

“To Thy Own Self Be True”:  
Ernest Dichter & The American 1950s

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Introduction	4
Historiography	8
Chapter One: The Strength in Weakness	16
Chapter Two: Freud + Köhler & Bühler = Dichter	27
Chapter Three: Dichter: The Master of Misdirection	36
Chapter Four: Like Sherlock Holmes, Dichter's Findings were "Elementary"	46
Conclusion: Dichter & The Unveiling of America	60
Reflection	65
Bibliography	66

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## Introduction

In many ways I think I share many similarities with Ernest Dichter. While I was fortunate enough to not have grown up in poverty, much less extreme poverty, or during a war-ridden era, I too suffered from insecurity at a young age. Dichter was critical of his appearance, as was I. He threw himself into his studies because he felt most comfortable in his isolated study. My formative years paralleled his experiences, as I too, spent my time alone often reading and studying while my peers were partying. Dichter struggled with his religion, ashamed that his phallus was a constant physical indicator of his ethnicity. Similarly, I struggled with my religion, always lamenting the strict laws that I felt kept me from the freedom my peers had. I was terribly self-conscious of having to explain the certain laws I abided by, thinking others might find it strange, and “different.” And like Dichter, I sought to go above and beyond my insecurities: to make something of my self despite those self-perceived weaknesses.

Coming to college, I took my first steps in reinventing myself. I subverted my insecurities and played with them, chiseling them away. I became happier with who I was, I made friends of a life time, I expanded my horizons and opened my mind to the world around me, never saying no, and always saying yes. I came to understand others, and in turn, I learned that everyone has their differences and that such distinctions are perfect in their own way, and more importantly, respected by others. Dichter understood people. He understood their fears and what they were afraid to admit to. Dichter deeply knew about insecurities, having struggled with them his whole life, before turning it into the basis for his career as a motivational researcher and marketer. My thesis, therefore, seeks to tell the story of Ernest Dichter through the lens of his experiences and childhood, and argues that it was those unique experiences that allowed him to truly understand the American psyche and become the validator it so badly wanted.

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Perhaps the best way to characterize the 1950s in America is to dub it as economist John Kenneth Galbraith did: the affluent society. The decade enjoyed “a booming, almost miraculous, economic growth that made even the heady 1920s seem pale by comparison.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the GDP in America during the post World War II era experienced a 250 percent increase from \$200 billion to \$500 billion. Although many Americans – minorities, in particular – were excluded from this prosperity, unemployment and inflation overall were at favorably low levels. Most importantly, such economic prosperity was buoyed by a shift in economy from one of basic need, to that of consumerism.<sup>2</sup> In part it was this new type of economy, boasting a new type of consumer mentality, which made Ernest Dichter so successful. Arriving in America during a decade that primed people to buy goods made Dichter’s ability to persuade people that much easier. Nevertheless, this reality was true for all advertisers and marketers of the time. What made Dichter unique was his ability to realize and then utilize the notion that consumers are really unaware of what it is they want. Dichter sought to figure out this mystery, and deliver. However, while post World War II America was experiencing immense wealth in the private sector, the public sector was ailing. Galbraith’s influential book *The Affluent Society* chastised Americans for being immoral in their prosperity and for failing to address social justice issues.

Admonished for their selfish behavior, Americans took upon themselves a “Puritan complex,” in which society adhered to a strict moral construct, for the guilt of being so affluent while neighbors suffered was too harsh to acknowledge. Thus, Americans sought to be morally conscious and cautious. However, while morality was brought to the fore, immoral desires, were

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<sup>1</sup> Andrea Carosso, *Cold War Narratives: American Culture in the 1950s* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2012), 39.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

relegated to the subconscious. Interestingly, these muted desires would subtly emerge when individuals made purchases. Dichter, in his motivational research, began to see patterns in consumer choices, connecting those hidden desires to the purchases individuals made. Thus, Dichter identified that Americans had a sense of guilt that was holding them back from their unspoken desires. This was the result of the American “Puritan complex,” which people fought to practice, but were inevitably conflicted in following. Lawrence R. Samuel writes, “the country’s ‘Puritan complex’ was an unfortunate consequence of its prosperity... with many if not most Americans unable to fully enjoy the good things in life they had worked so hard to earn.”<sup>3</sup> Buying symbolic items relieved Americans’ urges. While it gave them satisfaction, it circumvented the actual sin itself. For example, buying a convertible would stand in place of having a mistress, as a convertible shared the same associations as a mistress: excitement and freedom.<sup>4</sup> “Like other observers of the social scene in the late fifties... Dichter saw Americans as a particularly lonely crowd with a dire need for emotional support.”<sup>5</sup> Thus he supported them by creating a form of corporate hedonism that was the basis for his theories about psychology and marketing. Dichter’s purpose, as a marketer, then, was to coax the “immoral” tendencies out of the American psyche, and to validate Americans, assuring them that such inclinations were not immoral, but acceptable.

This thesis seeks to explore what it was about Dichter that made him so influential, especially at a time when the motivational research and marketing field was burgeoning with many pioneers. It argues that it was Dichter’s unique experiences as a child and young adult in Europe that prepared him to take America by storm. Chapter one explores Dichter’s formative

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<sup>3</sup> Lawrence R. Samuel, *Freud on Madison Avenue* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 145.

<sup>4</sup> Ernest Dichter, *The Strategy of Desire* [1960] (Garden Centre: Martino Publishing, 2012), 36.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel, *Freud on Madison Avenue*, 145.

years in Vienna, when he first became aware of his own flaws and insecurities. The chapter focuses on the issues Dichter had with himself through a Freudian psychoanalytic lens, as Freud was a key influencer of Dichter's theories, though Dichter himself often tried to erase the associations drawn between him and the famous psychologist. Chapter two of this thesis addresses Dichter's training and education, and the Gestalt Theory. The theory stipulates that individuals perceive objects differently as a whole than as the sum of its parts. This chapter argues that the combination of Gestalt psychology with Freudian psychoanalysis was the defining feature of Dichter's motivational research. This chapter also explains why this theory was so pertinent to Dichter's work later in America. Chapter three hones in on Dichter's first years in America, his in-depth focus group approach to understanding consumers, and his quick rise to fame. Dichter's method of focus groups was novel in that it negated statistics and quantitative research—a sense of actual science—and instead focused on the emotional, irrational, qualitative aspects of his study. My final, fourth chapter looks at Dichter's impact in the field of motivational research, as well as motivational research's significance to the next generation. Supporting the chapters of this thesis are primary documents provided by the American Consumer Culture database, which contains thousands of original reports and papers by Dichter. Of the extant works on Dichter, these documents have not been referenced, thereby differentiating this thesis from preexisting scholarship on Dichter.

Ernest Dichter allows scholars today to better understand the American people of the 1950s. While many argue that Dichter was a manipulative man, playing on the insecurities and vulnerabilities of people to exploit them for corporate monetary gain, I believe that his story is telling of the true character of America. As Gerd Prechtl writes, "Dichter stirred up a process of

discussion.”<sup>6</sup> This discussion was the question of what truly motivates human beings. Dichter, in his ever “creative discontentedness,” always sought to question the world around him, to find deeper meanings into the seemingly rational and simple semblance of individuals. In his questioning of it, he turned to psychology, to the human mind and subconscious. He is to be understood as the man who made Freud’s theories applicable. Franz Kreuzer said, “you [Dichter] did not discover electricity but invented the light bulb.”<sup>7</sup> Electricity was Freud’s psychoanalysis, and psychoanalysis was the spark that led Dichter to his light bulb: motivational research. Dichter’s work set the foundation for further understanding human psychology, especially in terms of human desires. This thesis attempts to explain how Dichter went about doing that. It shows how Dichter’s unique past helped build his future, and how his deepest insecurities allowed him to empathize with America while it too suffered.

### Historiography

Though Dichter dominated the American landscape for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he has become a mere vestige of American history. Alternatively, he can be seen as an appendage to the greater treasury of American history on consumerism and abundance of the 1950s. Not much has been written on Dichter, and even less has been written on an analysis of his life. In conducting the research for this thesis, I found only *two* books written specifically on Dichter. Moreover, those two books are more akin to anthologies, compiling essays written on different aspects of Dichter and his work. Other works, though not explicitly on Dichter, have used him as an anchor about which to weave the greater story of marketing and advertising in America during the mid-

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<sup>6</sup> Gerd Precht, “Kick-Off: Ernest Dichter, a Man from Vienna,” in *A Tiger in the Tank: Ernest Dichter an Austrian Advertising Guru* (Riverside: Ariadne Press, 2007), 13.

<sup>7</sup> Franz Kreuzer, Gerd Precht, and Christoph Steiner, “The Secret Freudian: Ernest Dichter as a Witness of his Work, Franz Kreuzer in an Interview with Ernest Dichter,” in *A Tiger in the Tank: Ernest Dichter an Austrian Advertising Guru* (Riverside: Ariadne Press, 2007), 24.



20th century. The earliest seminal work written on Dichter was Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957), which targeted Dichter as a manipulative demon who infiltrated the American psyche, using his research to bend the will of consumers to corporate America. Packard's book achieved such fame due to his status as a famous journalist and social critic of the 1950s.

To Packard, Dichter “manipulate[d] human motivations and desires and develop[ed] a need for goods with which the public ha[d] at one time been unfamiliar – perhaps even undesirous of purchasing.”<sup>8</sup> Packard identified a growing bridge between psychology and marketing, and branded Ernest Dichter and his motivational research as the connector between both fields. The main claim of his work was that psychology was being used against Americans. Packard showed how advertisers understood that at the center of consumer psychology lay uncertainty and impulsiveness, and explained how marketers had come to identify this and exploit it for their commercial benefit. He also exposed advertisers as having developed a theory of human consciousness based on Freudian theories. As Dichter precisely used Freudian ideas to shape his research, Packard recognized him as the master behind the manipulative nature of marketing. As such, he painted Dichter as a menacing controller, making Americans pawns in his consumer game. Moreover, Packard claimed advertisers and marketers were particularly exploitative of women, claiming that the industry saw women as emotional and irrational beings that could easily be overwhelmed by an array of products, sending them into a trance, which would ultimately induce them to impulsively purchase goods. This claim particularly caught the attention of acclaimed feminist Betty Friedan, who condemned Dichter, and came to see him too as a foe to American women. (In her famous book *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan alluded to

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<sup>8</sup> Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (New York: D. McKay Co., 1957), 27.

Dichter: “I went to see a man who is paid approximately a million dollars a year for his professional services in manipulating the emotions of American women to serve the needs of business.”<sup>9</sup> While Packard had felt he had done a justice for the American people by illuminating the truth behind the advertising world and outing Dichter, others were not convinced, and instead saw *The Hidden Persuaders* as just another stepping stone that catapulted Dichter into fame.

Dichter himself was perhaps the most appreciative of Packard’s criticism. In his autobiography, *Getting Motivated: The Secret Behind Individual Motivations by the Man Who Was Not Afraid to Ask “Why?”* (1979), Dichter thanked Packard for his denunciation in an aptly titled chapter: “Thank You, Mr. Packard.” Dichter explained: “I must admit that nothing in the manuscript led me to expect the spectacular, literally world-wide attention which was created through this book... my business started booming.”<sup>10</sup> But aside from the rather tongue-and-cheek thank you that his book provides, it is also one of the only books written solely about Dichter. Though perhaps not considered amongst the contemporary scholarship on Dichter due to its primary nature, *Getting Motivated* is a very telling, and nuanced tale of Dichter, despite Dichter himself being the author. The autobiography argues that Dichter is foremost a self-made man. In this work, Dichter’s penchant for self-aggrandizement and his predisposition to arrogance becomes clear. As such, the reader picks up on a seemingly nuanced version of Dichter’s life: one that highlights his strengths, hides his weaknesses, and invalidates any help or support he may have received throughout his life, with the exception of his dear wife, Hedy. This is important to note, as it discredits the influence of Freud and his professors on his own work and

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<sup>9</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* [1963] (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1983), 208.

<sup>10</sup> Ernest Dichter, *Getting Motivated: The Secret Behind Individual Motivations by the Man Who Was Not Afraid to Ask “Why?”* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1979), 82.

theories. The book fails to mention any formal teaching and guidance Dichter received, such as the roles Wolfgang Köhler and Karl and Charlotte Bühler played in his life. In the American Consumer Culture database a search query for Köhler or the Böhlers retrieve zero results. Occasionally, however, Dichter did mention Paul Lazarsfeld, a professor and mentor of his, but only to show how he took Lazarsfeld's teaching and improved it in ways that Lazarsfeld failed to do. In the same database, the thousands of original documents by Dichter only mention Lazarsfeld seven times. Similarly, Dichter merely commented on Freud twice in his nearly 200-paged book: once to mention how in Vienna he lived across the street from the esteemed psychologist, and once to say: "I have often been accused of being Freudian... In reality I am not; I am much more an eclectic."<sup>11</sup> I would argue that Dichter's limited acknowledgement of Freud and his various mentors serves to expose his insecurity that past work in his field might come to overshadow his progression of that work.

*Ernest Dichter and Motivational Research* (2010) edited by Stefan Schwarzkopf and Rainer Gries is the first of two anthologies I came upon in my research. The work is broken down into 5 parts, excluding the introduction and conclusion, and focuses on Dichter's work and personality, delves into some case studies, and then discusses Dichter's effect in Europe. Though the anthology in its entirety has been useful to studying Dichter, it is the section that deals with Dichter's work holistically and his personality that have proven most useful for this thesis. In his essay, "From Vienna to the United States and Back: Ernest Dichter and American Consumer Culture," Daniel Horowitz argues that it was Dichter's atypical émigré nature that made him so successful in the United States. Where most émigrés were aloof and critical of American culture, Dichter submerged himself in it. He recognized the puritanical nature of America, which viewed

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 92.

“affluence as a harbinger of immorality and declension.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, Dichter took European practices of consumerism and thought and adapted them to America. This meant that Dichter democratized the act of consumption, while others such as John Kenneth Galbraith and Vance Packard condemned it. Horowitz argues that Dichter empowered the buyer by linking consumption, pleasure, and democracy, for it allowed the purchaser to personally grow and express himself when he made purchases. Horowitz’s argument comes full circle, as he ends by demonstrating how Dichter exported his “[Americanized] European patterns of consumption” back to Europe. While Horowitz’s work heavily deals with Dichter’s shock-value as he brought sensual European practices of consumerism to puritanical America, and how he then adapted such practices to better fit the American landscape, my thesis seeks to dissect Dichter’s early experiences as a way to better understand the application and success of his theories in the United States. Moreover, where Horowitz returns to Europe to discuss the legacy of Dichter’s work, my work remains in the United States and discusses the legacy Dichter left in America.

Ronald Fullerton’s essay, “Ernest Dichter: The Motivational Researcher,” argues first and foremost that it was precisely Dichter as a *motivational researcher*, that catapulted him into fame. Fullerton weighs in on the qualitative nature of motivational research (MR) as the key to its success, and Dichter’s affinity for the imaginative that made MR a mainstay of the American 1950s and 60s. However, Fullerton downplays Dichter’s feats, writing, “Dichter was hardly the only prominent motivation researcher” and that he did not merit the title of “father of motivational research” as “his methods had really been developed by others.”<sup>13</sup> Fullerton hones

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<sup>12</sup> Daniel Horowitz, “From Vienna to the United States and Back: Ernest Dichter and American Consumer Culture” in *Ernest Dichter and Motivation Research* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 42.

<sup>13</sup> Ronald Fullerton, “Ernest Dichter: The Motivational Researcher” in *Ernest Dichter and Motivation Research* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 63.

in on the history of MR, dating its origins to the early 1920s and 30s, having been developed by a group at the Society for Consumption Research in Nuremberg. Moreover, Fullerton accredits much of Dichter's methodology to Paul Lazarsfeld. Fullerton argues that Lazarsfeld lost an interest in commercial pursuits and instead focused his attention on academic research. Finally, Fullerton rounds out his criticism of Dichter by drawing Packard and Freidan into his account to show how Dichter was accused of fraudulence during his time. In his conclusion, Fullerton writes, "methodologically, Dichter's 'findings' were questionable – replication was not even mentioned – and of course Dichter seldom reported any failures... his genius was his own imagination."<sup>14</sup> Fullerton is clearly deprecating towards Dichter, but he is also blind to the fact that Dichter was more of an innovator and theorist than he gives him credit for. As I argue in my thesis, while Dichter did build on the theories of others, (and I will admit, he did not necessarily give them credit), it was the marriage of the separate theories into one— namely Freudian psychoanalysis and Gestalt theory, utilized through Lazarsfeld's invention of depth interviews—that made Dichter's motivational research and methodology original and successful.

The second anthology on Dichter is *A Tiger in the Tank* (2007) edited and authored by Franz Kreuzer, Gerd Prechtel, and Christoph Steiner. The book contains eleven unique works, including an interview with Dichter, an essay by Dichter's wife Hedy, and a piece entitled "Ernest Dichter, Unadorned," by his son, Thomas Dichter. Perhaps the most useful scholarship for this thesis, and the most related to the work contained in the following pages is Thomas Cudlik and Christoph Steiner's work "Rabbi Ernest, The Strategist of Desire: A Portrait." Together the authors touch upon many facets of Dichter's life, some of which are the main points of my thesis. Of the four sections and nineteen subsections of their work, five subsections—

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 72.

insecurity, Freud, wholistic approach, desire, and pleasure—are related to my work. Under the category of insecurities, Cudlik and Steiner narrow in on Dichter’s poverty as the source of his insecurity, claiming it was this experience that motivated him to seek a better life for himself. On Freud, the authors mention how Freud’s theories served as a guideline for Dichter. While the work mentions Dichter’s approach of seeing products as a whole, they never once mention the term Gestalt in the subsection of their work entitled “The Soul of Things”—the precise area where Gestalt would be discussed—thereby omitting an important key word from the discussion. The term Gestalt is used in the context of Dichter’s invention of it. Oddly, it is missing from the argument in which they describe how Dichter perceived of objects as having souls or personalities. Finally, on the topics of desire and pleasure, desire is spoken about in the context of depth interviews as the main object of search during these sessions, and pleasure is written about in the context of puritanical America. Undoubtedly, Cudlik and Steiner touch upon many points of my thesis; however, the accounts given by these authors are, as the title suggests, merely a *portrait*, and are therefore superficial in nature. As their work covers a lot of ground, it precludes them from analyzing each portion of their study comprehensively. Conversely, I take a more in-depth approach to these five categories, giving a detailed analysis of the how and why each of these topics was so important in the greater scheme of Dichter’s life. Additionally, Cudlik and Steiner tend to focus on Dichter himself, where this thesis additionally explores the intimate relationship between Dichter and America. Lastly, the claims made in their work are underlined by the crux of their argument: that it was Dichter’s personality—and especially his attitude as a pragmatist (ironically)—that made him so successful.<sup>15</sup> My argument is more

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas Cudlik and Christoph Steiner, “Rabbi Ernest, The Strategist of Desire: A Portrait” in *A Tiger in the Tank: Ernest Dichter an Austrian Advertising Guru* (Riverside: Ariadne Press, 2007), 52.

nuanced in that I claim it was Dichter's experiences with insecurity solely that made him so influential.

Finally, Lawrence R. Samuel's *Freud on Madison Avenue: Motivation Research and Subliminal Advertising in America* (2010) accounts for a detailed work on the influence of Freudian theories on Madison Avenue, the New York road famously known for its slew of advertising and marketing firms. Dichter, though not the topic of the book, is a main feature of the work as he was one of the most influential marketers during the rise of the Madison Avenue era, greatly relying on Freudian psychology. Samuel focuses on how ideas of the subconscious were applied to advertising, and also spends time exploring subliminal advertising, a topic unrelated to Dichter. Through his description of Dichter, Samuel demonstrates that at the time, it became crucial for marketers to be able to sell themselves before they could sell any product (an apt reason for why Dichter hired a friend to rid him of his Viennese accent). Samuel outlines Dichter's first major successes and how his ideas and methods were adopted widely by the industry, making motivational research the main technique in advertising. However, as Samuel's book is a holistic account on the role of psychology in advertising, he goes on to characterize other schools that were influential. Other than Freudian psychology, as practiced by Dichter, there was a "psychosocial" school, which focused on group behavior, and a third school that was influenced by Alfred Adler's approach to psychoanalysis. The argument of my thesis does not overlap with the argument presented in Samuel's book. However, his book gives clout to the notion of a puritanical America searching for a savior. In this way, Samuel's book, which demonstrates how Freud became so popular in marketing and advertising, is a lead in to my thesis on the man who made it possible: Ernest Dichter.

## Chapter One: The Strength in Weakness

“‘Ernest,’ he said, ‘don’t ever lose your insecurity. It is the secret to your success. Because you yourself are insecure, you can understand other people and discover what makes them tick.’”

— Mr. Updegraff<sup>16</sup>

“No one wants to relive childhood unpleasanties,” wrote Dichter in his report on the psychology of young men.<sup>17</sup> Dichter was referring to the insecurities that one forms as a child and adolescent. Many times insecurities can be crippling and as such can keep an individual from obtaining things they desire or want to do. Dichter, however, was not like typical individuals. Rather he used his insecurities as a diving board from which he could jump to success. He was able to do this through intense observation and reflection of his own insecurities throughout his formative years. This chapter argues that it was Dichter’s early life experiences in Vienna that equipped him to bring the change he did to America. In Vienna, Dichter learned to observe others and identify their insecurities, a skill he perfected through the struggle with his own various insecurities. By embracing his perceived shortcomings he was able to achieve personal success.

Covering the years from Dichter’s birth in 1907 until his flight from Austria in 1938, this chapter utilizes Dichter’s autobiography, *Getting Motivated*, to portray how Dichter’s early experiences in Vienna ultimately shaped the way he conceived of others and their insecurities. Additionally, this chapter uses Freudian principles of psychoanalysis as a way to psychologically decipher the meaning behind Dichter’s experiences, as well as show how the underlying psychology of Dichter’s personal events mirror the subconscious of the 1950s American psyche.

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<sup>16</sup> Dichter, *Getting Motivated*, 48. Mr. Updegraff, a good friend of Dichter’s, was a consultant at Lever Brothers at the time.

<sup>17</sup> Ernest Dichter, “The Peacock Revolution: The Psychology of the Young Men’s Market.” 1966. American Consumer Culture.



Though dubbed the “father of motivational research,” a more apt title for Ernest Dichter would be “insecurity validator.” Born in 1907 in Vienna, Austria, Dichter was no stranger to insecurity himself. As a child, he was an outcast, both in school and at home. A red head, Dichter immediately felt different amongst his peers. He was not an athlete, and rather concerned himself with his studies. He also imposed harsh criticism on himself, admitting that he never liked his physical features, and that he was “always dissatisfied with [himself].”<sup>18</sup> Dichter’s insecurities therefore began to develop at a young, prime age. Though insecure, Dichter never allowed others to see it. He built a tough skin, constantly looking for ways to blunt these feelings, by burying himself inside his books. Furthermore, school was not the only place where Dichter felt vulnerable; his home life also served to deeply foster his insecurities.

Dichter’s father was a salesman, and not a particularly good one. The family struggled, often having to go hungry, for no sales meant no commission, and in turn, meant no food. To make matters more difficult, Dichter’s father did not approve of his studying, believing the young boy should concern himself with finding work and making money.<sup>19</sup> When Dichter quit his job as a clerk and window decorator, his father felt betrayed. Dichter’s father’s disapproval of his studying—the only thing providing Dichter an escape from his painful reality—exacerbated their ill relationship. Moreover, Dichter, who was often embarrassed by his father’s failures, did not regard him as a role model, but rather as a source of insecurity. Upon his father’s death in 1934, Dichter, at 27 years of age, had to assume the role of head of the household, as the oldest male of his siblings. This new position only served to further alienate Dichter from his family members. Having been forced into the breadwinner role, Dichter’s brothers began to view him

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<sup>18</sup> Dichter, introduction to *Getting Motivated*, xi.

<sup>19</sup> Dichter, *Getting Motivated*, 8.

with disfavor as their superior because he was supporting them.<sup>20</sup> At odds, Dichter and his brothers grew apart.

For Dichter, religion became another source of insecurity. In his autobiography, Dichter describes his mother as a *shickse*, the Yiddish term for female gentile. While in reality his mother was Jewish, she had been given the nickname because she did not identify herself as Jewish. Conversely, his father “desperately attempt[ed] to act Jewish.”<sup>21</sup> Living in a religiously divided home led Dichter to an ambivalent attitude towards his religion. Yet, his weekly shower was a constant reminder of his Jewish identity. Being poor, his family’s flat did not include an in-home shower and bath. Such amenities were reserved for millionaires. Thus, Dichter and his family would visit the public showers once a week. While there was a separation for men and women, there was no division between Jews and non-Jews. Thus, having to undress and shower amongst others, Dichter was highly aware that his circumcised penis was a blatant declaration of his ethnicity. Such a distinction, he recalls, was very embarrassing: “I tried to hide what I considered my deformity with towels and body distortions. But, too often, I had to face my gentile brethren as hostile teasers in what, to me, came close to ‘hell.’”<sup>22</sup> (Dichter seemed to shy away from the topic of circumcision for the rest of his life as evidenced by the fact that a search for the word “circumcision” within his thousands of original documents archived in the American Consumer Culture online database retrieves *zero* results, indicating that Dichter perhaps never truly came to terms with this insecurity, and failed to personally address it in his later life).

Though his circumcised penis was a shameful reminder of his ethnicity, it also marked the special relationship Dichter had with his sexuality. His weekly showers made him hyper-

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 4.

aware of his penis at a very young age. Being aware of his penis also made him curious about it. Thus, when his cousin presented an opportunity to engage his genitals, Dichter took advantage. Dichter recalls that at the age of five and six his cousins were rather unabashed children, always ready to sing in front of people and carefree.<sup>23</sup> They were a source of admiration for the shy and insecure young Dichter. He would often spend summers with his cousins, and it was during one particular summer that Dichter's cousin Max invited him to play with his penis. In response, Dichter invited Max to play with his.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Max also gave Dichter his first lesson in masturbation.<sup>25</sup> Thus, Dichter began to see his penis in a positive light, as a sort of tool that could provide him with happiness. In this way, Dichter took the object of his shame, and turned it into an object of his pleasure. This would highly influence his career, as the practice of motivational research, later developed by Dichter, was meant to serve the purpose of confronting insecurities so as to transform them into channels of success. Moreover, much of his motivational research was often tinged with, if not overtly related to, sexual urges.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>24</sup> This childhood experience can be seen as the source of Dichter's openness to homosexuality. Later in his career, Dichter would conduct research on male perception of clothing and homosexuality. He wrote, "in the future men will no longer be afraid to wear frills and tight pants because they fear that this will be a sign of homosexuality and homosexual change." This demonstrates that Dichter already accepted the idea of homosexuality in society, the very suggestion of it in this study a testament to his comfort with the topic (and stemming from his familiarity with the topic due to his interactions with Max). It also shows how Dichter believed this fear would be freed overtime. For a man who wanted to wear more progressive clothing, his fear of being labeled a homosexual was alleviated by Dichter, enabling him to wear these types of clothes without inhibition. This process was the general pattern for all his work: his personal experience paralleled a contemporary 1950s issue, and his work on the taboo subject would help Americans accept the issue so it could be incorporated into the norm of everyday life. This would allow fashion designers in the future to create less conservative clothing for men, and more brightly colored styles, for example. Ernest Dichter, "Down With the Barriers – The Peacock Revolution Continues," 1967. *American Consumer Culture*.

<sup>25</sup> Dichter, *Getting Motivated*, 54.

Such a reversal of the conception of his penis can be understood in the context of Freud's "pleasure principle." The principle states that individuals instinctually seek pleasure and avoid pain in order to satisfy biological and psychological needs. This would be the basis for Dichter's work in marketing and advertising in America. America in the 1950s was a wholesome nation that repressed sex and hedonism (in the form of consumerism) because it went against its puritanical ethics.<sup>26</sup> As sources of pain or embarrassment for Americans, consumerism and sex became taboo topics that lurked beneath the American psyche but which never dared to show themselves. In context with Freud's pleasure principle, this meant that Americans were shunning these sources of pain, and by doing so, were relieved and happy to keep their puritanical ethics intact. However, when Dichter announced himself as validator, America experienced a reversal in the conception of sex and purchasing goods, much like he himself experienced a reversal in the conception of his penis. With Dichter as validator, Americans felt that to deny themselves of their taboo desires was to inflict pain on themselves. Validation gave America the key to obtaining its wants. As such, to continuously abstain from what was perceived in the 1950s as immoral meant to inflict pain, and in that way violated the pleasure principle. Thus, Americans began to indulge themselves, regaining the pleasure principle balance. Now indulging meant pleasure, and abstention meant pain. Dichter's insight in understanding how to apply Freudian psychology to his work was what catapulted him to success. As Lawrence R. Samuels writes, "Dichter's positive take on hedonism... was in retrospect very much ahead of its time, foreshadowing the self-indulgences of the 1960s and 1970s."<sup>27</sup> Such foresight, however, would

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<sup>26</sup> Dichter, in his book *Strategy of Desire* (1960), would describe Americans as stuck in "a cobweb of tradition and morality." For full quote, see page 57 of this thesis.

<sup>27</sup> Samuel, *Freud on Madison Avenue*, 18.

have been lost without the experiences provided to him by his own childhood and adolescence in Europe.

Fed up with his outcast status in Vienna, Dichter moved to Paris as a young student. He was a Bohemian, a term used to describe an individual with unconventional social habits – not surprising given his insecurity-ridden childhood. He was a starving student (literally), taking classes at the Sorbonne, when he encountered his first flirtation. Her name was Tassja, and he was smitten. Though taking literature and philosophy courses, Dichter decided to change his course of study to psychology, Tassja’s major. His justification was that he did it for love, and because he wanted to be able to fix his own problems while simultaneously utilizing psychology to please his girlfriend. But it was hard for Dichter to do that. Having only employed his sexuality in his own presence, and at times in front of his cousin, Dichter could not conceive of “‘dirtying’ her with [his] erotic starvation.”<sup>28</sup> Such a lapse in judgment led to their eventual split, for, as it turned out, Tassja had been looking for someone to aggressively deflower her.<sup>29</sup>

Dichter did not make the same mistake twice. As his situation in Paris deteriorated, he moved back to Vienna. He first saw Hedy on a public transportation car that was taking passengers to the woods for a trip. She was with her cousin, upon whom Dichter focused his attention, believing Hedy to be out of his league, another indicator of his insecurities. Out in nature, the wall that Dichter had created between him and Hedy broke down, and he mustered the courage to ask her out. She accepted. From then on they courted, and eventually began to physically explore each other, making “mutual discoveries... long before [their] official marriage.”<sup>30</sup> Marriage was its own challenge, but it was not on Dichter’s part. Hedy had

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<sup>28</sup> Dichter, *Getting Motivated*, 9.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

reservations about accepting Dichter's hand, not sure if he would be able to take care of her. While he could not promise her riches, he promised her a lifetime of excitement, an area of expertise for Dichter, who had learned to innovate from a young age.

At the age of eight, Dichter began to ponder ways to make money. His concentration for earning cash came early in life, a result of his father's ailing career. As a child Dichter would venture into the Austrian forests with his uncle. Together they would pick mushrooms and wild berries for consumption. He realized that he could sell the produce to local stores. Dichter therefore became an expert in mushrooms, and a connoisseur of wild berries. He would pick baskets full of produce, selling them, and turning a handsome profit. At the age of fifteen Dichter began working in his uncle's small department store. His uncle hired him as a salesman, and he was quickly promoted to window decorator. As a decorator, Dichter began to innovate new ways to bring customers into the store. From an American magazine he learned how to assemble a "three tube radio," which had the effect of flooding the store with music. Not only were customers impressed, but so were his uncle and fellow staff. Getting his uncle to originally pay for the materials to build the radio had proven a challenge. It was through this experience that Dichter first practiced selling an idea, and persuading others into buying it. He demonstrated his savvy and innovation, ultimately proving wildly successful. It was this kind of thinking— understanding what people really wanted and why— that later launched Dichter's career as a motivational researcher and marketer. Without his past, which afforded him valuable experiences, Dichter would not have reached the height of fame that he did. Dichter's insecurity, while no doubt at the forefront of his being, ironically led him to take bold moves that one would least expect to occur with someone as insecure as he was.

Dichter's early life experiences were the foundation for his future. His lack of enthusiasm for athletics made him an outcast amongst his peers. His penchant for study made him an outcast at home. His general embarrassment of his father made him highly aware of his poverty. His circumcised penis made him highly aware of his ethnicity. He was unconfident in his looks, which made him cautious in his sexual prowess. His caution, made him alienate women. Although Dichter suffered from immense insecurity in all aspects of his life, he was not one to show it. He used his insecurities as avenues to reach success. He used his lack of athleticism to spend more time cultivating his intellect. He used his father's disappointment in him, and his disappointment in his father, to spur him to financial innovation. He used his awareness of his "deformed" phallus as a channel through which he could learn about sexuality. Dichter did not allow his insecurities to control him. Instead, he used them as motivation.

Finding meaning in his childhood experiences to propel him forward in life, Dichter was applying the main tenets of Freudian psychology. Scholars have yet to frame Dichter's life in Freudian terms but looking at some of Freud's essential principles, we see great parallelisms between them and Dichter's experiences. Freud's theories were grounded in the basic human need for gratification. He understood that what satisfied a person as a child, would later shape their persona as an adult. In what Freud called the id, instinctual desires and wants that shaped human behavior would manifest in the subconscious of a person, requiring skilled coaxing and a discerning eye to elucidate those human yearnings. Rationalization, was another Freudian concept that Dichter latched on to. The theory stated, "conscious or unconscious acts were made to appear rational." We see this clearly in an example of Dichter's experiences. When exercising caution in sexual prowess with Tassja, Dichter explained that he did not engage her sexually for fear of "dirtying her." While a rational explanation for his caution, the truth behind his restraint

was that he merely had no prior experience with a woman, and was embarrassed of ill performance. Finally, Freud's theories of projection and free association also proved useful instruments to Dichter. Projection was an "unconscious mechanism people used to cast off their weaknesses onto others" and free association was a Freudian tool used to "extract unconscious feelings and thoughts." Projection was a mechanism Dichter used throughout the entirety of his life. Largely insecure himself, Dichter was often arrogant and thought himself a messiah of the people as a way to deflect his insecurities. Though macho in his projections, Dichter did recognize his insecurities, and sought to learn from them.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the theory of projection tied in with Gestalt, the concept of viewing objects holistically, which Dichter utilized heavily in his motivational research. Dichter realized that the image, or Gestalt, of a product was really a reflection of the desires and/or insecurities of the purchaser, a notion similar to Freud's concept of projection.

Dichter understood that by recognizing, confronting, and understanding his insecurities, he could utilize what he learned from his introspection and apply it to other human beings. Because of his self-doubt, Dichter was constantly observing other people to see if they could spot his insecurity. From this exercise, he learned to observe other people, and pick up on their vulnerabilities. His earliest vulnerability was his red hair. At the age of nine he dyed it, believing that a girl would never look his way with his coloring. After his red hair grew back, he gave up. But this experience was very influential for Dichter. It allowed him to analyze people's faces for disapproval or approval, a key exercise in observing others. It also taught him that the strongest motivation compelling human beings is fear. Fear, Dichter believed, was the motivation behind the desire for security. He felt that people "accumulate money, power, titles, almost all forms of

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<sup>31</sup> Samuel, *Freud on Madison Avenue*, 11.



incantations against the gnawing and grinning devil of self doubt.”<sup>32</sup> (He corroborated this notion in his study “Power v. Economy – A Psychological Study” in which he found that “to the insecure [individual,] buyer power is a very important consideration as it is a means of enhancing his own [personal] power.”<sup>33</sup> Thus the act of purchasing goods, in addition to the kind of goods bought, heightened an individual’s sense of self-power. Such a feeling would eliminate feelings of weakness or inadequacy.) With his knowledge of this human reality, Dichter built the basis for his business.

Having been his own first subject in understanding the inner workings of the human psyche, coupled with his degree in psychology from the University of Vienna, Dichter became a credible expert on the matter. What had been missing in his life while growing up was a validator, a person to quell his fears, and give him solutions to cope with his insecurities. Dichter had to play that role for himself. Moreover, his years observing others as a way to understand himself, made Dichter very attuned to human fears, as well as led him to discern the (often irrational) truth behind those insecurities. He continued this practice into his early adult life by opening up his psychoanalytic practice. He began to realize that a lot of people’s underlying fears had to do with the feeling of immorality. People felt dirty doing certain acts, and were looking for a way to be validated, if not cleansed of their sins. Dichter saw parallels of this in his life too. For example, Dichter’s genitals were both a source of pain and pleasure. In his youth, when he took showers, his genitals represented a source of insecurity and discomfort. At the same time, his genitals provided a source of pleasure when he discovered self-gratification with his cousin. Becoming more and more aware of the underlying immoral discomfort that plagued

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<sup>32</sup> Dichter, *Getting Motivated*, 50.

<sup>33</sup> Ernest Dichter, “Power v. Economy – A Psychological Study,” 1951. American Consumer Culture.

many individuals, Dichter understood that he had a role to play in people's lives. With his exclusive insight, Dichter assumed the role of validator.

Dichter became his own God. Thinking through his insecurities, he created solutions that would allow him to cope with his fears. But unlike him, Dichter found through his research that other people were unable to cope with their fears, believing them to be immoral and therefore without solution. On this notion, Dichter

... often thought that something [wasn't] quite right if what [was] pleasurable [was] forbidden and thereby offer[ed] more fun than the so-called moral and correct thing. One could muse about this fact and, if one believe[d] in an overall god-like motivator, one could come to the conclusion that this dichotomy may have been intended. Sin ha[d] been portrayed for us in a pleasurable fashion, so that we [could] possibly acquire even more genuine pleasure by learning to conquer sin.<sup>34</sup>

But not believing in rational explanations, Dichter was unwilling to accept that ideology. He believed that one could transform "sin"—what he equated with immorality and therefore a sources of insecurity—into a pleasurable success, something he knew given his own experiences doing so. Thus, Dichter chose to conquer sin, by validating it and as such allow people o perceive it as a channel for success. Hedonism, then, could become an object of pleasure and not of pain (which it had been before being validated). His observations and keen ability to understand the human subconscious enlightened Dichter to the fact that he could "become a messiah who [could] use his talents in almost all areas."<sup>35</sup> Thus Dichter taught people how to be free of their fears by validating them, by allowing them to feel pleasure without guilt, by simply following Freud's "pleasure principle." Ultimately, Dichter got the American consumer to do

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<sup>34</sup> Dichter, *Getting Motivated*, 20.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

what they really wanted to do, without guilt, without inhibitions, and without any moral obstacles. He liberated them.

### Chapter Two: Freud + Köhler & Bühler = Dichter

“All I’m really doing is freeing that person, or group of people, from fears, from false hopes. Sometimes I am able to show them how to overcome their fears and make use of them.”  
– Ernest Dichter<sup>36</sup>

In his original work *Total Self Knowledge*, Dichter posed the question, “are you the person you really want to be?” He answered, “It’s difficult—usually because we want to protect ourselves from the things we don’t want to see. We may feel more secure if we never take a frank look at our personal balance sheet.”<sup>37</sup> Dichter was getting at the idea that people tended to *project* the kind of person they *wanted* to be, by internally repressing those insecurities that made them anything but that projected self. Having acknowledged the human tendency to create this discrepancy, Dichter concluded that people purchased products that reflected their desires to be the person they knew they were not, but tried to be.

This chapter argues that the added component of Gestalt psychology to Freudian psychoanalysis made Dichter’s motivational research so innovative. The intersection between Gestalt psychology and Freudian psychoanalysis will be discussed in this chapter. Moreover, it argues that the concept of Gestalt was a psychologically tangible phenomenon that was occurring within the American consumer realm. This chapter demonstrates how Dichter’s early experiences were the basis for his relationship with the study of Gestalt psychology like they were for all his theories. Gestalt is defined as the perceived image of an object; it is the way one holistically views an item based on its components: price, smell, color, texture, and other qualitative characteristics. Like the previous chapter, this chapter uses Dichter’s autobiography

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>37</sup> Ernest Dichter, *Total Self Knowledge* (New York: Stein and Day, 1976), 11.

to prove the connections between Dichter's early life and the theories and methodology of his professional career. Additionally, original consumer reports by Dichter serve to substantiate the claims that the Gestalt phenomenon was occurring in the American consumer arena.

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The year 1934 was a pivotal time for both Dichter and the world. In that year, Dichter completed his doctorate in psychology at the University of Vienna. It was also the year that Hanns F.J. Kropff, a leading German researcher in advertising wrote, "in a time in which the word 'rational' shines as a beacon of light on every wall, it is astounding that German ads in many cases are still 'driven by emotions.'"<sup>38</sup> Such a statement acknowledges the use of psychology in marketing, and belief that irrational and emotional factors must be taken into consideration when creating advertisements. Moreover, Kropff praised the work of "American and British ad designers... as examples of best practice for understanding human desires and motivations."<sup>39</sup> It is no wonder then, that Dichter himself was using motivational research techniques to understand human desire. At that time, however, where Dichter was utilizing motivational research to deduce the motivations behind human desires, Nazi Germany was employing it for propagandist purposes.

Like these marketing theories, which came to the fore in 1934, so did Hitler, who assumed the role of Führer of Nazi Germany in the same year. With the rise of Nazism, the National Socialist Reich Association of German Advertisers (NSRDW) began to question how they could reconcile the notion of advertising, "a world that was largely geared toward creating or encouraging the fulfillment of personal desires through consumption" with the National

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<sup>38</sup> Quoted in: Pamela Swett, *Selling Under the Swastika: Advertising and Commercial Culture in Nazi Germany* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 17.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 17.

Socialist worldview, which “prioritize[ed] a racial community built on sacrifice and public welfare over individual desires and satisfaction.”<sup>40</sup> The answer lay, according to the NSRDW, in boycotting Jewish businesses. Doing so had a double effect: Germans could indulge in consumer goods, thereby buoying the German economy, and could contribute to the German public welfare by boycotting Jewish businesses, forging a racially superior nation. Thus ads produced by the German state began to include party symbols, such as the swastika, to show that it was a German’s duty to both consume goods and purge Jews from the nation.

The future of Jewish Europeans—Dichter included—was becoming increasingly bleak. Dichter began to contemplate leaving his home. Many of his friends and colleagues tried to dissuade him, believing Hitler’s influence would never infiltrate open and free Austria. But Dichter thought otherwise. As one of only two picked for a prestigious internship at the Testing Institute of the City of Vienna, Dichter asked his professor what his chances were of getting a job after the internship. His professor replied, “I am a Nazi... I would love to give you a job. You have developed a number of new ideas, but you are Jewish, are you not?”<sup>41</sup> From this exchange, Dichter knew he had to leave. Thus in 1938, Dichter and his wife Hedy left Austria for a brief stint in Paris, before boarding an ocean liner, in September of the same year, heading for New York.

Arriving in America, Dichter was taken up under the tutelage of Paul Lazarsfeld, a sociologist and market researcher at Columbia University, whom Dichter had already studied under in Vienna at the Institute of Economic Psychology.<sup>42</sup> A pioneer in market research himself,

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>41</sup> Dichter, *Getting Motivated*, 18.

<sup>42</sup> Lazarsfeld’s own research had earned him a two-year traveling fellowship to the United States. He arrived in 1933; after his fellowship, with the declining situation in Europe, Lazarsfeld decided to remain in America.

Lazarsfeld had been researching the “hidden dimensions of motivation and decision making” of consumers.<sup>43</sup> In his studies he emphasized the unification of both qualitative and quantitative approaches to market research, thus giving equal importance to direct observation and statistical factors. Dichter, believing that the key to motivational research was purely qualitative, dismissed Lazarsfeld’s weight on statistics. Dichter instead based his entire market research methodology on Freudian psychoanalysis, which provided for more imaginative and exciting observation upon which to establish his market theories. (Dichter had been using such a method since the time of his childhood when he would observe others to see if they were aware of his insecurities).<sup>44</sup> This had two implications for Dichter: firstly, the conceptualization of the consumer soul as repressed, harboring hidden desires, and secondly, the theory of the “soul of the product,” itself a constructed realm of taboos. This latter implication was the direct impact of the theories he learned at the University of Vienna.

While at the university, Dichter had been exposed to the Gestalt-psychological theories of Wolfgang Köhler and Karl and Charlotte Bühler. Understood broadly, the Gestalt theory proposed that individuals saw objects (in the case of Dichter, consumer goods and brands) holistically, rather than by its parts. Dichter termed the holistic conception of an object the “image” stemming from the Latin word *imago* meaning mental image. “The image is a peculiar kind of phenomenon. It ties-in with Gestalt Psychology. The total configuration is much more than the individual parts.”<sup>45</sup> For example, a simple product like laundry detergent was more than just a product. The component parts of laundry detergent— color, size, texture, price, smell,

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<sup>43</sup> Rainer Gries and Stefan Schwarzkopf, “Ernest Dichter, Motivation Research, and the ‘Century of the Consumer,’” in *Ernest Dichter and Motivation Research* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 6.

<sup>44</sup> Dichter, *Getting Motivated*, 49.

<sup>45</sup> Ernest Dichter, “The Newspaper of Today and Tomorrow.” 1969. American Consumer Culture.

etc.— would all factor in to a consumer’s purchase. The purchase was very telling. If the overall Gestalt of the detergent was one of cleanliness (as opposed to relaxation or warmth), for example, one could surmise that the purchaser desired a sense of moral purity in their life. Thus, what made the image “a peculiar phenomenon,” was that it attributed to a product an individual’s insecurities while simultaneously overcoming them. A more concrete example is found in a study Dichter later conducted for the Kosher food company Rokeach.

In *A Motivational Research Study of the Major Problem Areas for Rokeach*, Dichter found that “the projection of modern advertising by Kosher food companies enables [Jews] to see Judaism not only surviving in contemporary America, but competing on a democratic basis with non-Jewish food companies.”<sup>46</sup> Given that a lot of the Jews in the United States at the time of this study were immigrants who had endured the anti-Semitism of World War II, there was a lurking insecurity that Jewish survival could be potentially threatened in the United States. However, the presence of Kosher food in American stores, and moreover the fact that such products were keeping up with non-Kosher foods and modern advertising, projected the idea that Judaism in the United States was surviving and would continue to. In this example, therefore, the soul of the product (Kosher food) was Jewish survival. Its presence on the shelves of grocery stores validated the notion that Jews were expected to stay, for if that was not the case, there would be no sense in carrying Kosher items. Thus, Dichter’s conception of the “soul of the product” was a direct application of Gestalt theory; the soul of the product was the link to individuals’ insecurities and desires, forming the overall relationship to the consumer.<sup>47</sup> The power of this finding moreover, was that Dichter could use this idea for other companies and

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<sup>46</sup> Ernest Dichter, “A Motivational Research Study of the Major Problem Areas for Rokeach within the Kosher Food Market.” 1961. *American Consumer Culture*.

<sup>47</sup> Gries and Schwarzkopf, “Ernest Dichter, Motivation Research,” 9.

suggest achieving greater sales by branding themselves as Kosher. The food company would increase profits, and Jews would feel an even greater acceptance in the United States. By manipulating society, Dichter was benefitting both parties and in that way allowing each to grow; the company would grow in terms of business, and Jews would grow in their sense of security: without the limitation of an insecurity, they would be able to further flourish in society. Thus, conceiving of the Gestalt of the product proved both an important and effective part of Dichter's motivational research.

Dichter's subconscious affinity for Gestalt psychology can be traced back to his early experiences, as using a Gestalt perspective to analyze objects and people had also been a part of Dichter's upbringing. Take for example Dichter's relationship with his father. Dichter could have viewed his father from individual perspectives: he didn't like his father's social status, he didn't like his deterring him from studying, he didn't like his general failure. However, Dichter ultimately realized that not *one* of these things led to his dislike of his father. Rather, Dichter viewed his father holistically and in doing so realized that he simply disliked his father as a whole. As Dichter once said in an interview, regarding Gestalt psychology and speaking in terms of a random individual, one could say "I don't like how he parts his hair. I don't like how he talks. I don't like how he eats. And then I would have to admit that I didn't like him."<sup>48</sup> It wasn't that one necessarily disliked a person for any *particular* reason, but rather he simply did not like the person as a *whole*. This is how Dichter had seen his father. Where he could have honed in on each part of his father, Dichter saw his father holistically. In doing so, Dichter determined that he disliked his father. Though at the time Dichter would not have known that seeing his father wholly was considered a Gestalt approach in viewing objects, it may have been the reason that

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<sup>48</sup> Kreuzer, Prechtel, and Steiner "The Secret Freudian," 31.



he was subconsciously drawn to the teaching of Köhler and the Böhlers, all of whom contributed to Gestalt psychology.

It was not solely Dichter's understanding of Gestalt theory that led him to his success. Psychoanalysis was another key part to Dichter's method. Through in-depth "interviews we get only the tips... the clues... the circumstantial evidence" of people's insecurities which lie "deep in the unconscious."<sup>49</sup> Those clues would be reinforced via observing the kinds of products people bought and the kind of Gestalt associated with those items. Thus, it was Dichter's conflation of both Gestalt theory and psychoanalysis (the method of understanding the subconscious via in-depth interviews) that made his ideas unique. For example, in a study conducted for toothpaste, Dichter found that there were three different kinds of toothpaste users: the antiauthoritarian, the hypochondriac, and the social conformist. Dichter found that the kind of toothpaste user one was was a result of their childhood, a Freudian-esque explanation. Take the antiauthoritarian: it was understood that in his childhood his mother would often have to force him to brush his teeth and take care of his dental hygiene. Therefore, as an adult, the individual would choose the toothbrush that had a Gestalt of ease and quickness, for such an individual would have negative associations with brushing his teeth, and would want to get the job done as easily and as fast as possible.<sup>50</sup> In this way, Freudian psychoanalysis and Gestalt psychology collided.

This conflation was remarkable and personal to Dichter because it was a summation of who Dichter essentially was himself. In an interview with Franz Kreuzer, Dichter revealed that the Böhlers "never succeeded in American science" because "they strictly rejected

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<sup>49</sup> Ernest Dichter, "The Psychology of Car Buying: A Psychological Study Undertaken to Answer Two Vital Questions About Car Buying." 1940. *American Consumer Culture*.

<sup>50</sup> Ernest Dichter, *Motivating Human Behavior* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), 197.

psychoanalysis.”<sup>51</sup> (Dichter’s negative remark about the Böhlers can arguably be seen as stemming from an insecurity that their work could potentially outdo his own). Kreuzer probed further, “You [Dichter] were some kind of ‘rebel’ during your studies with the Böhlers. You secretly studied psychoanalysis,” to which Dichter responded, “yes, without a doubt that was despised. But it attracted me.”<sup>52</sup> In the same interview, Dichter later defines himself: “I would have to say that I was always an ‘anti.’ I always wanted to do the exact opposite of what I should have done. And that is also why I got interested in psychoanalysis.”<sup>53</sup> An “anti” was exactly who Dichter had been all his life. As a child he always viewed his insecurities in opposition to others: he was un-athletic, a red head, a Jew with a circumcised penis, and constantly opposed his father, a consequence of poverty. These underlying sources of insecurity came together to form Dichter’s personal Gestalt. Imperative in forming his holistic persona, required Dichter to identify those repressed fears he experienced as a child.

The conceptualization of the consumer’s repressed soul, a Freudian theory and Dichter’s first inference, was a direct result of his past, a sort of conclusion based on his early life. Plagued by his own insecurities as a young boy, Dichter would observe other people to see if they were aware of his insecurities. He might observe how people would react to his red hair, for instance. But in observing people, he began to notice others’ own insecurities and the measures they would take to diminish their vulnerabilities.<sup>54</sup> Like him, they would repress their insecurities and feign a level of confidence, a response Dichter knew all too well. As a young boy he thought that

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<sup>51</sup> Kreuzer, Prechtel, and Steiner, “The Secret Freudian,” 21.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>54</sup> For example, Dichter might identify that someone was insecure about their hair color because he observed them constantly scratching their head or perhaps their roots were growing out, indicating that they dyed it as a way to cover up their natural hair color. Thus, what others might have viewed as a tick, Dichter identified it as an insecurity.

not playing sports was strange, that it made him different, and undesirable. To cover for his lack of athleticism, he would throw himself into his studies. When he would find himself studying instead of playing baseball, for example, he rationalized it as having a lack of interest in sports. It was not that he *couldn't* play sports, it was just that he didn't *want* to. It was a way to justify his “weirdness,” but also a way to repress the truth that he simply was not athletic. Only later in life when Dichter matured did he begin to reflect on his childhood, his autobiography a testament to that reflection.<sup>55</sup> He realized that he had been repressing those insecurities, and projecting a confidence in what he chose as alternatives. Having such experiences led Dichter to identify that people have hopes and dreams that they aspire to, which stem from their underlying subconscious fears—their repressed soul.<sup>56</sup> For example, unattractive women would buy beauty products because Dichter, sensing their insecurity of feeling unattractive, prompted them to buy it: not in an admission to hide their ugliness but as a desire to enhance their beauty. Pretty women would buy makeup for similar reasons: to showcase their beauty.<sup>57</sup>

The method by which Dichter applied psychoanalysis and Gestalt psychology came to be known as motivational research. This process would make Dichter privy to the repressed emotions of individuals. Dichter had innately gone through this process as a child and young adult, and by reflecting on his past, he understood that coming to terms with his fears enabled him to triumph. Using this knowledge, he began to apply it on the American people.

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<sup>55</sup> Dichter, *Getting Motivated*, 51.

<sup>56</sup> Dichter wrote: “we are always confronted by a surface, by an outside appearance,” meaning that what meets the eye is a constructed persona, and not reflective of what truly is underneath. *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

### Chapter 3: Dichter – The Master of Misdirection

“It was probably not so much the downfall of mankind as the beginning of the enjoyment of sin.”  
– Ernest Dichter<sup>58</sup>

In his career, Dichter once encountered the issue of women rejecting colored nylon bed sheets. He found that women were averse to them because it conflicted with their morality. Colored nylon sheets, they felt, would give their husbands “ideas.”<sup>59</sup> Such an anecdote reflects what was going on in the minds of American consumers of the 1950s. Individuals were refraining from indulging in their inner desires because it went against the grain of what Puritan values taught. As such, Americans abstained from buying products that overtly resembled their longings or that cast them in a bad light.

This chapter, looking at the late 1930s and the 1940s decade, argues that Dichter’s theory was that people’s insecurities and fears could be gleaned from the kinds of products they bought and conversely from those they shied away from. Dichter realized that the motivations behind these decisions were irrational, and were actually linked to their inner desires, and not based on rationalized semblances. Thus Dichter’s role in the United States was to identify and validate those insecurities and desires that Americans harbored. He did so by understanding their motivations and then marketing to individuals’ products that struck at their core desires. To demonstrate this, this chapter uses Dichter’s book *The Strategy of Desire* and key study reports on sex in America conducted by Dichter himself.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>59</sup> Dichter, *Strategy of Desire*, 258.

With theories in hand, Dichter sought to find a job that would allow him to test them. Supported with recommendations by Lazarsfeld, Dichter received four job offers.<sup>60</sup> In 1939, he accepted a position at *Esquire*, a men's magazine. The timing at which Dichter arrived in the U.S., and more pointedly, his job offer at *Esquire*, had proven fortuitous. For it had only been in the late 1930s that Lazarsfeld and his partner Robert Merton had developed the method of "focus groups" which afforded researchers the opportunity to probe the minds of individuals by asking them meaningful questions. In turn, researchers could glean a better understanding of consumer wants and desires from participant responses. Dichter also utilized focus groups. However, he paid attention to the *relationship between the consumer and the product*, and not only the *product itself*, as was the centerpiece of Lazarsfeld's focus groups. Thus, using such study methods, Dichter was able to identify subscribers' appeal to *Esquire*, namely images of nude women. The magazine already knew this, but was not willing to admit to it. Such reluctance by the magazine began to confirm Dichter's notion that within the consumer lived a repressed soul that was silently driving consumer choices.<sup>61</sup> Dichter harnessed the image of nude women to increase advertising.

Unlike the magazine's official position, the "articles" were not the selling point of the magazine. But to confess that images of nude women were what really attracted *Esquire's* subscribers was to admit to a taboo, and conceivably immoral truth. As such, subscribers and *Esquire* itself were shy to acknowledge the reality of the situation. Reflecting on his own life, Dichter recalled that he was "extremely shy."<sup>62</sup> It was Dichter's shyness that first led him to observe and admire extroverted and nervy people. Particularly, it was his admiration for his

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<sup>60</sup> Dichter, *Getting Motivated*, 34. Dichter reached out to six potential employers and received four replies. In his autobiography, he does not specify which other companies he contacted.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 53. Dichter was so shy he "did not even address [his] own parents directly." *Ibid.*, 53.

precocious and shameless cousin Max that allowed Dichter to periodically break free from his inhibitions (during the summer) as he learned from Max how to be bold—especially with his sexuality. This is what gave Dichter his foresight into diagnosing what lured subscribers to *Esquire*. He understood the problem and the repression. When he was embarrassed about his penis, he tried to hide it, just like *Esquire* subscribers tried to hide the truth behind their subscription. Dichter was able to overcome his phallic insecurity by finding a validator in his cousin; now Dichter could play the validator of the *Esquire* readers. He did not suggest, then, that *Esquire* change its content. Instead, he gave the publication an alternative that only served the act of viewing nude photos. He suggested that *Esquire* capitalize on advertising, for when men looked at photos of nude women, they were more attentive to visual stimuli. Thus, once the men were visually oriented, they would pay more attention to advertisements.<sup>63</sup> As long as the advertisements fit the personality of the magazine, men experienced increased visual interest. His next study, proved even more instrumental in confirming his theories. This thesis argues that Dichter was able to establish a “cause and effect” relationship between the nude photos and the reader’s increased attentiveness to ads. Therefore, armed with the scientific basis between the photos and the advertising, *Esquire* was able to convince more advertisers to place ads in order to maximize the efficacy of their marketing dollar.<sup>64</sup>

While at *Esquire*, Dichter conducted a research study for the Compton Advertising Agency, whose client was Proctor and Gamble’s Ivory Soap. As was Dichter’s method, he focused on the relationship between the user and the product, the Gestalt, as opposed to focusing on the product itself. Such a method was pioneering in that it was an unusual way to think about

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 34. This was a satisfactory explanation as advertisers had been looking for a scientifically grounded basis for placing ads.

products. Recording answers from focus group participants, Dichter began to see a pattern in the answers given. He realized that people saw taking a bath as a cleansing experience, as a sort of baptism in which one could cleanse themselves of the day's immorality. Moreover, he identified bath time as something that happened before a special occasion, as well as "one of the few occasions when the puritanical American was allowed to caress himself or herself."<sup>65</sup> Finally, the study strengthened his argument about the Gestalt of a product: more than features of pricing, smell, and texture, the soap had a personality—the ability to cleanse—which marketers and advertisers could capitalize on. Dichter's findings influenced Ivory Soap's next advertising campaign: "Be Smart and *Get a Fresh Start* with Ivory Soap."<sup>66</sup> (italics mine)

Following his Ivory Soap research, Dichter embarked upon his work at Chrysler, which cemented his role as the validator of American taboos. In 1939, Dichter teamed up with the car company in what would be the study that launched his career. Invited by his boss at *Esquire*, Dichter accompanied him to Detroit to help Chrysler with a marketing problem. Chrysler's new car, the Plymouth, which came as both a sedan and convertible, was facing market resistance, as consumers were loyal to other brands. Executives at Chrysler were intrigued by Dichter's prior research and his developing theory on marketing. As such, they hired him fulltime, and Dichter left *Esquire*. Again, Dichter commenced his research for Chrysler using the in-depth focus group method, interviewing and culling responses from 100 consumers. He made two important observations. The first was that women played a key role in the car-buying decision, the second was the importance of convertibles in tempting consumers to look at a wider range of cars.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Dichter, *Strategy of Desire*, 33-34.

<sup>66</sup> Dichter, *Getting Motivated*, 34-35.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

Chrysler's original slogan was "different from any other one you have ever tried." Through focus groups, Dichter realized that this slogan was actually alienating consumers as it made them feel uneasy, triggering a sense of the unknown, when Americans enjoyed the comfort of the familiar.<sup>68</sup> He also understood that while convertibles only made up a small percentage of sales, there was a strong desire among middle-aged men to own one because of its symbolic nature of being young and free. Thus, Dichter proposed putting convertibles in dealership windows as a way to attract customers into the store. Once in the store, they would end up buying a sedan. He also suggested enhancing automobile advertisements by prominently featuring convertibles. His observation that women were important in the car-purchasing decision led him to suggest advertising automobiles in women's magazines. Thus, when men would come in to the dealership, allured by the convertible, they would end up buying a sensible sedan, as suggested by their wives. Finally, Dichter noticed how men would lean up against convertibles as they discussed buying a less sporty car. The convertible, Dichter claimed, as a symbol of youth and freedom, was also emblematic of a wish for a mistress; conversely, men viewed their everyday car as reliable and familiar, like their wives.<sup>69</sup>

Dichter's study on Chrysler's Plymouth proved a critical moment in his career. His findings made their way to various publications, the notion of the convertible as a mistress and a the sedan as a wife pervaded trade magazines, and *Time* did an interview with Dichter, though he had only been in the United States for two years. What was so revealing about Dichter's findings was his analogy of the convertible to the alluring mistress, and the sedan to the comforting wife. Dichter was tapping into the repressed psyche of Americans, and in this case specifically of men. Subconsciously men lusted after convertibles, as evidenced by the way they would *lean up*

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<sup>68</sup> Dichter, *Strategy of Desire*, 34.

<sup>69</sup> Dichter, *Getting Motivated*, 38.



*against* them while speaking about purchasing a sedan. The sedan, was comfortable and reliable, where the convertible was irresponsible, and as an extension of that, immoral. It was a luxury that was symbolic of one's youthful years, a time known for recklessness and carefree decisions. Arguably, there was also the added dimension of guilt in buying a convertible as it indeed was a luxury car. Puritan values of the fifties preached living within the bare minimum of one's needs. Buying such a car would induce feelings of guilt because it was a superfluous purchase as well as it represented an immoral idea (hence only making up 2% of car sales). Thus, advertising a convertible remained a functional tactic in that it brought customers into the dealership by stirring up feelings of excitement and scandal, but would ultimately deter individuals from buying them, instead steering people to buy the new (wholesome) Plymouth sedan, the model Chrysler was pushing to sell. The convertible was the bait to lure the customer into the dealership; the ultimate hook was to buy the sedan.

The fact that the first three campaigns (*Esquire*, Ivory Soap, Chrysler) Dichter worked on after arriving in America dealt with notions of immorality is rather telling of the atmosphere that pervaded in the United States. The 40s and 50s were exceptionally religious and conservative times in America. The 1940s commenced a resurgence of evangelical Christianity, with various Christian groups arising: American Council of Christian Churches (1941), National Association of Evangelicals (1942), Youth for Christ (1944), Conservative Baptist Association of America (1947), Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (1950), and Campus Crusade for Christ (1951).<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> "Home Page," American Council of Christian Churches, accessed April 21, 2015, <http://www.accc4truth.org/home.html>; "Home Page," National Association of Evangelicals, accessed April 21, 2015, <http://www.nae.net>; "About, History," Youth For Christ, accessed April 21, 2015, <http://www.yfc.net/about/history/>; "Conservative Baptist Association of America (CBAmerica)," USA Churches, accessed April 21, 2015, <http://www.usachurches.org/denomination/conservative-baptist-association-of-america.htm>;

The publication *Christianity Today* debuted its first issue in 1956, the year that also marked the beginning of the Bethany Fellowship, a small press that grew to be a prominent Evangelical press.<sup>71</sup> Starting in the late 40s, and continuing through 1952 was the popular radio show *The Cowboy Church of the Air*, a religious show hosted by Carl Stuart Hamblen, a born again Christian. Finally, society in the 1950s was very restrictive of sex, as it was a largely taboo subject. Soft-core pornography at the time even avoided describing sex. The decades were characterized by a heightened sense of conformity and conservatism. Dichter therefore felt it was the role of “the advertiser... [and of] anyone who has access to people, to use his leadership to combat the guilt feeling among the American people, to convince them that it is all right to enjoy life.”<sup>72</sup> He did this by first recognizing and then alleviating their concerns by refocusing their desires towards more acceptable norms.

A better sense of the conservative culture of the 1950s is gleaned by comparing it with the increasing openness of the following decade. Through a study on condoms, Dichter was able to capture that the American spirit had changed towards the subject of sex, and as an extension of that, their conception of morality. The study explored the viability of the condom in this new age that was becoming more open to speaking about sex and birth control. Condoms, as a generic product, were becoming less popular as other forms of birth control were coming into vogue. Dichter began his study by emphasizing the need to give the condom the respect that it deserves, especially with the increasingly open times. He outlined reasons why one might feel embarrassed

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“Fact Sheet: Billy Graham Evangelistic Association,” Demoss, accessed April 21, 2015, <http://demoss.com/newsrooms/bgea/background/fact-sheet-billy-graham-evangelistic-association1>; “About,” Campus Crusade for Christ, accessed April 21, 2015, <http://www.cru.org/about.html>.

<sup>71</sup> “Ministry, Mission,” *Christianity Today*, accessed April 21, 2015, <http://www.christianitytoday.org/ministry/mission/>.

<sup>72</sup> Dichter, *Strategy of Desire*, 254.

about the condom (the condom's association with the penis caused mortification; of all the kinds of contraceptive it is the most visible, creating a keen awareness of the product; some find it difficult to put on and therefore feel bashful; etc.). Following, he described the advantages of the condom (the condom is simple to use; it has no side effects; it is least expensive; etc.). Dichter then suggested that to revive the condom companies should get "doctors on their side," as well as change the perception of condoms for women who felt that their partners didn't like using them. Having both these demographics on board would help increase condom sales. Finally, to ensure the success of the condom, Dichter recommended that companies capitalize on the turning tide of the discussion of sex and contraceptive use.<sup>73</sup>

As the study revealed, sex was becoming less of an immoral subject, and more of an accepted reality of the times. The study found that "the new climate of moral permissiveness is a cue for a greater feminine role in the husband-wife partnership in sex." This not only explicitly declares that moral permissiveness was becoming more commonplace, but it also demonstrates a greater freedom in sexuality for women. Most compelling was a comment a young male participant said to Dichter in his in-depth interview of the same study,

Yes, I am sure people talk more freely about the problem. I myself belong to the younger generation, I am 24 years old, but from what I remember and read, and what my parents told me, it was not even usual for married couples to discuss the issue, and now I believe all young people talk about it with each other, married or not.<sup>74</sup>

Times had clearly changed. The ability to talk about sex in the 1950s had been a subject often not even spoken about among *spouses*. Yet in the sixties, it had become commonplace to speak about it amongst *friends*. Interestingly, however, is the fact that even within this quote, the young

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<sup>73</sup> Ernest Dichter, "The Place of the Condom in the Present Cultural Climate." 1962. American Consumer Culture.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

man had issues identifying the subject, often using pronouns like “problem,” “issue,” and “it.” This suggests, that while times had changed, they still were in flux, as people continually became more and more comfortable with the topic of sex.

By coming to America, Dichter had stepped into the land of the repressed. He saw his role as the American “messiah,” to liberate the people of their fears and insecurities, to validate their repressed souls. Part of what solidified Dichter’s confidence in his theory was the sheer acclaim his Chrysler study received. Media became increasingly interested in his work, an indication of not only the novelty of his ideas, but also of the truth they held. Perhaps people accepted what Dichter was claiming because in being true to themselves they began to identify their own subconscious desires. In a *Time* article, the magazine quoted Dichter as saying that he was the first to apply scientific psychology to the field of product marketing.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, the article explained, “Dr. Dichter scoffs at advertising which tries to reason with potential customers, to scare them or lecture them on their shortcomings. He believes in tapping hidden desires and urges.”<sup>76</sup> Dichter had identified the undercurrent of lasciviousness in the American psyche, and was using it as a way to influence consumers, making them feel that they were making their own choices by giving in to their subconscious desires, as opposed to overtly being told what to do.

Americans however, would not openly admit to being driven by their desires, for it meant admitting to indulging in what was perceived as immoral and highly repressed societal subjects of the time. Consequently, people projected an outward appearance that they thought was most

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<sup>75</sup> “Science: Psychoanalysis in Advertising,” *Time*, March 25, 1940, accessed November 28, 2014, <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,763730,00.html>.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

appropriate. For example, buying the sedan instead of the convertible. But by Dichter openly accepting these suppressed and hidden desires, people slowly began to embrace these feelings. Dichter knew too that “change [was] one of the most important problems of modern times. [And that] most people resist[ed] it.”<sup>77</sup> The implications of resistance to change meant that Dichter had to create a way to grant himself access to the inner minds of individuals without them fearing the change that would inevitably come from declaring such desires. Thus Dichter developed a type of indirect questioning system, which was so integral to his in-depth interview process (a topic further discussed in the next chapter). This method allowed Dichter to identify underlying fears, insecurities, and desires of people without them having to openly admit to them. Thus, Dichter was able to maintain their semblance of morality while still obtaining pertinent information that would allow him to validate their fears via marketing tactics.

In 1940, Dichter took a position as director of psychological research at J. Stirling Getchell, a premier advertising firm that was also a pioneer in the field. With a high paying job, Dichter and his wife started their family, having two kids over the next few years, naming their son Thomas William and their daughter Susan Jane, both starkly American names. In the less than three years that Dichter had been in America, Dichter had lost his Austrian accent, given his children American names, was quoted in *Time* magazine, and worked for iconic American companies. In essence, Dichter had achieved the American Dream, strived by many, in an incredibly short amount of time. His most lasting role was as validator. Daniel Horowitz captures this side of Dichter’s spirit best:

Dichter transformed dark and tragic sexual urges into pleasurable ones linked to individual self-fulfillment. His emphasis on pleasure—served up in a way that combined

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<sup>77</sup> Ernest Dichter, “The Uprooted Ones – A Psychological Pilot Study on Migration.” 1969. *American Consumer Culture*.

sexuality with masculinity—countered the puritanical tradition long articulated by American intellectuals and embraced an equally American emphasis on pleasures and affluence.<sup>78</sup>

But more than validate their fears internally, Dichter’s work enabled American society to bring their insecurities to the forefront and allow them to act upon their insecurities through their purchases of products without the concern of societal judgment. Dichter enabled the American consumer to progress and improve his way of life by acting and doing as they personally felt without inhibition from external forces or preconceived notions.

Americans at this time were struggling with immorality, a battle that had been cultivating itself throughout the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Feeling pressure to conform to the rigid ideals of puritanical ethics left Americans feeling dissatisfied. Yet at the same time, it left them feeling compelled to follow such strict principles because of the guilt that manifested itself if one did not abide by them. But immorality still existed within the repressed soul. To quell such desires, Americans purchased symbolic items whose Gestalts reflected their inner longings. This provided a sense of satisfaction without having to actually do the “sin.” In turn, Dichter used this cycle to create a form of corporate hedonism. He validated consumers in their desires, the basis for his theories about psychology and marketing, which set the stage for future progress.

#### Chapter 4: Like Sherlock Holmes, Dichter’s Findings were “Elementary”

“My red hair led to insecurity and, through some rocky detours, to my skills in becoming a psychological sleuth and Sherlock Holmes.”

– Ernest Dichter <sup>79</sup>

Written in 1971, *Motivating Human Behavior* by Ernest Dichter captured the changing tide in America. “Our motivational research shows that instead of doing many things in a sober

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<sup>78</sup> Daniel Horowitz, “From Vienna to the United States,” 48-49.

<sup>79</sup> Dichter, *Getting Motivated*, 49.

way, we're beginning to take a 'hobby' approach to life... We used to wash out bodies and brush our hair as a duty. We are now doing it for pleasure, for fun."<sup>80</sup> It was Dichter's work that helped reached this new consciousness in America. Slowly Americans were shedding their puritanical skin, and coming to embrace a more emotional way of living. "Discovering that we are allowed to do something previously forbidden, like bathing in the nude, has a lot to do with our sense of security. We don't have to prove our morality anymore by sticking to customary ways. We can afford to enjoy ourselves."<sup>81</sup>

Focusing on the 1950s, this chapter argues that Americans were ill equipped to adapt to their new social status. Affluence and prosperity were realms that had previously been unknown to many Americans, and moreover, had been portrayed as immoral. For example, the *I Love Lucy Show* (1951-60), the most revered sitcom of the decade, depicted Lucy and her husband Desi as sleeping in separate bedrooms despite being married both in the show and real life. Moreover, CBS, the network on which the show aired, was unwilling to use the word "pregnant" despite Lucy's pregnancy being an integral part of the sitcom.<sup>82</sup> Additionally, before airing the show in which Lucy gave birth, a rabbi, minister, and priest were brought in to watch the episode to ensure it was appropriate for public viewing.<sup>83</sup> Dichter recognized this conflict, and through motivational research came to help Americans embrace their new status and validate their insecurities: it was okay to indulge in their affluence. Ultimately, Dichter's work helped Americans come to terms with their inner desires, and so, transformed the American mentality from the sensible, cautious, and wholesome attitude of the fifties, to the more liberated, sexual,

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<sup>80</sup> Dichter, *Motivating Human Behavior*, 112.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>82</sup> "Early to Bed," Snopes, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://www.snopes.com/radiotv/tv/marykay.asp>.

<sup>83</sup> Bart Andrews, *Lucy & Ricky & Fred & Ethel: The Story of "I Love Lucy"* (New York: Dutton, 1976), 68.

and narcissistic mentality of the sixties. This chapter demonstrates how Dichter first came to conceptualize motivational research, and how, once he developed his method, he applied it to Americans allowing them to move forward.

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Americans struggled with the relative state of affluence afforded to them after World War II. A rigid Puritan teaching had been engrained in the American psyche, making Americans feel immoral and guilty living a superfluous and less than wholesome life. Influenced by the theories of Freud and coupled with personal experiences from Vienna, Dichter was able to get at the core of American insecurity. Utilizing motivational research, Dichter reached American desires via their insecurities. Validating corporate hedonism, Dichter coaxed American fears and eventually allowed them to embrace their insecurities. In his book *Motivating Human Behavior*, Dichter summed up various motivational research studies he had done, all of which were heavily entrenched in in-depth interviews, and findings, concluding that only by accepting pleasure, fun, and carefreeness (all viewed as irrational at the time) as valid human motivations could America progress. “We still court and admire a caveman type of philosophy and morality which makes us look upon these things [fun and pleasure] as bad. We do not realize that by developing them, we have freed ourselves... None of [Dichter’s techniques that allow people to change] will work, however, unless the willingness to change has been established and accepted, not because ‘big, moral brother’ says so, but because it provides a better life.”<sup>84</sup> Only by believing that Americans were deserving of a better life, especially with its new affluence, could Americans accept the validity of these motivations and in turn foster personal growth. Believing this wholeheartedly,

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<sup>84</sup> Dichter, *Motivating Human Behavior*, 10.



Dichter set out to revolutionize America's perspective, transforming its insecurity from a source of embarrassment to one of success.

Dichter's motivational research method and in-depth interview technique, like other aspects of his theories, can be linked to his early years in Vienna. In 1936, needing money, Dichter began working at University of Vienna's Psychoeconomic Institute. There he conducted in-depth interviews on the milk drinking habits of the Viennese.<sup>85</sup> During his time working there, Dichter was arrested, the Socialist Democratic Party believing that the research conducted at the institute was in some way subversive.<sup>86</sup> The questioning Dichter was subjected to while under interrogation enlightened Dichter to the notion that a motivational researcher was akin to an investigator. The investigator relentlessly bombarded Dichter with questions, hoping that in some way one of his questions might touch upon pertinent information. Dichter described the process: "He [the investigator] kept coming back, again and again, to this question and felt that by hammering away at it and attributing my admissions to one aspect of my relations with the Institute, he gradually would soften me up enough to admit more relevant facts."<sup>87</sup> Later Dichter described his in-depth interview process as asking participants enough indirect questions to give respondents "enough rope" to "hang" themselves. Thus from his experience with the Viennese detective, Dichter understood that through indirect questioning, individuals would eventually, divulge useful information about themselves, without necessarily realizing what they were admitting to. The second part to this method was then to cultivate the subconscious information obtained. Dichter sharpened this skill by employing his motivational research to determine a decision that ultimately saved him from the Holocaust.

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<sup>85</sup> Dichter, *Getting Motivated*, 16.

<sup>86</sup> Unbeknownst to Dichter, the Institute *had* been used as a secret mailing center during the Dollfuss & Schuschnigg Fascist rule of Austria. *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-18.

After his experience with the detective, Dichter became hyper aware of the rise of Nazism and the deteriorating status of Jews in Austria. While he had a hunch that the situation would only worsen, Dichter employed motivational research to determine if staying in or fleeing from his homeland would be a wiser decision.<sup>88</sup> Dichter interviewed a number of knowledgeable individuals on what the true political situation in Austria was. His most apt advice came from a lawyer who was a spy for the anti-Nazi government of Austria: “He taught me to look beneath the surface... bit by bit, reading between the lines and ‘listening with the third ear,’ and observing people, the pieces of the puzzle started to form a rather frightening and sharply contoured outline of the future.”<sup>89</sup> By applying what the lawyer had taught him, Dichter was able to discern that the situation in Austria was no longer sustainable for Jews. But more importantly, such an exercise had taught Dichter the value and imperativeness of information below the surface; how such fine “reading” can make hidden information known. Finally, the basis for Dichter’s motivational research technique was melded together after his experience with the U.S. consulate in Paris (where he briefly settled after fleeing from Vienna).

When the swastika began appearing in French newspapers, Dichter knew it was time to leave Europe. Using a fake contract as a basis for a work visa to the United States, he sought to have his papers approved by the U.S. consulate in Paris. The Vice Consul perceived the contract to be false, and denied Dichter a visa. Dichter lashed out. He condemned the United States, criticizing the American principle of freedom and accusing the U.S. of only granting those with money a visa. The Vice Consul was taken aback, explaining to Dichter that what he claimed was

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 19. Dichter described that all of his friends thought he was crazy for considering leaving everything behind. They were convinced that Austria would not follow in the steps of Germany.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 19.

not so, and that he could easily arrange for him a visa.<sup>90</sup> By criticizing the very object of the Consul's pride, Dichter had struck a chord, and in trying to rectify Dichter's "ill conception" of the United States, the Consul demonstrated the generosity of the U.S. "It was at this point that I, probably for the first time, formulated most clearly what by now is fairly well known all over the world as motivational research... to use modern psychology and psychoanalytical ideas, not only to understand people better but also to motivate them was, at that time, a new idea."<sup>91</sup> Through his own application of and experience with motivational research, Dichter had obtained what he had wanted. He recognized the potency of such an idea, and of the potential it had to influence others. The notion that it had been useful to him in his own life would make Dichter's usage of motivational research in the United States more credible.

With World War II came a shift in the socio-economic make up of America. The war had brought a large wave of prosperity to the U.S., thus inducing a shift in purchasing power from the upper echelon of society to the middle class. The growing middle class was due to the constricting sizes of both the upper and lower classes. According to studies conducted by Dichter, "the individuals comprising this large new middle class group came from families which, prior to the war, were generally economically deprived."<sup>92</sup> This pre-war economic deprivation was an important influence on these new members of the middle class. It meant they had to learn a new way of life that was more fitted to their new economic standing. Continuing his research, Dichter found that individuals who had always been in the middle class bought products based on recommendations from friends and family: from personal relationships.<sup>93</sup> The

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>92</sup> Dichter, *Strategy of Desire*, 181.

<sup>93</sup> Ernest Dichter, "How Word of Mouth Advertising Works," 1966. American Consumer Culture.

same was not true for the new members of the middle class. Rather, they looked to impersonal relationships, such as TV, radio, and newspapers to inform them on which kinds of products they should buy given their new status. “Young wives and even older women who were reared on a lower social stratum learn their etiquette, dinner recipes, clothes, conduct and, especially, the products that are to symbolize their class membership, from radio, and TV programs... magazine articles, and newspaper advertisements.”<sup>94</sup> Thus, media educated the growing middle class on how to play the part.

Prosperity, the new trait dominating the middle class, was the reason behind the media’s new role in middle class life. Being prosperous transformed the middle class mentality, allowing it to feel a growing sense of importance. To convey that importance, they bought products that they believed reflected their status. Dichter wrote,

it is again a psychological truism that *economic status* has little meaning for most individuals unless it can be translated into outward, concrete, *prestige status*. This prosperity must be symbolized by the purchase of concrete articles that will say to the beholder, ‘Look, I am making money, I am prosperous, I have gained prestige.’<sup>95</sup>

However, this newfound prosperity did not come without consequences. Complicating American freedom to revel in this prosperity was a long tradition of stringent morality. Indulging in products and advertising one’s own personal economic status brought about psychological qualms for Puritan middle class America. On the one hand, Americans were excited in their new role, happy to finally have broken the barrier to economic prosperity, and ready to show it off. On the other hand, Americans felt that this prosperity violated their code of ethics. Puritanical morality preached hard work and meaningful values. Such ideals had been embedded in the

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 182.

American psyche for decades. Thus, faced with new wealth, middle class America found itself battling cognitive dissonance: how could it enjoy in and take advantage of this new lifestyle and still remain within the virtues of American morality?

In response to this internal conflict, Americans repressed their desires. The idea of repression was a Freudian notion. At the time, Freud was an influential figure in America. Freud's theories were relevant to the mental state of America at this time. Freud's idea of repression, in particular, was highly applicable to those people who understood and valued personal traditions but who rebelled against them.<sup>96</sup> Tangibly felt, moral standards were a compelling and powerful force. Freud tested his hypothesis on those individuals who never risked entertaining their desires. In these individuals, Freud found a level of neurosis: "they didn't dare cross swords with their internalized tradition. The ensuing anxiety would be too threatening, too painful... instead of rebelling against tradition, such people repressed their desires because of the power of that tradition."<sup>97</sup> Freud also tested his theory on individuals who revolted against this imposed morality. "Freud found that many of his patients rebelled against their standards—and then experienced anxiety and guilt as a result. This often led to repression and neurosis."<sup>98</sup> Americans of the 1950s reflected this anxiety of fearing morality and the iron fist it wielded over their heads. Thus, faced with the challenge of combining wealth—traditionally associated with abundance, recklessness, and lasciviousness— and morality, the American public found itself suppressing its desires. If Freud identified the disease, Dichter came up with the cure.

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<sup>96</sup> Henry Idema, *Before our Time, A Theory of the Sixties: From a Religious, Social and Psychoanalytic Perspective* (Lanham: University Press of America, Inc., 1996), 21.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

Dichter's study of motivational research paralleled what was socially and psychologically occurring in the United States. Dichter's own personal childhood experiences gave him the knowledge and perspective needed to understand the place from which the American psyche stemmed. Dichter was known for his approach of in-depth focus groups, through which he conducted his motivational research. Imperative in this process were two questions: why and why not. Moreover, such questions were not directed to individuals about a product but more pointedly toward their *experience* with products. Such a method paralleled Dichter's own life in that through reflecting on his own experiences as a child, he was able to identify his personal insecurities and thereby find solutions to alleviate those pressures. Thus, he would pose indirect questions about a person's relationship to a product, "in order to set stories, emotions, free associations, and memories in motion."<sup>99</sup> Dichter gathered information about the underlying repressed feelings of an individual, using keen observational techniques. As a child, Dichter honed these techniques as he constantly surveyed those around him hoping to both discern their insecurities and catch them spotting his, like his stark red hair, for example. In conjunction with gathering insight on the repressed souls of Americans, this process could also help Dichter identify and understand the overall image a product conveyed to people. Dichter cured their internal conflict by giving them an avenue to be true to their feelings, and thus buy the products they wanted without inhibitions.

This holistic image was known as the Gestalt of the product. As mentioned in previous chapters, the Gestalt of an object was the image it projected when a consumer took into consideration the product's individual parts— appearance, function, price, smell, and other qualitative aspects as a *whole*. This Gestalt image was a reflection of the deeper, underlying

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<sup>99</sup> Cudlik and Steiner, "Rabbi Ernest," 74.

repressions of the individual. Thus after asking in-depth interview participants his “why questions,” Dichter would employ the second part of his “strategy of desire”: “the creative application and psychological assertion of influence.”<sup>100</sup> To illustrate the process, it is helpful to return to the study that Dichter conducted for Proctor & Gamble’s Ivory Soap. Through his in-depth interview process, Dichter learned that Americans perceived bathing as the one time it was acceptable for the average individual to caress and touch himself. Moreover, the act of bathing was considered a vital step in the process of readying oneself for a special occasion such as a date. Thus, from these interviews Dichter was able to pick up on a strain of repressed sexuality, and an overt consciousness of puritanical ideals.<sup>101</sup> In another study Dichter conducted for the feminine products market, Dichter reported that asking individuals questions about tampons and menstruation “triggered some rather anxious feelings especially in those respondents for whom these subjects, and the broader rubric of sexuality under which they are frequently subsumed, are conversationally taboo.”<sup>102</sup> Dichter identified the existence of a repressed American psyche, the desires that were being suppressed, and the prevalence of a puritanical semblance. Thus, he emphasized the need for companies to be cognizant that “whenever a taboo is not heeded, the immediate result is punishment; anxiety,” and so ultimately the individual is deterred from buying the product.<sup>103</sup>

Feeding this Puritanical force was insecurity and fear. The fear of being judged by others for breaking moral standards, and the anxiety that came with either trying to uphold them or from breaking them, were other influences repressing American desires. Therefore, the

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>101</sup> Dichter, *Getting Motivated*, 35.

<sup>102</sup> Ernest Dichter, “Developing a Market for Tampon Products: Phase II of a Motivation Research Study,” 1973. American Consumer Culture.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

implication of this fear, and at the heart of motivational research, was the need for a sense of security. According to Dichter, “a basic human motivation for almost all our activities and needs is the desire for security in one form or another.”<sup>104</sup> Dichter’s role then for Americans was to be their validator. He validated their fears, and allowed them to embrace their desires. He did so by transforming products into the solutions needed to alleviate the pressure of those desires. Dichter believed that “most human actions are the result of tensions. Whenever tension differentials [became] strong enough, they [led] to action.”<sup>105</sup> This meant when a desire became overpowering, an individual would indulge in it and, given American guilt, often led an individual to cover up his actions by rationalizing what he had done. But the act of rationalization had implications too. Through his observations, Dichter understood that rationalizing one’s actions was just a defense against the fear of being judged, and moreover, the fear of the irrational. Dichter realized this and came to accept that many human behaviors were precisely emotional and lacked rational intent. The acceptance of this concept was fundamental to Dichter’s success. Where other marketing firms were taking individuals’ rationalizations at face value, it was Dichter who was able to unlock the key to hidden desires by accepting the unconscious and unknown factors that contributed to individuals’ decisions. Through his practice of motivational research and in-depth interviews, Dichter demonstrated that “most human actions have deeper motivations than those which appear on the surface, motivations which can be uncovered if the right approach is used.”<sup>106</sup> Once the motivations were uncovered Dichter could position the product in a way that would no longer be a conflict.

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<sup>104</sup> Dichter, *Strategy of Desire*, 36-7.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.



Two basic desires were at the crux of American guilt: affluence and sex. In his *Strategy of Desire*, Dichter explained the basis for this guilt in his chapter “The ‘Burden’ of the Good Life.” The American people looked to God for guidance, using the teachings of the bible as their moral compass. Yet Dichter saw this deep reverence for religion as a handicap, and to a greater extent a source of insecurity. Dichter in his early years had become accustomed to viewing his religion as a hindrance. For all his life, religion had been a barrier for Dichter in that it separated him from his countrymen. As a young child it distinguished him from others in the public bath, a weekly ritual he feared and loathed for the very reason that it gave away his identity. Later, in his early adult life, his religion was cause for him to leave his Austrian home, for being Jewish meant being racially impure. The difference between Dichter’s situation and that of the American people was that Dichter was conscious of the impediment his religion posed for him: he understood that it was a limitation. Contrastingly, the American people could not consciously identify their religion as a barricade. The morals of religion were so ingrained within the American mind that their desires were denied a space in their consciousness; it was a subconscious block. But for Dichter, someone who had identified religion as a personal limitation at a young age through intense observation and self-reflection, it was obvious. Americans’ religion was a source of insecurity; its strict teaching of living a simple and hard working life, devoid of extravagances and excess, imposed a harsh standard to live by, one that if broken would cause great shame and guilt, in other words, insecurity.

For example, take a man who is used to attending church every Sunday as part of his weekly routine. Such devotion to worship reflects a certain standard of how he projects himself onto the world. Assuming that one Sunday he is feeling lazy and not up to the task of going to church, he forgoes his normal routine and instead decides to go play golf. By abandoning the

standard to which he usually abides by, he senses a feeling of shame and insecurity in public – what if someone from the community were to see him skip church? He admonishes himself for being lazy, because now out in society, he feels lacking. Such a sentiment, then, only reinforces his need to attend church every Sunday. This scenario parallels the reality of the average American in 1950s America. Americans kept a rigid moral standard, but when they deviated from that principle, they felt insecure and ashamed. Thereby, to eschew feelings of insecurity, they subconsciously and continuously adhered to their religious moral standards. Dichter as someone who had recognized the insecurity imposed by his religion, and as someone who then used that insecurity to propel himself to happiness, saw the chance to do what he did for himself, to do for the American people. Dichter realized, “A cobweb of tradition and morality, beginning with the concept of original sin, has painted life as a sequence of worry and toil, if not misery. Yet this picture does not match the reality of life in the United States where most people have more than enough to eat and a well-shingled roof over their heads.”<sup>107</sup> Given the circumstances, and based on his personal experiences, Dichter sought to make changes to the American consciousness.

America was suffering from a guilty conscience. With the growing wealth of the middle class and the overall improvement in standard of living for Americans, many individuals felt uncomfortable embracing their new affluence. The teaching of religion had extolled the necessity for hard work and bare minimum. Thus Dichter set out to “make the average American accept the fact that a more comfortable life, a life of greater leisure, is one of the major achievements and not one of the major failures of the American way of life.” Dichter further realized that,

our economic world today is based on many products and services that can only be described as non-utilitarian... they

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 253.

are superfluous and self-indulgent. If we really wanted to live rationally, we would all live in steel-reinforced concrete bunkers, wear overalls, reject fireplaces, refuse all fashion changes... It does not need much proof to make it clear that our economy... would collapse almost overnight on a purely utilitarian basis.<sup>108</sup>

The key in this passage is that Dichter understood that humans are fundamentally irrational. While people projected a veneer of rationality and living realistically, Dichter understood that everything around them was a merely a semblance, and that what really drove humans were desires, unrealistic, emotional and irrational. But to admit to that reality, meant to reject the moral tenets of American life. For example, in conducting research on how to best advertise baby food, most advertisers felt that what mothers wanted to hear was that the product would promote healthy babies. Dichter, seeing this as the most rational explanation, immediately rejected it. Thus, through in-depth interviews he learned that what mothers really looked for in baby formula was something that was easy and convenient, that their child would like and not create a fuss or mess over. This latter insight was a subconscious taboo desire, for it lacked the moral wholesomeness that is expected of a mother: that her *only* concern be the health of the baby without considerations for other aspects of the baby food. Moralists would have been appalled.<sup>109</sup> It was up to Dichter then to validate American desires, to accept their irrationalities and to validate those desires as not only acceptable but also as imperative in pushing man on to pursue the highest of his potentials and to progress.

Dichter's impact on the American people was therefore his ability to coax their desires out of the subconscious, and thereby allow Americans to live their lives to the fullest potential. The earliest of Dichter's insecurities was his red hair, a trait readily discernable from a young

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 28.

age. From that seemingly insignificant insecurity, Dichter created a significant new area of study of which its purpose was to better understand humans and their desires, and ultimately how to free them from the bondage of insecurity. “Everybody has his ‘red hair.’ Instead of trying to dye it we should realize that this difference is an asset. [Dichter] discovered it in a slow process of biographical retrospection... the voltage needed for [action] is insecurity whether it stems from red hair or from any other inequality, imagined or real.”<sup>110</sup> Dichter freed America of its insecurities by reaching people through advertising, playing on their fears with the intent of curing Americans of them. In essence, it was the idea of facing one’s fears. Dichter delivered the cure through the purchasing of products. The product became the magic pill. “The product is employed in many, often clever, ways as a vehicle to carry him safely, even victoriously, through his self-doubts and insecurity. Most of us use such techniques occasionally and involuntarily, without being aware of it.”<sup>111</sup> Dichter brought American desires to the surface through his advertising campaigns, getting at the hearts of individuals’ desires, and shedding light on the hidden motivations that compel humans. By making the American people confront their insecurities and transform them from barriers to catapults, he effectively set the stage for the upcoming decades.

#### Conclusion: Dichter & The Unveiling of America

The 1960s is famously known in American history as the time of the American sexual revolution. Understanding Dichter’s work and his mission, one cannot help but think of the influence it must have had on this decade. Societal mores require for the most part, a gradual evolution. Dichter planted the seed for change by first removing the inhibition of Americans to

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<sup>110</sup> Dichter, *Getting Motivated*, 51.

<sup>111</sup> Ernest Dichter, “How Word of Mouth Advertising Works.” 1966. American Consumer Culture.

express themselves simply by buying products. Eventually buying products gave Americans the strength to publicly exclaim and change their attitudes towards morality and towards sex. By strengthening or empowering the American consumer to buy products that reflected their inner thoughts and desires, Dichter paved the way for Americans to more publicly proclaim their feelings and thoughts towards a wide variety of subjects. What was considered taboo just a decade earlier, was now becoming the norm.

Evidence of the above is seen in a study Dichter conducted in July of 1962 entitled the *Place of the Condom in Present Cultural Climate*. He found:

There has been a widespread growth of a new, mature attitude toward sex. It is taken more seriously than in the past, when it was a subject that was usually discussed only furtively. Of course, many of the old puritanical overtones associated with sex still persist, but the new attitude tends to discourage a frivolous treatment of sexual matters. The ability to discuss sex in a 'mature' and comprehensive way has now become one of the attributes of an 'enlightened' person.<sup>112</sup>

This attitude embodies Dichter's mission. It shows how Americans were coming to face their insecurities (sex), embracing them (discussing sex in a mature manner) and progressing (by becoming enlightened persons). While it is of course an exaggeration to solely credit Dichter with the new permissive moral attitude of the sixties, it would be ignorant to dismiss the influence he undoubtedly had.

Dichter's encouragement of self-understanding and of indulging desires permeated America. As the most sought out person in the advertising and marketing industry, his influence could be found in the everyday lives of Americans via the products they used. In this way, Dichter was in neighborhood stores, in American homes, and inside individuals' minds. His

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<sup>112</sup> Ernest Dichter, "The Place of the Condom in the Present Cultural Climate." 1962. American Consumer Culture.

unique experiences as a young child, adolescent, and young man in Vienna contributed to his incredible insight and ability to understand Americans. His formative years' experiences paralleled the "growing pains" that America found itself in during the 1950s. His motivational research and its application helped shape the following decade. By the 1960s the fear of self-indulgence had been shattered. Henry Idema, in his book *Before Our Time*, writes "the Church helps us curb our 'self-love,' our emotional investment in ourselves, in short, our self-preoccupations."<sup>113</sup> But with the decline of the Church's teaching in the sixties, people began to feel less obligated towards the morals preached by religion. Without the weight of the church over its shoulder on the one hand, and with Dichter validating self-indulgence on the other, the freedom that Dichter tried so hard to give to Americans began to filter through.

The freedom filtered through, but did not rain down. The sixties were still an in-between time. Idema, a child of the sixties himself, explains: "morality still had plenty of power to prevent sex and cause a lot of havoc... tradition still had some pull during our adolescence."<sup>114</sup> But the fact remains that the ball had been set in motion. "Tradition still had *some* pull" but not all. Young Americans were slowly revolting against the values that had been so engrained in previous decades and which Dichter began intensely questioning in the fifties. Idema concedes that those only slightly younger than him had lost *all* the sense of morality of their parents. In this sense, the work that Dichter had embarked upon in the fifties had taken root in that generation, finally blossoming in the subsequent decades. That is what Dichter had intended. "Only when man has learned to fight the devil within himself can we honestly claim that we have made a further step in our very slow maturing process of human intelligence," Dichter wrote. The beginning of Dichter's career planted the seeds necessary to lift the heavy anchor

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<sup>113</sup> Henry Idema, *Before Our Time*, 30.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

within the American psyche—the insecurities holding America back. Once those seeds were planted, they became the new morals that were to become the deep-seated American tradition of the future. Those new values were ones of progress that allowed Americans to break free from their fears and explore realms previously forbidden. By 1971, Dichter saw that the conception of sex had significantly changed from one of pure biological necessity to one of playfulness and fun. “The original purpose of sex was procreation—a very sober biological function. For quite a long time now we’ve known that playfulness in sex can make it more fun... [and rids people] of their hang-ups about themselves and other people.”<sup>115</sup> This attitudinal change led the American public to receive newer products.

The question then becomes: for someone who was one of the most influential men of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, why is Ernest Dichter virtually unknown to Americans? Why does such little scholarship exist on a man who, in the view of some, bent the will of the entire American public to corporate hedonism? I would venture a guess that after his peak, Dichter was forgotten by most Americans. For after he planted and sowed his seeds, he reaped his plow, and others picked up where Dichter left off. Dichter’s ideas and theories were perfect for the fifties. His own experiences were fit for the circumstances that presented themselves in the 1950s of America. Stated differently, Dichter applied his theories on a subconscious level. He was a man behind the scenes, known primarily by a subset of corporate America, as opposed to a man in front of the camera. Perhaps an analogy will lie with cinema: many movies are great not so much because of the actors in front of the camera, but because of the director behind the camera. Dichter's work was behind the commercials, behind the ad campaigns, behind the motivational research that was applied to the public but was carried out in private.

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<sup>115</sup> Dichter, *Motivating Human Behavior*, 113.

Another theory for Dichter's lack of presence in the annals of history, is that many sociologists may have conspired to whitewash his influence simply because they did not like Dichter who had been known, especially among social critics like Freidan and Packard, as a manipulative, abrasive individual. Whether or not Dichter was manipulative or abrasive, it is still important that we remember Dichter for the way he revolutionized motivational thinking, and in part changed the trajectory of the following decades. Dichter taught that we must listen to the inner irrationalities that drive us, and that insecurity can be used for future success. Dichter wrote about his home: "There is a feeling especially in Europe and in the more romantic countries, that life is here to be savored, to be enjoyed slowly. Vienna is one of these cities. Nostalgia is one of the emotions which is waiting to be rediscovered."<sup>116</sup> Dichter rediscovered the stories of his past and used them to push him forward. With those past experiences, coupled with an empathy that only one who has been in the same situation as another can understand, he validated America when no one else would. He poised America for the progress of the future. With that said, this thesis encourages that new studies of Dichter's work be undertaken to "rediscover" his methods, with perhaps some tweaking, so that new insight into his theories can be used as a catapult to more progress in the future.

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<sup>116</sup> Ernest Dichter, "Pilot Study on Emerging Trends in Food and Beverages in Some European Countries and the U.S.A." 1988. American Consumer Culture.



## Reflection

Looking back on how I started my thesis and how it has evolved over the past months, I would say that I am surprised at how my thinking towards Ernest Dichter has changed. Perhaps because I was new to the thesis writing process, I first started out this project as a recounting of Dichter's story. I did not add very much analysis and I failed to connect the various episodes in Dichter's life to his greater work. However, once I started seeing patterns between the kind of work he did in America (via original documents provided by the American Consumer Culture database), and the events he experienced in Vienna (via his autobiography), it became clear to me that Dichter was utilizing his keen sense of observation and his reflection on his past to mold the future of America. He repeated the process he had undergone himself with the American mentality, changing it for the better (for the purpose of progress), much like he changed himself for personal growth.

What does not completely surprise me is where this thesis ended up. I will admit that for a lot of the thesis process, I had been shooting in the dark. I let a loose outline guide me, but ultimately let the research I came across create my path. The most unexpected revelation of my thesis was that I had never truly considered the great impact Dichter had on the next generation. But the more I mulled it over, the more I convinced myself that he most definitely did. Finally, my attitude towards Dichter at the beginning of this process and at the end of it has changed. At first I thought Dichter was the manipulative, immoral individual that Vance Packard and others made him out to be. But through my own analysis of Dichter, I have come to appreciate who he was and admire what he did. He recognized his insecurities as tools from which to grow—something I can deeply resonate with—and in turn he helped an entire people find its footing in the future.

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