

“NO CARRY-OVER PARTS” CORPORATIONS AND THE METACULTURE OF NEWNESS

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When Chrysler executives touted the new 1999 Jeep Grand Cherokee model, they “gleefully displayed a small cloth bag, too tiny for an anorexic lunch, which contained all the parts carried over from the past model” (Storck 1998) – 127 of them. Except for those in the bag, all of the parts making up the entire vehicle were, by implication, new, re-designed, not copied directly from older parts. The executives calculated that this emphasis on “no carry-over parts” would make for good spin. And they were right. The small number of carry-over parts was heralded in review after review of the 1999 Grand Cherokee. The stunt did make for good spin. But was the claim only a publicity stunt, part of a false consciousness about the world, or was there a truth to the contention that the 1999 Grand Cherokee really was “all new”? More generally, are such claims, as part of what might be termed a metaculture of “newness”, or culture about culture, false and distorting or do they have substance? If these claims are efficacious, by what mechanism do they work – deceit or veracity?

Figure 1 shows the “all-new” 1999 Jeep Grand Cherokee in comparison with the 1998 model it replaced. The first thing that popped out at us – admittedly not automobile aficionados – is the continuity of culture, not the novelty of *ex nihilo* creation. One finds oneself wondering: Why is there a metacultural claim to newness in these “new” car models? Why not simply point to the continuity, the inertia that governs the outward shape and general idea of the vehicle? What is the idea of newness all about?



Figure 1: 1998 (left) versus 1999 (right) Jeep Grand Cherokee

Students of culture are taught to look for continuities, and the continuities are very often obvious. Students of corporate culture, however, while finding obvious continuities, also find their research subjects generally unimpressed by them. Members of corporations do not typically celebrate continuity, at least not in their publicly circulating metaculture, even when continuity is patent. Instead, they tout newness and innovation, seemingly denying the powerful role of the past as a force shaping the present. This apparent contradiction is worthy of study.

To present the results of our inquiry into this seeming contradiction, the essay first focuses on the conception of culture needed to make sense of the phenomenon. After that, we turn to the idea of “dissemination,” which, in the realm of cars, has to do with selling them and getting them out there in the world so that people can use them. The next part of the essay takes up the question of cultural motion. How does the culture that goes into making an automobile, an SUV, in particular, move forward through time? Finally, we return to the idea of newness, along with its expression in discourse, endeavoring to situate it within broader processes of motion.

A different conception of culture

For those steeped in the mid-twentieth century culture concept in anthropology, the approach taken here will, no doubt, seem strange, though we hope it will prove useful to unraveling the seeming conundrum of corporate culture sketched above. The mid-twentieth-century synthesis took culture to be the property or possession of a group. One could speak of the “culture of,” for example, the Navajo Indians or Chinese or even General Motors or Chrysler. Culture, in this sense, is enduring and it is shared. Yet there has been, in the past several decades, widespread discontent with this “shared culture” model in anthropology.

The conception underlying the present paper does not presuppose a rejection of the shared culture model entirely, but it does necessitate that the sharing process itself be subjected to empirical scrutiny. How does culture get from A to B? What happens to it in the course of the movement on which the idea of sharing inevitably depends? The approach requires one to pay attention to specific “elements” of culture. Greg Urban spent years, for example, studying such phenomena as myths (cultural elements) in Amerindian communities in Brazil (Urban 1991, 1996). If A tells a myth to B, and B then tells something recognizable as the same myth to C, there is evidence of the movement of culture, and, hence, for sharing between A and B.

Such microscopic studies of cultural movement show, first, that the sharing of culture within communities is not uniform. Not everyone, to continue the myth example, learns every myth or learns a given myth equally well. Therefore, the idea of sharing is problematic, something to be investigated empirically. Second, studies show that the cultural element itself gets reshaped as it moves through the world. The myth told by B to C is not precisely the same as the myth told by A to B. A third finding of this work is that cultural elements do not stay only within a defined group, but rather move across group boundaries. This is also a premise of much of the research on globalization of culture.

The approach outlined here – the “circulatory model of culture”¹ – does have some similarity to the shared culture model. Many elements of culture do tend to move or circulate within certain group limits more readily than they do outside those limits. There is, thus, a reality in speaking about the culture of a corporation, as well as of a “people,” a nation, a community, and so forth. That culture is the result of circulatory processes in which elements move around, change in the course of movement, enter in from outside the group, and pass through the boundaries of the group on their way to other locations. From this perspective, groups tend to coalesce around relatively dense pathways of circulation of culture, but it is the circulation or movement of culture that is the object of study.

In such a notion of cultural motion, culture is conceptualized as abstract. Indeed, it is the abstract form of ways of acting or thinking or being in the world that can be passed from individual to individual. In the case of a myth, there is something that carries over – the choice of words, characters, situations, events, plots – even though much also changes. In a similar way, some culture passes through time from the 1998 Jeep Grand Cherokee to the 1999 model, even if the 1999 model is not identical to the 1998. How does this passage take place? And what affects and effects it? These are the interesting and relevant questions.

Dissemination (versus replication) of culture

“Dissemination” involves putting cultural objects forth into the world such that they can be, potentially, at any rate, taken up by people. Dissemination is thus one phase of the “replication” of culture. But it is a phase not typically differentiated by anthropologists. It is crucial, however, to understanding the kind of movement of culture associated with production of the “all-new 1999 Jeep Grand Cherokee.”

If one looks at the movement of myth through the world under the circumstances of oral transmission, as in the case of the Brazilian indigenous communities in which Greg Urban lived, one sees that dissemination cannot be readily distinguished from replication. If A tells a myth, and B is there to hear it, A has disseminated the myth to B. Still, dissemination alone does not provide evidence of the movement of culture. B may not have been paying attention when A told the myth. Or B may have listened to the myth but found it uninteresting. Or maybe B did not understand it very well. There are numerous circumstances under which B would not have been in a position to reproduce that myth for someone else. At the same time, if B did reproduce it, (that is, re-disseminate it to someone else (C), and if B’s version were recognizable as like A’s original myth) there is evidence that some of the culture from A moved to B. Replication is the proof of cultural motion.

The case of automobiles and other mass-produced cultural objects presents significant differences from that of myths, however. When someone buys an SUV, it is not usually because they want to figure out how to re-manufacture that SUV and give a copy of it to someone else (C). Unlike myth, therefore, in the case of SUVs, a great deal of the culture that goes into the making of the object does not get extracted from the object after dissemination has taken place.

To be sure, some of the culture deposited in the SUV does get extracted by those who buy and use it. People want the object in order to take it up in their own local patterns of use.² They want to make use of the performance, handling, and style characteristics that were put into the object by the manufacturer. Where the manufacturer test-drives vehicle prototypes, the buyer simply drives it. Where the designer fashions models and beholds those models to ascertain aesthetic appeal, the buyer simply beholds it. This secondary form of replication of the culture that went into the making of the object is limited in scope. The ordinary buyer will not extract enough of the culture that went into it to be able to reproduce the whole object exactly. Dissemination, in the case of automobiles, is, in short, generally not followed by replication – at least not on the part of the average buyer.

This does not tell us, however, what would happen to the demand for the object – the force impelling the dissemination – were the object not to change. Suppose the auto manufacturers were not interested in producing significantly revised versions of their older models. The dissemination of the Jeep Grand Cherokee models that preceded the all-new 1999 version helps to answer this question – the first Jeep Grand Cherokee having been announced in 1992.

Sales for the Jeep Grand Cherokee in the mid 1990s are shown in Figure 2. The sales curve rises, with sales increasing until 1996, at which point sales taper off. When the “all-new” Jeep Grand Cherokee is introduced in 1999, with only 127 carry-over parts, sales shoot up again. The public is attracted to whatever design or re-engineering has taken place or to the metaculture touting it.

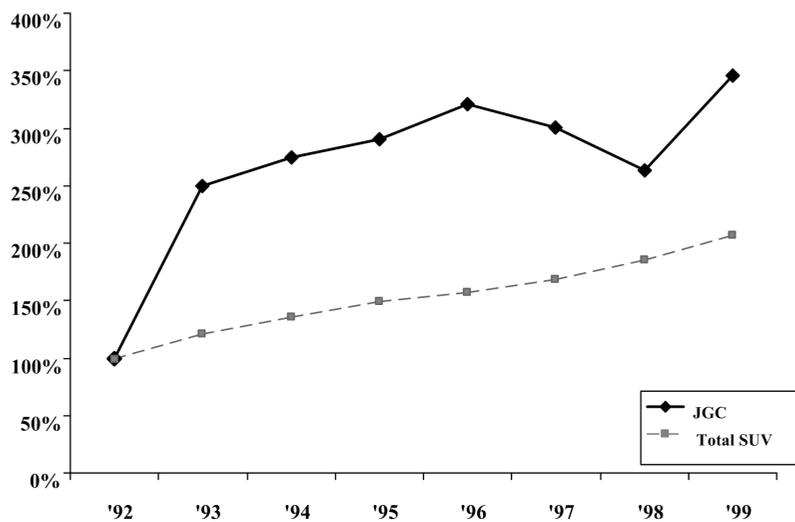


Figure 2: Calendar year sales curve for the Jeep Grand Cherokee from its debut in 1992 to 1999 as a percentage of 1992 sales.³

The Jeep Grand Cherokee was produced by the Chrysler Corporation, but the pattern appears to be the same as at General Motors, where a distinction is made between “major” and “minor programs.” Major programs result in the production of a new line of vehicle – such as, for example, the first Chevrolet Blazer. Minor programs, which take about six years to implement, result in a significant remaking of an existing line. In the intervening years, there is only minimal modification (Elizabeth Briody, personal communication). The analogous “major program” at Jeep, now a part of the Daimler-Chrysler Corporation, produced the “first” Grand Cherokee in 1992 called the “1993 model.” Very few modifications were done on that earlier program until the 1999 model came out. From an insider perspective, the Jeep Grand Cherokee from 1992 was replicated across model years with very little variation until 1999. In that latter year, a significant variation was introduced as the result of a minor program.

The model of a cycle of revision over a roughly six to ten year period applies in the case of GM and Daimler Chrysler, and it applies also in the other automobile lines investigated as part of this research, namely, the Ford Explorer and Isuzu Trooper. In each case,

significant revisions were introduced on a periodic basis – not necessarily exactly six year intervals, but something roughly corresponding to that time period. So from an internal perspective, some of the changes taking place over time are greater than other changes. They are the result of program revisions. As culture moves through time via replication, some replicas exhibit greater variation, greater discontinuities, than others. Between 1992 and 1998, there were, relatively speaking, few significant changes. What Figure 2 shows is that, after an initial rise, demand declines until a significant revision of the vehicle is introduced.

The purpose of a corporation is not only or even primarily to carry on culture over time, or to modify it. Corporations like Chrysler, or General Motors, or Isuzu are out to make money, and money is not made through continuity or discontinuity per se. It is made through dissemination, price being a measure of the force of interest impelling dissemination. The introduction of changes in the 1999 model was apparently not for the overt purpose of introducing discontinuity in culture. It was, the sales curve seems to suggest, for the purpose of increasing dissemination as measured by sales. But since dissemination results in the movement of culture through the world – if only in the form of secondary replication – when dissemination falls off, the movement of culture itself falls off. Therefore, the introduction of a significant revision, far from decreasing the movement of culture through the world and across time, actually increases that movement.

This may sound paradoxical – that in order to move culture forward through time you have to change it – but it is a paradox only if one fails to grasp the dynamic connection between dissemination and replication. In the case of automobiles and other artifacts produced by corporations, dissemination (or the lateral spread of culture at any one given moment) is measured by sales, and, in this sense, is distinct from the movement of culture across time through primary replication. But if sales fall off when primary replication is too perfect – that is, when no changes are introduced – then that primary replication itself is diminished in significance. With less and less secondary replication taking place, less of the culture placed into the objects via primary replication actually moves out into the world.

Of course, maybe the evidence from the Jeep Grand Cherokee sales curve is atypical. We are dealing here, after all, with a single example, no matter how many millions of vehicles may be involved. However, the pattern does appear to be widespread. The same thing happened in the case of the Ford Explorer where a significant revision took place in 1995. Sales had begun to taper off and then they once again turned up.

The Isuzu Trooper case is more complex. A significant revision was introduced in 1992, but this seemed to correspond to a continuing sales slump. However, sales picked up again the next year and then followed the expected pattern of rising to a peak, and then falling off. The sharp up-turn in 1998 does correlate with a significant change, as will be discussed subsequently, although the change appears to have been primarily aesthetic – a change in the grill.

Sales curves for three different types of SUV – the Jeep Grand Cherokee, the Ford Explorer, and the Isuzu Trooper – are summarized in Figure 3, along with the overall sales curve for mid-sized SUVs of all types during the same period. The overall sales curve does not show the dramatic rise and fall pattern of the individual types. Since upturns in sales correlate with the introduction of significant changes to the model line, there appears to be a correlation between sales and significant model revisions over time.

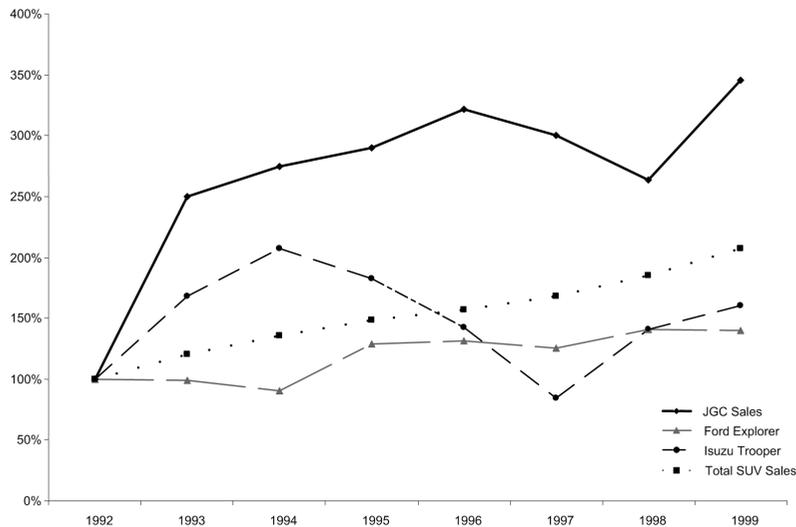


Figure 3: Calendar year sales curves for three types of SUV, along with overall sales for mid-size SUVs during the period.⁴

To put this in the language of culture, we have a correlation between sales curves – reflecting the dissemination of SUVs as cultural artifacts – and the timing of significant revisions to existing SUVs – reflecting the replication of culture with variation over time. Dissemination expands when a significant revision is introduced, but then peaks, and eventually requires, for its reinvigorated expansion, another revision. In short, the revisions or variations in the replication process seem to result in the expansion of dissemination.

Where did the idea of producing significant revisions of an existing model come from? In the automobile industry, the idea of bringing out “new” vehicles each year was actually a General Motors invention. When Henry Ford first produced the highly successful Model T in 1908, he had no intention of introducing variants. His celebrated (if never substantiated) quip about the Model T was: “You can have any color, as long as it’s black.”

He wanted to produce and sell as many vehicles as possible, and in 1913 began to mass-produce the Model T through assembly line production. By 1921 Ford was producing more than a million vehicles per year, an astonishing hundred-fold increase in production and sales over the 1908 figure of 10,202, when Ford was already the largest automobile manufacturer. Its 1921 production figures were ten times greater than the next competitor.

But then, in 1927, GM introduced an “annual model change,” which went along with what would later become known as the concept of “planned obsolescence,” by which customers were encouraged to continually buy new models. By 1928, Ford had slipped far into second place in sales, with only a third of a million, trailing after the GM Chevrolet which sold a million cars. Ford retired its Model T, and introduced the Model A. Ford and Chevrolet competed for dominance through the 1930s (see Figure 4). However, since GM included lines other than Chevrolet, it remained the dominant automobile manufacturer, with few exceptions, from then on. The idea of new models made for good business, that is, better dissemination of culture.

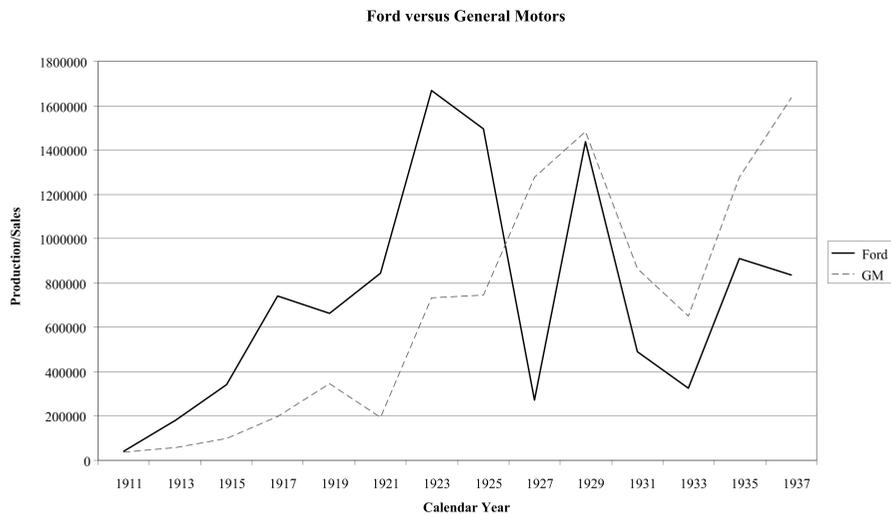


Figure 4: Ford had dominated the automobile market from 1918 until 1927, when GM introduced its policy of new models every year. That year, GM surpassed Ford in sales. 1911-1921 figures represent production; 1923-1937 figures represent sales (Chandler 1964: 3).

It is not that new models were not already being introduced every year when GM hit upon this idea. It was that the idea of producing new vehicles every year was not yet part of the metaculture of individual corporations. The newness was being introduced through the competition among the different corporations. After 1927, however, it became an aspiration of the individual corporations themselves — at least in the case of GM, and then later Ford and Chrysler.

How culture moves forward in time

There appears an apparent paradox as regards the movement of culture forward through time in the case of SUVs (and, we would argue, of many other mass-disseminated cultural elements). The paradox is that expanding dissemination, which results in increased secondary replication, requires changes in the cultural elements themselves over time. In order to get culture to move through the world, you cannot keep it exactly the same — contra a purist notion of culture as something received unchanged from the past. In the case of SUVs, culture has to be forward looking, if it is to move forward in time. It must change its shape, however slightly. This raises the question of whether this change is detectable by ordinary people, the kind who might buy an SUV or any other type of passenger vehicle. Are ordinary people sensitive to the newness? Or do they see it simply as we had, originally, as a continuation of what has come before? In short, do they see replication or innovation in what the automobile companies are doing?

We designed and implemented a test in order to assess this. The test is based on the idea, acquired from automobile reviews, that the grill of an automobile is its “signature.” The grill is sometimes described as the vehicle’s “face.” It is what makes the vehicle readily distinguishable from others that it might resemble. Consequently, one could look at grills over time to see whether there were detectable differences at those junctures where

significant revisions in the automobile were introduced – for example, when the “all-new” Jeep Grand Cherokee was introduced in 1999.

We took four lines of SUV – Chevrolet Blazer, Ford Explorer, Isuzu Trooper, and Jeep Grand Cherokee. We assembled photos of the grills, with manufacturer logos removed, of each of these lines for the model years 1994, 1996, 1998, and 2000. In a pilot study, one of us assembled a set consisting of the 136 possible pairs of these four vehicle lines and four model years. For each pair, the same question was posed to individual respondents: Are these two pairs (A) same make and same year; (B) same make but different year; (C) different make but same year; or (D) different make and different year. After the pilot phase, we significantly reduced the number of questions in the study. Only questions with a correct answer of B – “same make but different year” – along with some decoy questions were left in the test for a total of 27 questions. The test was first given to a sample of undergraduates and graduate students from a major Northeastern university. After that test was run, several more decoy questions were added to the test. In addition, the ordering of the questions was randomized in order to rule out learning effects and add validity to our results. Then, the second version was given to undergraduate students at a major Midwestern university and analyzed with the help of Dr. David Schweidel. The results from both iterations of the test were fairly similar.

The concern was not with the accuracy of the test results, but rather with the errors respondents made. In particular, when it came to significant revisions of an existing model line – which could be detected through sales curves as well as through automobile reviews – would the respondents be more likely to see two grills as coming from different makes of vehicles when a significant revision was introduced? Correspondingly, would they be more likely to see two grills that were of the same make but different years as being from the same year and make when no significant revision was introduced?

The results from the second trial at the Midwestern university (Figure 5a) show that at those junctures where a significant revision took place, the relative discontinuity is detected in the grill comparison. The test focuses on those cases where the answer should be “B” – that is, same make but different year. When the two vehicles of same make but different year cross a time boundary where an important renovation has occurred, one should detect a shift in the answer towards C or D, if respondents are recognizing the difference. That is, they should more likely regard the vehicles separated by a significant revision as “different make but same year” or “different make and different year.” Correspondingly, when the two years are within a given program, with no significant revisions, the results should be skewed towards A. In other words, the two vehicles should appear more readily mistaken for same make, same year. This turned out to be the case and there was significant evidence that people perceived discontinuities between two given programs.

	Response without revision				Response with revision			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Isuzu	39%	37%	14%	9%	3%	25%	17%	56%
Chevy	22%	54%	15%	9%	2%	34%	16%	49%
Jeep	44%	47%	7%	2%	6%	58%	16%	19%
Ford	50%	37%	8%	6%	6%	35%	12%	47%

Figure 5a: Results of a test to determine whether respondents can detect program revisions in SUV model lines. Sample size was 56 undergraduates at the Midwestern university. "Response without revision" refers to questions that were across periods with no significant model revision. "Response with revision" refers to periods without significant model revision. The numbers obtained are extrapolated population response percentages using Bayesian analysis of the data.

If we assign values to the answers as follows: A = 1, B = 2, C = 3 and D = 4, then higher numbers indicate a perceived disjunction, lower numbers, a perceived continuity (see the horizontal axis in Figure 5a). The questions fall into two categories. One category (labeled "Response without Revision" in Figure 5a) contains the results for those vehicle pairs where the respective dates *do not* cross a boundary when a significant model revision took. This would be true, for instance, of the 1996 and 1998 Jeep Grand Cherokee. No substantial revision occurred between those dates. The dates are within a given program cycle. The other category (labeled "Response with Revision" in Figure 5a) contains the results for those vehicle pairs where the respective dates *do* cross a boundary where a significant model revision took place. Grills from the 1998 and 2000 Jeep Grand Cherokee, for example, would fall into this latter category, since a substantial revision in that model took place in 1999.

Bayesian analysis allowed us to compare the proportions of people that migrated from the answers that emphasize similarity to answers that emphasize disjunction. Figure 5a shows the results of the analysis. It shows a noticeable shift to answers that emphasized disjunction across dates that crossed a boundary where a significant model revision took place. The Jeep Grand Cherokee indicated the least shift to answers emphasizing disjunction when compared across a period with a significant model revision due to a grill redesign that was not significantly different from the previous year. Even so, a large number of people still changed their answers from A to B in the case of the Jeep Grand Cherokee thus showing that the perceived shift effect was there but it was not as strong as in the other car models.

The results in Figure 5a come from a volunteer, convenience sample at the Midwestern university. The previous test (shown below in Figure 5b) was run from a volunteer, convenience sample of undergraduate and graduate students at the Northeastern university, along with some of their relatives and friends. While neither sample was randomly selected, the results still achieve a high degree of significance. Both studies exhibit similar movements towards disjunction in the samples which were taken across a revision boundary. Since we were able to replicate this test at two different universities in two different parts of the country, there is a significant probability that this test will be replicable in other settings.

	Response without revision				Response with revision			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Isuzu	43%	39%	10%	7%	2%	28%	14%	56%
Chevy	29%	49%	14%	8%	1%	30%	15%	54%
Jeep	53%	40%	6%	1%	4%	59%	18%	19%
Ford	59%	31%	6%	4%	4%	36%	13%	48%

Figure 5b: Results from the original Northeastern university study. Sample size is 61 undergraduate and graduate students, along with some of their relatives and friends.

We mentioned earlier that it is well known within the automobile industry that grills are signatures. Hence, changing the grill signals a change in the vehicle. The grills were redesigned in significant ways as a marker of the major revisions in the Blazer and Explorer lines, and probably less significantly, although still noticeably, in the case of the Jeep Grand Cherokee. This suggests that there is a correlation between perceived discontinuity in grills, programs to revise the vehicles, and sales curves.

The Isuzu Trooper is in an interesting case. The major revision in the Trooper took place between 1991 and 1992, before our study began. However, at that time little revision was done to the grill. Sales of the Trooper did not improve in 1992, although they turned up in 1993, but then they headed back down again. Later, Isuzu decided to revise the grill for the 1998 model year. Isuzu took its cue from the Ford Explorer revision, and fashioned a grill that is significantly like the revised Explorer in appearance. This shows up in the grills comparison test. Matched pairs comparing the updated grills on the Explorer and the Trooper indicate that the two were often perceived as a different year of the same model, rather than as different models.

What do the overall results in Figure 5a tell us about the paradox of motion – that is, the idea that in order for culture to move through the world it must change? The results suggest that the changes are detectable on a statistical basis, at least as regards to signature design features. The changes introduced by the manufacturers are statistically linked to the culture that is extracted from the SUVs – in this case, appreciation of design difference. It is therefore plausible that change at the cultural level is one of the factors inducing the greater dissemination of the cultural element, which in turn results, through secondary replication, in greater movement of culture through the world.

A possible objection to the test is that the changes studied are cosmetic. Perhaps, despite the cosmetic changes, nothing has changed as regards performance and handling. There is some truth to this. In the 1998 Isuzu Trooper, the changes were largely in the grill design – as we will discuss in the next section. These changes went along with an uptick in sales. A change in grill signature does not necessarily mean a change in other aspects of the vehicle, even if the Detroit manufacturers (Ford, GM, and Chrysler) do put noteworthy aesthetic changes together with important modifications in performance and handling.

However, the point is not that the changes go beyond the cosmetic. Aesthetic changes are, after all, significant in their own right. The point is, instead, that, according to the interpretation proposed here, customers may (and ought to) be able to detect other changes as well, and we could, in principle, determine those changes through pair wise tests such as the one used for grills. For example, if there are significant changes in gas mileage on

the highway, ordinary people ought to be able to discover those changes, given the opportunity to drive the paired vehicles in questions. If there is a significant change in cornering ability, people should be able to detect it, however small the statistical margin. If the vehicle has been redesigned to have substantially less road noise, again ordinary folk ought to be able to perceive the difference. Given time and resources, we could construct a test for just about any one of the significant changes in performance, handling, and aesthetics, and expect that the difference would be detectable by potential customers.

What is the relationship of the metaculture of newness to the movement of culture?

Having looked at cultural change in relationship to the movement of culture, we come now to the question posed at the outset of this paper about the relationship between metacultural representations and the movement of that culture. Why have an advertising campaign center on the idea that there are only “127 carry-over parts” between the 1998 and 1999 models of the Jeep Grand Cherokee? It is one thing to ask whether aesthetic (along with performance and handling) characteristics can be detected by ordinary people, and, hence, can contribute to the uptick in dissemination and cultural motion. It is another to wonder how people might know to look for those significant modifications, or to appreciate that an overall change has occurred in the first place. Metaculture directs attention to the changes.

The starting point in approaching this problem was not only the observation made at the outset – namely, that what seems obvious to the anthropologist is the similarity between the old and new vehicles, not the differences, whereas to those inside the corporation what is most remarkable are the changes. That was the first empirical puzzle confronted. The other was the general feeling that the auto industry engages in an endless hype of newness. We could not help but feel that the claim to newness was false, unconnected to the reality of cultural motion, where what meets the senses is monotonous regularity. Having seen that our impression of monotonous regularity was incorrect, that, in fact, there are periods of significant design change alternating cyclically with periods of relatively little change, our attention turned to the claims made about those changes. Were the automobile manufacturers continuously touting the idea of newness, even in those periods of relatively little modification?

The first example is the campaign for the 1999 “All-New Jeep Grand Cherokee,” as it was touted (see Figure 6). How were other years described? The “All-New” label, in the *Car and Driver* magazine ads we consulted, was only used for the 1999 model. That is, the label marked the vehicle as significantly new, even though the word “New” had been used previously. The significant change – resulting from a cyclical program revision – was, in fact, marked by a change in the metacultural descriptor: “All-New” versus “New.” The “All-New” descriptor was, again relatively speaking, used accurately.

	Jeep Grand Cherokee	Ford Explorer	Chevrolet Blazer	Isuzu Trooper
1991				Isuzu Trooper
1992	<u>New Jeep: New Grand Cherokee; New Grand Wagoneer model</u>	Explorer		<u>New Isuzu Trooper</u>
1993	Grand Cherokee; Most advanced Jeep			
1994	Jeep Grand Cherokee			
1995	Jeep Grand Cherokee	All-new Ford Explorer; New Ford Explorer	All new Chevy Blazer; New Blazer	<u>New Trooper Limited</u>
1996	<u>New Jeep Grand Cherokee</u>		Chevy Blazer	Isuzu Trooper
1997	<u>New Jeep Grand Cherokee</u>			Isuzu Trooper
1998	<u>New Jeep Grand Cherokee</u>			
1999	All-new Jeep Grand Cherokee	<u>New Explorer</u>		Isuzu Trooper
2000	Jeep Grand Cherokee			
2001	Jeep Grand Cherokee			
2002		All-new Ford Explorer		

Figure 6: The use of the metaculture descriptors “new” and “all new” in SUV ads in *Car and Driver* magazine.

Nor is the descriptor “new,” when applied to other years, actually false. A close examination shows that some changes are introduced almost every year, even when no significant program revision has occurred. Minor tinkering often (even if not always) occurs within the existing line when a new model comes out.

A similar metacultural marking takes place in the case of the Chevy Blazer and Ford Explorer, which introduced minor program (i.e., substantial) revisions in 1995. Both use the descriptor “new” sparingly or not at all in years other than those involving a significant program revision – i.e., 1995 and 2002 in the case of the Ford Explorer, and 1995 in the case of the Chevy Blazer. In each of those years, they herald the significant change with the descriptor “all-new.”

The Isuzu case is interesting from this perspective. Isuzu introduced a program revision in 1992, and they did herald that change with the word “new.” However, curiously, the grill change – and recall that the grill is the face of the vehicle – was not conspicuous for the 1992 program. They did introduce a major grill change in 1998, here apparently copying in some measure the rounded style that Ford had already adopted, replacing the earlier rather squarish styles that were typical on SUVs around 1990. Isuzu seemed to appreciate less well than the Detroit automakers how cultural change and the metacultural marking of that change correlate with dissemination and the movement of culture. Their grill redesign was out of sync with their program revision and advertising, as if they did not really know how these all fit together and reinforced one another.

The bottom-line conclusion here is that the *metaculture of newness* has some truth behind it and is concerned with the spatial dissemination of culture. The claims to newness are constructed in such a way as to mark significant revisions in an existing strand of culture. While to an anthropologist as outsider it may appear that we are dealing with cultural continuity coupled with metacultural hype that is detached from the culture it is about, cultural-metacultural analysis reveals the truth of the metaculture. The metaculture accurately portrays the culture it is about.

If this is true of advertising campaigns, what about sales people endeavoring to get you to buy their vehicle? Are they touting newness where it does not, in fact, occur? The dealers we contacted seemed little inclined to hype newness in the absence of important revisions. Here is an example from one interview, where “R” is the “interviewer,” “S” the “salesperson”:

R: I just want to know how different this model is from the previous model.

S: First, 2002 is about \$3,000 cheaper than the 2001. As far as significant changes (body style), it's pretty much the same vehicle.

R: No changes in functionality.

S: No.

Another example from a different dealer:

R: I was wondering why I should even get a 2002 model. What is different from earlier models...?

S: Uh, not much. Not much, and what I would suggest if we have any ones left... [asks if there are some left]. What I would like you to do, drive both of them...

Note also the salesperson's emphasis on the customer's first-hand experience. In this case, the reference is to the sameness of experience, but we find this as well in cases where the salesperson is pointing, metaculturally, to significant change, as in the difference between the Jeep Grand Cherokee and Jeep Liberty:

R: I never had an SUV before.

S: The JGC [Jeep Grand Cherokee] is phenomenal. Now, if you have never had one, you might like the Liberty better, because they say the reason... It rides like a sedan. It's got a beautiful soft ride! You know, what I would suggest is, come on down. We'll take both of 'em out. You can see how you like them.

In the interviews, we found no evidence of a hyping of newness where none existed. We found, rather, that the metacultural discourse of the salespeople was designed to point to comparative features (whether similarities or differences) that the customers might observe themselves, perhaps through test-driving.

The metacultural commentary of the salesperson, like that of the advertisement, calls attention to newness and difference but only in relatively realistic ways. In order for people to know that a significant program revision has taken place, the manufacturer has to mark it metaculturally, such that potential buyers will take note. By bringing newness or difference to the attention of potential buyers, the metaculture, in effect, imparts an accelerative force to the culture that it is about. It helps to increase dissemination, typically after a downturn, and the increased dissemination means greater movement of culture (via processes of secondary replication) into the world.

With this, however, the question of why the metaculture of newness sells remains. Certainly, one will find, with further research, examples where change backfires and results in decreased dissemination. The attempt to introduce a “new Coke” in 1985 is invariably brought up in this context. The Coca Cola Company attempted to replace its classic soft drink with a new one, presumably to increase sales. Market share had dropped from about 60% just after WWII to about 24% in 1983, just two years before the aborted innovation. In fact, the newness campaign failed. People rejected the “new Coke,” preferring the classic version.

The failures of newness actually throw light on the reasons for a metaculture of newness itself. In situations of a downturn in dissemination, emphasizing sameness or lack of change would, presumably, not do the trick. If the older model had been selling less and less well, then emphasizing identity with the older model would not result in an uptick in dissemination. Consequently, a metaculture of newness or at least difference appears as the only hope for imparting new momentum to old culture. The irony is, of course, that to be successful, the old culture has to change. It has to become something different. Hence, it has to be “new.”

From the perspective of culture as oldness or tradition, however, with which this paper began, “newness” is clearly a relative term. Just how different is the 1999 Jeep Grand Cherokee from the 1998? Relatively speaking, it is more different than the 1998 was from the 1997. True, but this is a matter of degree. It is still the case that putatively new culture moves along inertial pathways. The culture cannot be too new, or it would risk being unrecognizable and, therefore, undisseminalable. At the same time, neither can it be too similar to its past. Its secret lies in the mixture of oldness and newness. The new design has to contain enough of the old design that it preserves the original appeal, but it has to be just different enough that an attractive force results.

There is something in the problem of oldness and newness that anthropologists have yet to fully grasp. How can the motion of an abstract form be dependent, in part, on the modification of that abstract form? How can oldness, in short, depend upon newness? If culture is too rigidly fixed in its material form, it loses some of its interest, and that interest is the force that keeps it in circulation, insures that people will want to replicate it in the first place. If it changes too much in its abstract form, its material manifestations cannot make use of the inertial pathways already laid down. Those pathways facilitate movement in accord with a principle that culture already in motion tends to continue in motion unless acted upon by some other force. In the last two hundred years of corporate history, the force tending to slow inertial motion has been the competition from other corporations. An emphasis on newness within the corporation provides a mechanism for keeping ahead of (or at least up with) other corporations bent on seeing their culture flow along the same pathways.

NOTES

¹ The circulatory model bears a resemblance to epidemiological models such as that espoused by Sperber (1996).

² And, to be sure, local patterns of usage of automobiles vary widely (see the essays in Miller 2001). Diana Young (2001), for example, describes uses of cars in the Pitjantjatjara Lands of South Australia: “Car headlights are used during nocturnal ceremonies to illuminate the dancers, augmenting

large bonfires replenished continually for the same purpose” (42); “at public meetings or church *inma* drivers group their cars in a rough semi-circle facing the action...” (42); “as they travel along dirt roads cars are transformed, rapidly modified...by their owners, acquiring contrasting panels, odd wheels, fabric instead of window-glazing and, inside, an accumulation of rubbish” (43).

³ Data obtained from Automotive News Market Data Books (1992-2000). 1994 data obtained from Motor Vehicle Facts and Figures 1996.

⁴ Data obtained from Automotive News Market Data Books (1992-2000). 1994 data obtained from Motor Vehicle Facts and Figures 1996.

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