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Trash in Transit:

A Mobile History of the Paper Cup

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ABSTRACT

The paper cup is the embodiment of mobile trash. First mass-produced in 1907, paper cups were soon to be found in the transitional spaces of urban America: the railway, the department store, take-out restaurants. America was in flux – migration, immigration and urbanisation not only dramatically changed the country’s landscape but also the ways that people lived their day-to-day life. This short article will present the paper cup as part of this new mobile society, and examines the influence of demographic changes that fuelled paper cup use as well as prejudice and xenophobia.

Introduction

Paper cups emerged at a time of great change in America. The expanding railroad network, and growing immigration and migration all played their part in creating demand for the product. Used in the rapidly changing urban landscape the paper cup

was shaped by these factors. Appearing in transitory spaces, lauded for their efficiency, mobility and health credentials, paper cups were ready-made mobile trash.

Whilst these factors created opportunities for paper cup usage to develop, creating the movement of people and change in routine the paper cup needed to become commonplace, the cup's ascendance can also be seen to be linked to the darker side of these changes. Radical demographic shifts fuelled xenophobia and racial prejudice that turned the paper cup, which was once seen as a novelty, into a middle class essential. Exploiting fears around germs, status and class, the use of these sterile, white paper cups can be understood to have meant more than mere convenience.

Mobility is key to understanding the history of the paper cup. It created both the physical and psychological forces that led to use of the product, and is a key prism with which to examine the history of this object. Rooted in the interdisciplinary practice of History of Design – which examines objects in their historical contexts through modes of production, consumption and design – this paper is an example of how mobility frameworks can be introduced to material culture studies.

The paper cup provides a pertinent way to examine the changing context of an expanding America. The development of this object was dependant on the context of growing mobility, but paper cups were also mobile objects themselves, associated with travel, leisure and a new type of lifestyle. Mass-produced and distributed through growing transport networks, the paper cup was accessible to, and used by, a growing number of Americans, giving insight into their beliefs and concerns. A successful early example of disposable consumer goods, the mobile nature of this popular product provides a perfect case study with which to examine mobile trash.

A Short History of the Paper Cup in America: Health, Mobility and Demography

Paper cups arrived as part of what was known as ‘the Age of Paper’ (Inland Printer 1889, 580). Capitalising on the success of papermaking machines earlier in the century, the industry benefitted from a burst of ingenuity. Mass production by machine and the use of woodchip to make pulp meant that large amounts of material could be produced cheaply. From this growing abundance of material came a growing abundance of goods. The cup therefore did not develop in isolation, but was rather part of a proliferation of paper objects that included: ‘hats, handkerchiefs, raincoats, corsets, slippers, petticoats, curtains...’ amongst others (Hunter 1978, 561).

It is likely that the first paper cups produced in the 1870s were not disposable like other paper products produced in the decade (Busch 1983, 323). Further technological development in the 1880s and 1890s allowed for an even cheaper product whilst solving some of the issues surrounding the quality of early woodchip paper. This cheaper product supported the economic backbone of disposability – that these products could be produced so cheaply consumers could afford to throw them away. By the turn of the twentieth century disposable products such as paper collars and toilet paper had become widespread (Strasser 1999, 174-175). To benefit from the convenience and sanitary nature of disposability, paper cup users were increasingly encouraged to throw their cups away from the 1910s onwards.

Paper cups became established as a part of everyday life throughout the following decades. They were used by many city dwelling Americans in public spaces such as department stores and train stations, and increasingly entered other arenas such as

offices and factories. By 1914 a patent by L.W Luellen, a key inventor of paper cup technology, stated that ‘millions’ of cups were used ‘annually’, illustrating the early scale of production and consumption. From its first inception the paper cup was a public cup, designed to provide a drinking receptacle to be used at public water and soda fountains. The paper cup in this respect was spatially specific, found within the growing public spaces of late nineteenth and early twentieth century America.

Ideas of hygiene and sanitation were central to the marketing of paper cups and formed the key argument for the necessity of ‘individual’ paper drinking cups as advocated by marketers and health campaigners. This preoccupation with the sanitary nature of drinking wares developed in tandem with the public health movement and the acceptance of germ theory in America. This emphasis on hygiene took an object that had been seen previously as a novelty, and re-marketed it in the guise of a necessity. The financial gains that could be won by this emphasis on health are clearly articulated by the Individual Drinking Cup Company’s decision to change their product’s name to the *Health Kup* in 1912 (see Image1).



Image 1: example of Health Kup advertising from c.1912 from Hugh Moore Dixie Cup Collection, Special collections, Lafayette College Library, Easton, Box 1 File 40.

The paper cup industry enthusiastically took up this health crusade, anointing the paper cup as the natural and safe successor to the germ ridden common cup that graced communal drinking fountains in the period (usually a tin cup that was chained to the fountain and not washed between users). Calling publicly for a ban outlawing this menace to public health, the industry was a powerful voice in the ‘common cup campaign’ (Voss Hubbard 1996, 91). The campaign was ultimately successful, and the paper cup industry benefited greatly from a wave of legislation prohibiting the use of the common cup as it left a void that the paper cup was primed to fill, whether at public drinking fountains or the ever-growing railroad networks.

Railroads played an important part in the history of the paper cup and were the first major platform for the dissemination of these objects, distributing the product throughout the country via stations and train cars (Dixie Cup Company 2014). A Dixie

Cup Company produced map titled, 'Standardised by Transport System of the Continent' (1910s) illustrates the spread of paper cups throughout America, tracing the red lines of the railroad routes on which these cups were used, depicting the popular modes of transport that they proliferated (Image 2). Railroads were an important part of the infrastructure of mobility, allowing people travel further and faster than they ever had before – they were the technological embodiment of the quickening pace of life.

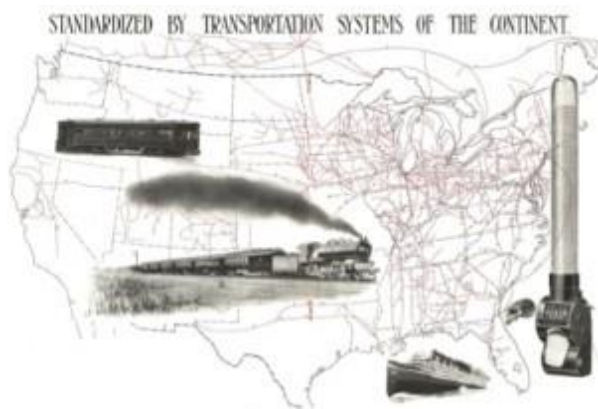


Image 2: depiction of the routes covered by the expanding transport system from Hugh Moore Dixie Cup Collection, Special collections, Lafayette College Library, Easton, Box 9 File 12.

The paper cup companies of the early twentieth century emerged at a time of rapid change in American life. Cities were expanding; urban life was changing the way people lived and the social networks around them. The growing paper cup industry must be understood in this context. By 1920, America was a primarily urban nation. 54.3 million people lived in cities – a significant increase from 6.2 million urban inhabitants in 1860

(Baldwin, Chudacoff , Smith 2010, 102). Large waves of immigration from the 1840s onwards meant the nation was ethnically diversifying. Immigration peaked in the 1900s (Gibson and Lennon 1919) and the cities where paper cups were used would have been demographically mixed. The movement of people within America matched this transnational mobility. Migration across state lines increased as people moved looking for new employment opportunities, making the most of improvements in transport. African American migration in the wake of the Civil War was driven by this search for work and new opportunities, and was an important factor for increasing racial diversity in northern cities (Zunz 1982).

Mobility changed where people lived and their daily routines – paper cups were aimed at the growing number of people who commuted or travelled. Developments such as the streetcars and electric railroads allowed city boundaries to increase, whilst industrial work patterns changed when and where people worked (Baldwin, Chudacoff , Smith 2010, 84). Mobility drove the use of these products, but it was also an attribute of the cup itself. Paper cups were a mobile commodity: light and easy to transport, or readily available at your destination. This mobility was an important factor in merchandising foldable ‘tourist’s’ cups sold in a leather cases for easy transportation, and was capitalised upon by the growing take-out industry. Eating out in social spaces such as department stores and restaurants was a growing practice and these establishments valued the hygienic nature of paper cups and the ease of not having to wash them between users. A 1930s advert for Porcell Cups aimed at fast food retailers underlines this link. It depicts a stark backdrop of the modern city and reads, ‘they come from all around the neighbourhood to you’ (Image3).



Image 3: 1930s Porcell Cup Advert. Hugh Moore Dixie Cup Collection, Special Collections, Lafayette College Library, Easton, Box 12 File 21.

Throughout the early twentieth century paper cups became established as an everyday example of disposable living. Benefiting from the changes in papermaking technology, cups were so cheap people could afford to throw them away. Growing acceptance of germ theory and health concerns fuelled the use of the product, but its urban setting and the forces of immigration and migration, that changed the demographic makeup of these spaces, also shaped the history of the paper cup. Building upon this mobile history the next section examines the tensions that were created by this new context and demonstrates how they can be understood to have influenced paper cup use.

‘Untouched by Human Hands’: Health, Prejudice and Mobility

The mobile nature of the U.S.A's frenetic society in the early twentieth century therefore played an important role in the development of the paper cup and its growing popularity. Through its ingrained position on the railroads of America, the public became used to drinking from these white vessels. The importance of mobility is clear but whilst the impact of travel and new ways of living may be self-evident, not all factors in this new mobile society were positive; looking through paper cup advertising a sense of anxiety emerges. Fear of dust and germs characterise the rhetoric surrounding the paper cup, but what were the greater implications of these fears?

The clean white paper cup in these circumstances can be read as a form of protection – a barrier not only against killer microbes but the new population of ethnically and culturally diverse Americans. Adrian Forty in *Objects of Desire* (2010) and Anne McClintock in *Imperial leather* (1995) both characterise a preoccupation with cleanliness in this way. Building on the work of Mary Douglas (2002), Forty sees a middle class fixation with cleanliness and hygiene in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as a reaction to social change, especially growing working class political and economic power. Although genuine contemporary concerns with germs and the utility of the product are factors in paper cup use, the object can also be read as an indicator of class, ethnic and racial transgression. Using a paper cup was a proactive step, in which the users were protecting themselves from what they feared. This concept of protection can be read both physically – ensuring protection from microbes – but also psychologically. The use of a paper cup to drink from can be interpreted as a drawing of a boundary, as epitomised by description of the paper cup by manufacturers as 'individuals' in contrast to the previously accepted communal common cup.

This boundary created a distinction between the paper cup user and *others* in an increasingly diverse and populous country. Against this back drop, fear of infection and disease was increasingly imbued with racial and class prejudice. As medical historian Andrea Patterson (2009) powerfully describes, those suffering from infectious disease were imagined by the white American middle classes as dark skinned or foreign, and preventive measures were needed to prevent infection from these groups. Health care for immigrants and other ethnic and racial groups was often seen as beneficial by white middle class Americans as it would stem the spread of disease. In this vein, the dissemination of cups to the wider population shows that this paternalism was not always altruistic, but instead often a thinly veiled form of bigotry. In short, the changing geographic and demographic landscape fuelled prejudice. In the same way as white middle class Americans actively choose to ‘protect’ themselves, by forming bodies such as the Hyde Park Protection Association in Chicago, which ensured the neighbourhood was white American (Teaford 1986, 22), the paper cup ensured that their drinking wares had not been contaminated by any of these ‘new’ Americans.

As Anne McClintock (1995, 9) has argued, problems of race, gender and class are intrinsically connected: ethnicity and class are bound together in the case of the paper cup. Cleanliness in this period is to be seen not only as middle class trait but also an American one: ‘all equated cleanliness with success and the American way of life’ (Hoy 1995, 149). Sanitation and hygiene therefore cannot only be understood as a form of protection but a mark of distinction, an indicator of American middle class (and primarily white) values. Paper cups became an indicator in this web of status, a fact that was manipulated by the cup manufacturers. Status and class are perfectly exemplified

by the figures that feature in paper cup ads, such as the top hat wearing lady chosen by Lilly Cup (Image 4). Finely dressed with delicate and dainty gloved hands, she gesticulates to ‘swell clubs’. She is the focus of the advert, selling aspirational values. The cup is relegated to support act, furnished with no detail – depicted only as a simple outline.

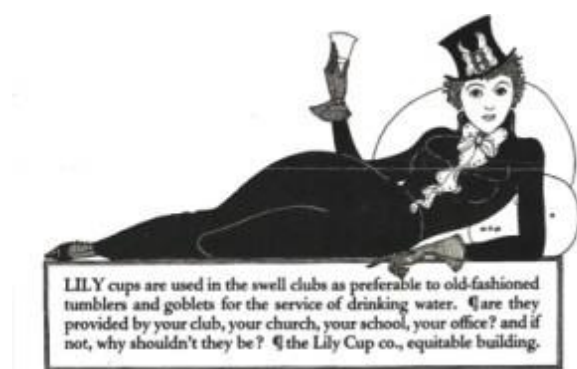


Image 4: An image showing a smartly dressed woman depicting the ‘class’ of the Lily Cup from Hugh Moore Dixie Cup Collection, Special collections, Lafayette College Library, Easton, Box 12 File 21.

Mobile Cups for a Mobile Age

Paper cups belong with planes, trains and automobiles, and all mobile technologies that played their part in the modern age. Growing mobility is a vital factor in the history of the object, providing an important context with which to understand the developing popularity of this product. Found within the growing transport networks and urban public spaces, paper cups were part of the changing way of life. Dynamic population

movement, both internationally and transnationally, was an important trigger for growing paper cup use, changing both the demographic profile of the country and social attitudes towards these changes. The proliferation of paper cups did not simply result from a move towards a more convenient and mobile society, but was motivated by issues of class, health and racial prejudice that this new mobility brought to the fore. Building upon the work of historians of hygiene, the increasingly diverse population can be read as a growing cause for anxiety, fuelling both prejudice and paper cup use.

The history of the paper cup asks questions about what we throw away and why. It calls for us to question the assumed narratives of health and convenience so often cited in the use of disposables. Important factor though they are, these disposable objects must be understood as part of a complex web of health, status and utility. Genuine worries about health and the ease of throwaway living feature in the early twentieth century use of the cup as they do in our twenty-first century throwaway paper cup habit, but these were not the only factors behind paper cup use. A critical reading of the object allows a more complex picture of use, social status and prejudice to appear.

were made improvisationally and performed in real-time for each track of playback. The spontaneity of the piece is also aided by the fact that I did not seek out any particular clips to sample. In resisting the urge to take more control over the piece I hoped to reflect the experience of thrift shopping more generally. As Tinkcom, Fuqua, and Villarejo (2002) note, “Thrift shopping rarely satisfies the hunt for a particular object,

even if that desire motivates the shopping experience. It instead requires fluidity and is structured by chance and surprise” (p. 464). Through the lens of Heidegger’s essay, thrift shopping is bound up in revealing. The thrift shopper must be open to what might be revealed rather than regarding the expedition merely as a means to an end; the thrift shopper must also be aware that an item is never completely used up. These ideas operated as guiding principles for this sound piece and indeed for the project overall.

Conclusion

A basic premise of this project has been that active experimentation with the portastudio in the context of its obsolescence will shed light on issues surrounding mobility, sound-recording, and technological change. Of course, it must be acknowledged that such an approach risks technological determinism by focusing so strongly on the “thing”. Further research into the portastudio’s past and current position among home-recording enthusiasts would help to provide a better-rounded social context for an investigation of some of the issues covered here. However, such a study necessitates ethnographic work that unfortunately was beyond the scope of this project. That said, this preliminary examination of the portastudio begins to reveal the device’s significance in terms of the convergence of studio recording practices and an increased variability of the place of recording – the meeting of “porta” and “studio.” This

Tinkcom, M., Fuqua, J.V., & Villarejo, A. (2002). “On thrifting.” In H. Jenkins, T. McPherson, and J. Shattuc (Eds.). *Hop on pop: The politics and pleasures of popular culture* (pp. 459-471). Durham and London: Duke University Press.

White, P. (2003). *Creative recording: Part one – effects and processors*. London: Sanctuary.

Biography

Samuel Thulin is a graduate student in the Department of Communication Studies at Concordia University in Montreal. His current research explores relationships between music, mobility, and place.