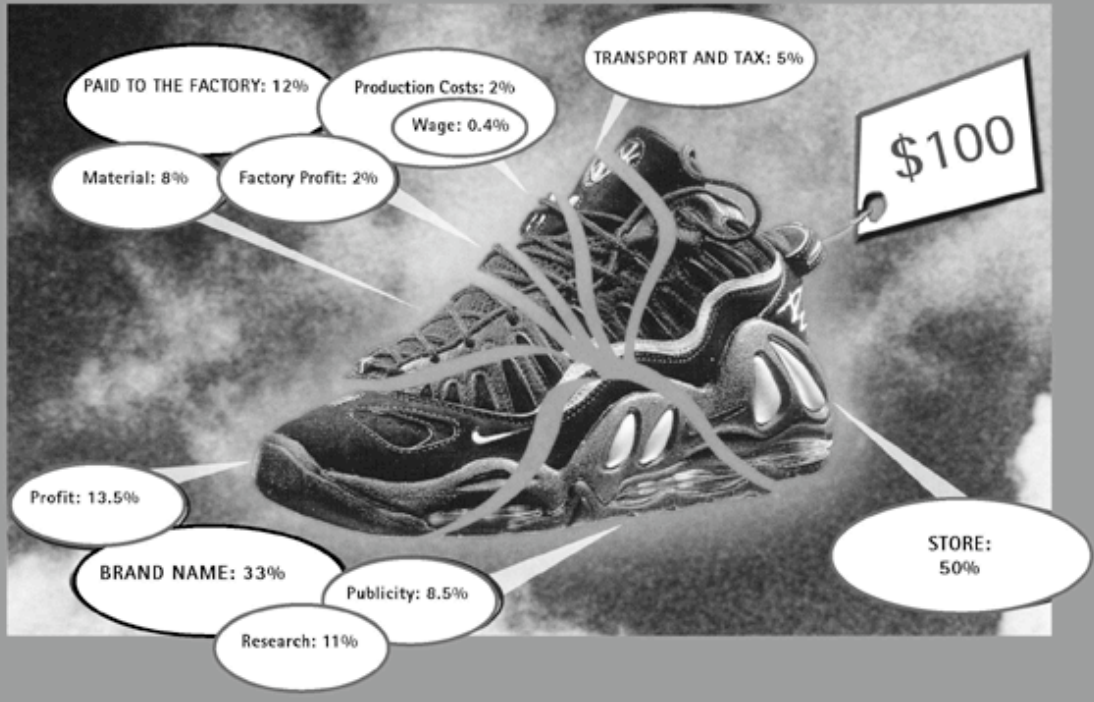


A Cultural Study of Nike

Price Make-up of a US\$100 Sport Shoe

MADE IN INDONESIA



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A Cultural Study and Political Ecology of Nike

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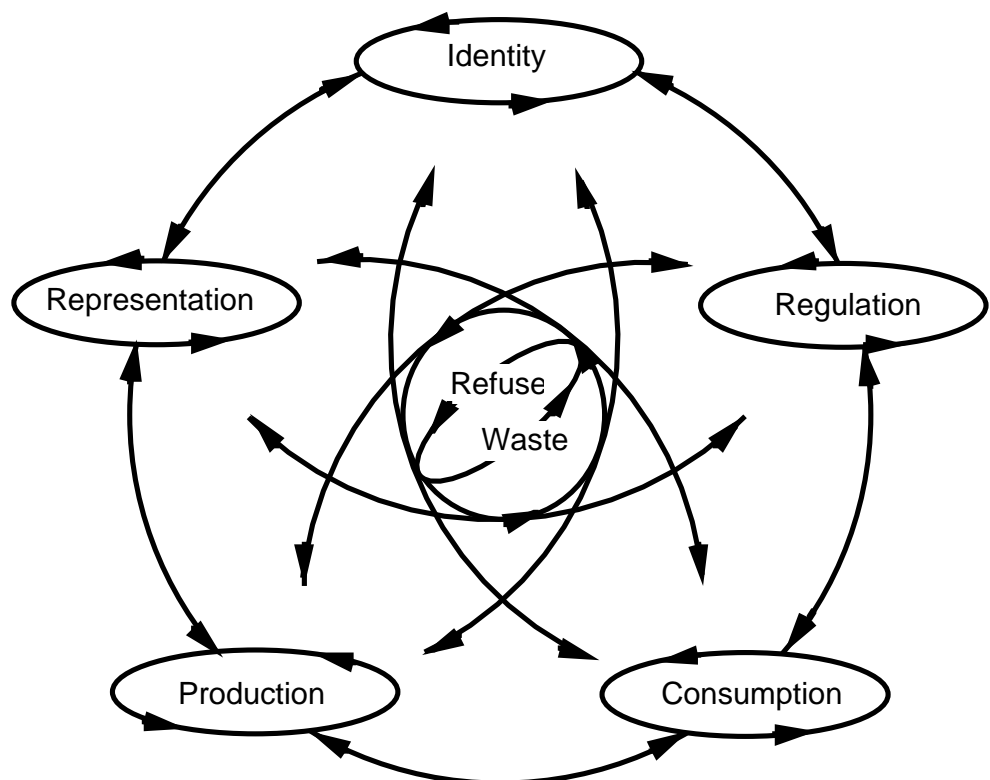
When we put our comfortable shoes on in the morning and take a step, our steps are always already scripted within powerful cultural processes. Shoes, no more so than the apparel covering our bodies, happen to provide particularly robust examples of how this is so. Who we are— identity— is intimately tied to a political ecology of who and what we produce, consume, regulate, represent, and waste. While there may be no escaping political ecology and these cultural processes, there are ways of appropriating, confronting and acting on one's complicity—ways of forming a critical literacy of the world. I use Nike shoes as an example of how we might consciously attend to the levels of our complicity in misappropriations of lives and life in our everyday world. In attending to a "circuit" of cultural processes, we are reminded to pay close attention to even the most mundane of artefacts.

The political ecology of design takes resources into account and helps us take the additional step in accounting for wakes of commodities. A *product's wake*— the rippling together of production, consumption, and waste— extends outside of resource streams. When we design, build, purchase, use, or dispose of a product, our actions have biophysical, psychosocial, *and* political consequences. Ecological values such as care, complexity, disequilibrium, interconnectedness, interrelationship, and limitation hold us responsible to product life cycles (Krippendorff, 1989; Manzini, 1992; Pantzar, 1997). But, these values work in tandem with political values such as control, distribution, equity, interests, justice, liberty, and power. What is at question when accounting for wakes are the interrelations among nature, people, and things— the political ecologies of products. Rather than drawing distinctions between ecology, society, and technology, questions of relationships are intended to erase distinctions and emphasise the dynamic yet fragile web sustaining everyday life (Latour, 1991). Within this web, individual choices have become increasingly dictated by "situational factors, routines, and social norms, and less and less by individual preferences" (Pantzar, 1997, p. 55). Clearly, when designers make choices, they operate with some understanding of how people interrelate with technologies. The trouble is, in conventional design and technological practice,

these understandings have represented little more than a simple economics and praxiology of products, services, needs, and wants. Products do not merely mediate between actors, needs and wants, or between actions and motives; rather, actions motives and products interrelate in complex ways (Campbell, 1998; Durning, 1992, pp. 117-135; Margolin, 1995). These interrelations are nested in a web of social practices and a plurality of relations between human and non-human actors (Latour, 1991). Political ecologies of products presuppose intrinsically complex life cycles, demanding increased attention, care and participation in design and technological practice. The challenge is in framing this political ecology of culture, nature, and motivated actors.

The "circuit of culture" is one fruitful entry into this political ecology of design. In this model, representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation are framed as cultural processes working in tandem. Du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay & Negus (1997) used this model to demonstrate how these five cultural processes are inscribed into the material design and social uses of the Sony Walkman. When the process of waste, or refuse, is added to this, the circuit is an entry into a complex political ecology of design. This circuit of culture makes it crucial to pay close attention to even the most mundane of products and services (figure 1).

Figure 1. The Circuit of Culture takes on a complex political ecology when the ecocentric moment of waste is introduced (Feng and Petrina, 2000). Adapted from DuGay, Hall, Janes, Mackay & Negus (1997).



Nike Shoes

The shoe is magical, within both the history of the commodity and the psychological compulsions of modern “man.” The shoe is *the* emblem of fetishism that links the commodity to desire. And the most magical shoe of all is the athletic shoe because it is simultaneously a symbol of cultural capital, physical prowess, self-esteem, economic and psychic overinvestment, and crass capital exploitation; in fact, it epitomizes late flexible capital accumulation and continuing masculinist regimes of disavowal (Hitchcock, 1999, p. 113).

When we trace the resource stream of commodities, the interconnections between consumption, production, and waste are made evident. This is an essential, albeit difficult, task for life cycle design, ecopedagogy, and political ecology in general. For example, the average pair of sneakers, “cross-trainers”, makes quite an ecological footprint! These shoes are labelled, or “branded”, and designed by a multinational corporation in the US, engineered in Taiwan and South Korea, manufactured in China, South Korea, or Southeast Asia, and mostly purchased, worn, and disposed of in North America (Katz, 1994, pp. 160-204; Ross, 1997; Ryan & Durning, 1997, pp. 26-32; Vanderbilt, 1998, pp. 76-113). The leather upper of the shoes, consisting of about twenty parts, is typically from cows raised and slaughtered in Texas. The hides are shipped to Asia and treated through a chemical-intensive chrome tanning process, with a by-product of toxins dumped into an Asian river. The synthetic parts of the shoes are made from petroleum-based chemicals from Saudi Arabia, and distilled and cracked in a Korean refinery, with wastes again making their way into rivers. The midsole is Ethylene Vinyl Acetate foam which requires a number of processes to synthesise. The sole is made from styrene-butadiene rubber, synthesised from Saudi petroleum in a Taiwanese factory. In the factory, the sole is moulded and cut, generating the largest amount of solid waste in the shoe production process. The shoes are assembled in a Tangerang factory or similar Asian factories. Most of the assembly is done through the labour of children and women cutting, gluing, and sewing under sweatshop conditions of high temperatures (100 degrees F) and toxic fumes from solvent-based toluene glues and paint. Their average wage is about 15 cents per hour over their 65 hour work week (Klein, 1999, pp. 365-379; Sage, 1999). The finished shoes are hand packed with light-weight tissue from Sumatran rain forest trees and placed in a box. The unbleached, corrugated cardboard for the shoe box was made in a closed-loop paper mill in New Mexico. The shoe box itself is folded in a mill in Los Angeles and shipped to Asia. The boxed shoes are shipped as

cargo back to the west coast of the US, transported to local outlets, purchased for about \$60.00 to \$150.000 (USD) per pair, and worn for occasions having nothing to do with sports or training. The average pair of cross-trainers lasts less than a year and usually ends up in a landfill. This particular resource stream flowing into and through the production and consumption of these shoes is an example of current practices of globalisation.

Understanding this flow of resources is a necessary, but inadequate, condition to the political ecology of shoes. We can begin to see how in any given political ecology, extractors, converters, labourers, producers, products, shippers, consumers, collectors, and recyclers act in tandem, but resource streams are in themselves inadequate to fully account for a product's political ecology.

We fail to fully appreciate a cultural study of Nike until we attend to a series of processes which lend meaning to the shoes. We have to interrogate their wakes and ask "what do the shoes mean and how do we make sense of this?" Let us imagine that our pair of trainers was branded by Nike. Established in 1972, Nike had its best year in 1998 when sales topped \$9.6 billion. The company has produced 900 different types of shoes, most of which have been sport related and marketed, figuratively or literally, by athletes. Nike endorses more than 3,000 athletes through its advertising fold, including 72% of the National Basketball Association players, 60% of the Major League Baseball players, and 50% of the players in the National Football League. Over 200 universities fly the Nike banner for their sports teams. Nike sells about 160 million pairs of trainers each year, and nearly one of every two are purchased in the US (Egan, 1998; Katz, 1993, 1994; Reiland, 1998; Vanderbilt, 1998; Wetzel & Yager, 2000). The average American teenager buys between three and ten pairs of athletic shoes (specialty sports and fashion) each year at prices ranging from \$50.00 to \$150.00 per pair (Lane, 1996, p. 45; Vanderbilt, 1998, p. 116). Nike's brand logo is recognised by about 97% of all Americans, but the "swooshification" of culture is global. And it has little to do with shoe sales and sports. Nike produces consumer demand, images, and brands of blackness and whiteness. With distribution increasing in Asia, distinct brands of being Chinese, Japanese, or Korean are also represented in advertisements and shoes (Clifford, 1993; Media Foundation, 1999).

Nike executives speak of creating an "emotional tie" between affluent customer and branded shoe (Clifford, 1993, p. 46). As Nike analyst Timothy Egan (1998, p. 69) said, "the idea is simply to create a connection between consumer and product, a link often having nothing

to do with what is actually being sold". This connection is what's often referred to as "brand consciousness". The company has worked to construct the meaning of their shoes as well as the social practices with which a pair of Nike shoes is associated. To do this, Nike has used hyper marketing, sports, and urban street attitude in a unique, potent, strategic mix that adds up to exposure and endorsement. Nike spends between \$300-\$500 million each year, excluding athlete royalties, to create brand consciousness and desire. A pair of Nikes represents a competitive edge, glamour, rebellion, status, and the intricacies of coolness. Nike walks as a marketing giant, profiting each step through swoosh loyalty, in a culture where both conformity and egomania rule the day.

Nike produced, with their consumer loyalists, an identity and representation for their shoes in the mid 1980s. In 1984, the Georgetown Hoyas played to a national championship in college basketball with Nikes on their feet. In a gymnasium where white sneakers were everywhere, the Hoyas stood out as hard-playing rebels with their multicoloured grey and blue trainers. Later that year, Michael Jordan turned up on the professional basketball court in his Chicago Bulls uniform and Nike shoes laced and designed especially for him. And in the spring of his rookie year in 1985, he and his "Air Jordans" starred in a thirty second commercial that defined Nike's representation of blackness and sport. The ad showed Jordan, arm extended with ball, legs splayed wide, feet fitted with red, white, and black shoes, jumping toward a jet aeroplane and all the while hanging in the air for a third of the ad. Here was Jordan's genius, grace, and shoes, and Nike's strategy, shown over and over on a global television network (Strasser & Becklund, 1991). Rather than pitching a product, Nike produced an attitude with which their shoes could be associated. Adding to the mystique and rebellion, the National Basketball Association proceeded to temporarily ban the Air Jordans. Jordan, the Bulls, and Nike were transformed into icons in black and white neighbourhoods, and at about \$100.00 (USD) per pair, Air Jordan's accounted for \$130 million in sales that year. For the hearts, minds, and feet of many young men in inner city 'hoods, Nike made it possible to emulate Jordan's moves on the court and out of poverty.

More than any hoop dreams of class mobility, young men's identities were linked to the coolness and rebellion that the Nikes represented. An image had been produced, and by the late 1980s, some young men saw Air Jordans as representing an identity worth killing for. In 1989, a young man was found strangled in Baltimore, which later had been confirmed as a crime

committed for the two-week old Nikes he was wearing. This and succeeding crimes underscored the meaning which with shoes had been ascribed in an aggressive, inner-city, street culture. Baggy jeans, pork-pie hats, and Nikes or similar shoes (e.g., Reeboks) stood for black, hip-hop and "gangsta" identity. As they projected an identity of power and aggression, professional athletes and rappers came to be role models for young, black and white men. The shoes the basketball stars and rappers wore, and those desired by the young men, conferred a special blackness and identity. Since the mid 1980s, Nike reproduced this representation in their off-the-wall and in-your-face commercials. In 1991, Spike Lee and Jordan co-starred in a number of print and television ads, most of which captured Jordan in his patented "Jumpman" leap toward the hoop and Lee bespectacled, bug-eyed and mouthy. Here was Air Jordan and "Mars Blackmon" with popular appeal across racial lines—the shoes providing the edge—potently representing aggression, hipness, style of play, and distinction for black youth culture. In the ads, the camera invariably turned to Lee, who in his Blackmon character, exclaimed: "It's gotta be the shoes" (Wilson and Sparks, 1996).

In producing an inspired Air Jordan, Nike produced a brand consciousness where athlete, colours, logo, masculinity, performance, race, status, style, and shoes were represented and regulated as one. As Nike's vice president of research, design and development said, "for us, design and emotion are symbiotic....[people] respond to the swoosh because our products deliver emotion" (quoted in Gragg, 1997, pp. 63-64). To regulate desire for both identity and shoes, Nike releases new models on regular bases, while keeping supplies deliberately short. From the release of Air Jordan I to Air Jordan XIII, desire for symbol, status, and shoes have been regulated. The technical aspects of the shoes' designs are part of Nike's overall strategy in regulating the loyalty of "Nike guys" the world over. Nike has of course expanded to a clothing line, and to nearly all sports, producing a new colour or style of shoe and identity almost every day. Doubling its shoe design team since 1995 to about 300 currently, Nike draws on a range of technoscientific areas such as biomechanics and material science. Nike has managed to cross the gender line along with other companies, and in 1994 women's total athletic shoe sales passed men's (\$5.4 billion versus \$5.2 billion). Like most large companies, Nike builds "fashion ranges" through "new design modifications, colour combinations and logos", all of which have little to do with improved design (McDowell, 1989, p. p. 103). But Nike does not merely

design, produce, and regulate identities and shoes that are consumed, as in a uni-directional exchange between active producer and inactive consumer.

Nike, shoes, and identities are co-produced within a political ecology where lines between producer and consumer are blurred. Nike and its shoes are appropriated by consumers who have their own representations of what it means to be athletic, black or white, cool, and street-wise. Nike's success in sales is partially due to the fact that the company has realised that it is not sufficient to rely on their designers or athlete-consultants for design advice. There is a huge reliance on trend-tracking and focus group firms that are aimed at teen-age markets. Nike also allocates "cool hunters" to urban neighbourhoods and their NikeTown outlets to tune into what is "fresh"— what turns young people on. Nike sends out hip representatives who go "bringing" in cities like New York and Philadelphia to get brand reactions from young ghetto kids. Pairs of newly designed basketball shoes are given to some of the lucky kids for reactions on coolness and performance in return. The reactions are delivered back to the company's headquarters in Portland, Oregon where colours, styles and materials are redesigned. This may amount to simply altering shoes' soles, tongues or weight, or completely redesigning the shoes from the sole up. Nike's "Air Jack" shoes were renamed "Air Raid" in the late 1980s when Nike discovered that "jack" denoted killing or robbing in street lingo. Air "Jacks" would have represented a segment of culture that in the end, was uncool. And in spite of a fair bit of control, the frequency of Nike's ads continues to be regulated by the mass media's scheduling of sporting events. In this complex political ecology, it's difficult to tell who is producing and regulating what or who.

The "swooshification" of culture is intricately tied to the "sportsification" of the world. As Nike officials wrote: "We will mature in tandem with the inexorable penetration of sports into the global psyche" (quoted in Egan, 1998, p. 67). Within a complex of global capital, mass media, and sports, Nike's particular representation of culture has become accepted as normal and universal. Through these agencies and processes of regulation, aggressive play, coolness, and rebellion conferred through branded commodities such as hats, shirts, and shoes have come to be the fashion norm in countries like Canada and the US. Nike is prospering within a larger revolution against formality as "ath-leisure" fashion has been a hot trend for the past few decades (McDowell, 1989, p. 104). We are what we wear, and more than ever who we are is branded and regulated by some multinational corporation. Nike dominates British athletic shoe markets

and since the early 1990s has been penetrating Asian markets where teens appear all too anxious to adopt Nike's representation of culture on their own terms of rebellion. According to Dyson (1993, p. 72), "the sneaker symbolises the ingenious manner in which black cultural nuances of cool, hip, and chic have influenced" an increasingly Americanised global landscape. Yet this regulation of what Hoberman (1997, p. 4) calls the "black athletic aesthetic" stimulates "wildly unrealistic ambitions in black children—an improbable number of black boys expect to become pro athletes—and imitate fashion trends and hairstyles". Racial norms are regulated and where social conditions act against minorities, at least in sports there has come to be the acceptance of black bodies and minds (Dyson, 1993).

For many young people, Nike represents athletic fame and marginalised culture. For young blacks, Nike celebrates the success of blacks in a media world devoid of colour outside of music and sports. Nike reaffirms a popular form of blackness. Most teens understand that Nike sells identities and since the mid 1980s have produced Nike as much more than a shoe company. Nike's response to teens' media insights has been to drop any pretence that the company is marketing anything less than identities, accounting for much of the success. Nike plays on the fact that most youths have a marked distrust of moral leadership, and if given the choice, would rather be represented by Nike's athletes than by others such as politicians. Yet for all the media literacy and active consumption and production of American teen-agers, they buy between three and ten pairs of athletic shoes each year, as noted earlier. Resistance evidently may or may not be cool. Skateboarders are anti-Nike, but with feverish loyalties consume other brands.

Detractors who in the end realise that what Nike produces and markets are consumers, posture the swoosh as everything that is wrong with global capital. In 1990, Reverend Jesse Jackson led a boycott of Nike to demand that the company award contracts to black businesses in proportion to the sales made in inner city neighbourhoods. Despite a disproportionate amount of money coming from blacks, Nike was a white company with a white board of directors. For Jackson, Nike represented a typical American company—the establishment—in spite of the representation of rebellion the company projected. Currently for human rights activists, Nike's swoosh is more a "swooshtika" as the company has made little attempt to alter its labour practices in Asia (Egan, 1998, p. 67). Nike has been criticised for not ensuring fair wages, labour rights, and safety standards among its subcontractors. The "Nike ethic" has come to be defined simply as: "Extract from the many to benefit the few" (Brissell, quoted in editor, 1999, p.

25). And the advocates for social change have subverted the Nike slogan from "Just do it!" to "Justice do it!". Nike represents the effects of the globalisation and regulation of American culture. Nike workers are paid \$1.75 a day in China, \$2.46 a day in Indonesia, and \$1.60 a day in Vietnam (Johnson, G., 1998, p. 57; Sage, 1999). If a pair of trainers sells for \$100.00, \$50.00 will go directly to the store, \$33.00 will go to Nike (Plus store profit if sold in a Nike Town store), \$11.60 goes to the factory where 40 cents will be distributed for wages, and \$5.00 will go toward shipping and taxes (figure 2).

Figure 2. This figure suggests a variety of inequities in shoe design and production. Image printed with compliments to The Clean Clothes Campaign. No copyright.



As described earlier, Nike's factories chatter with the deafening noise of sewing machines and average temperatures are 100 degrees. These workers, most are under 24 and 75 to 80% are women, are jammed on assembly lines to turn out about 7,000 pairs of trainers through their 10-13 hour work day. In all, there are between 350,000 and 530,000 workers in Nike's Asian plants. The low US tariffs on most of Nike's shoes (8.5% on finished shoe) and the leather and synthetic upper materials, combined with the labour-intensive designs explain some of the incentives behind the political geography of Nike's global production practices (Barff & Austen, 1993; Klein, 1999, pp. 365-379; Sage, 1999). The US government has not been willing to increase tariffs and regulations on globalisation. But, activists and workers were successful in 1999, through political protest, to bring Nike to reconsider some of its labour and resource practices. At this moment in the political ecology of Nike shoes, we are directed from the wake back into Nike's resource stream.

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