

Starbucks Paper Cup and Plastic Lid (October 14 - 17, 2005)

by Sarah Jain

I nostalgically cherish the days of my youth, when cafes came with uneven coffee and varied experiences. Thus, I visit Starbucks infrequently. Though October 14 might have marked both the birth and the death of the cup ordered at the last stop on the way to Yosemite at that horrible mall in Gilroy, I left it in the car, holding leftover coffee and then the next day drank from it again. Surely I will photograph it, toss it away, and it will join the landfill of paper cups that will disintegrate and plastic lids that will not. My possession of the object indicates only a small portion of its life.

If McLuhan claimed that the medium is the message, this cup is replete. Starbucks was one of the first companies to realize the now standard mantra: Offer mass-produced experiences with just enough individuation. My cup, then, with its white spaces for directives and the check boxes for Decaf, Shots, Syrup, Milk, Custom, and Drink allow for countless deviations from the standard. This personalization surely reflects the intimacy of the cafe—the potential for the pensive moment, the deeper experience—contrary to the very existence of a disposable cup. My cup says: “The Way I See It # 12” written in a messy type, followed by: “The humble improve—**Wynton Marsalis.**”

Jurgen Habermas theorized that the coffee house provides a crucial location for the practice of democracy. According to Starbucks’ website, “The Way I See It” specifically cites this notion. The publics of Starbucks, however, may be less open-minded than those imagined by Habermas. My friend Jake boycotted Starbucks (if only for two days) because of a quote, and the right -wing Concerned Women for America criticized Starbucks for promoting a “homosexual agenda” with another. Thus the small type reads: “This is the author’s opinion, not necessarily that of Starbucks.”

If the directive to visit www.starbucks.com/wayiseeit offers one access point to a wider commodity producing republic, the cup identifies others. The patent number on the lid leads one to Jack Clements’ 1984 patent, and from there to designs as far back as 1870, when J. Leach patented his “tea cup cover.” Despite early iterations, Clements’ lid found its niche because, according to the patent filing, “in some lids, [...] drinking through the opening is difficult or uncomfortable due to the way in which the user’s mouth engages the lid.” Furthermore, “it may be inconvenient for the user to perform the requisite penetration or folding of the lid, particularly if the user is walking or riding in a vehicle, or has only one hand free.”

Engaging the user’s mouth? Penetrating the lid? One hand free?

The large American coffee, unlike the European version, is to be savored over a day, mobile, accessed with one hand. This coffee culture requires new designs for not only lids, but for automobiles, snack packages, and strollers for coffeedrinkers-in-training.

Even as the disposability of this cup proffers an experience that can be let go, my connection to this particular cup lies in its details. I now have an attachment to the shape of the stain that emerges from the bottom of the cup like the tail of Jonah’s whale to highlight “tarbuc” and “XM Sat,” the crinkled rim, and the squashed well-worn feel. These marks and stains, the tiny drop of three day old coffee are dictated by the cup’s design and yet never fully predictable. 🖐️

