

Think Different: Why Steve Jobs Doesn't Deserve Your Tears

by Ben Davis

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I may get some hate mail about this, but [with even Museum of Modern Art head Glenn Lowry piling on now](#) to pronounce him the "Designer of a Generation," I have to call bullshit when it comes to the current beatification of Apple guru Steve Jobs.

Jobs died at a relatively young age, as these things go, so it is of course sad for his friends and family. On the other hand, when it comes to all the people trekking to their local Apple stores and writing messages in the blacked-out windows as if at some kind of shrine, or sticking up cutesy homemade "iMiss Steve" posters — this is a sad case of misplaced solidarity. I mean, I guess people love their iPhones and all (literally, [according to the latest research](#)). But love can also make you go soft between the ears.

There are two theoretical uses of the word "fetish," the Freudian and the Marxian. The first, Freud's, denotes the libidinal investment in an object of desire; the second expresses the way commodities appear to us as magic objects, entering our life-world with no trace of the messy social relations that actually produced them (that's Marx's "commodity fetishism").

Apple — the world's most powerful technology company and, [for a time earlier this year](#), the world's most valuable company period, topping Exxon — became the Goliath it is by seamlessly integrating these two types of fetishism, creating aspirational gadgetry with ruthless supply-chain management.

It says it right there on every Apple package: "Designed in California/Assembled in China." Thus Apple basks in some of that feel-good "Made in the U.S.A." glory, while outsourcing all the actual dirty work to workers halfway around the world.

An example: Steve Jobs's empire uses, among other suppliers, Taiwan-based Hon Hai Precision Industry — aka Foxconn, the Earth's tenth-largest employer — to produce its numinous gizmos. This is the company that [workers call, in a play on its Chinese name, "Run to Your Death."](#) Driven so hard at facilities where workers live, sleep, and eat, as well as work, scores of employees have killed themselves or attempted to kill themselves under the pressure. When the suicides became a public relations problem, managers [had new workers sign "No Suicide" pledges](#), giving away their family's rights to more than the minimum in compensation should they kill themselves.

In [a statement issued yesterday](#), Foxconn lauded Jobs as "an industry visionary, a true partner to our company, and a great friend."

In another incident, Chinese workers in Suzhou were [poisoned in the course of making touchscreens for electronics supplier Wintek](#) when the company, trying to speed up production to meet demand for Apple's popular devices, replaced alcohol with a chemical called N-hexane, reportedly because it dried faster. N-hexane is known to cause nervous system disorders.

These workers wrote to Steve Jobs personally, demanding redress. "We want to ask you whether or not you should be responsible for the supplier companies you have chosen?" they said in their letter. "When you look down at the Apple phone you are using in your hand and you swipe it with your finger, is it possible that you can feel as if it is no longer a beautiful screen to show off, but the life and the blood of us employees and victims? Did you supervise the auditing staff to ensure that they were responsible and diligent?" They [heard nothing from Jobs](#).

But the workers at Apple's suppliers aren't the only ones who have to worry about being poisoned. A statement from 36-group coalition known as the Green Choice Initiative [put it thusly](#) earlier this year: "Behind their stylish image, Apple products have a side many do not

know about — pollution and poison. This side is hidden deep within the company's secretive supply chain." It's hard to say just how bad its effects are, though. Among 29 major IT firms in China, Apple is ranked dead last in terms of transparency on its environmental practices.

Another report released on August 31 of this year by five separate environmental groups accused Apple's suppliers of pouring toxic chemicals into China's water supply (as of 2008, [as much as one third of the Yellow River was unsafe to drink](#), in large part because of industrial waste). "Through five months of research and field investigations we have found that the pollution discharge from this \$300 billion dollar company has been expanding and spreading throughout its supply chain, and has been seriously encroaching on local communities and their surrounding environments," the [report states](#), going on to call Apple "a special case" in terms of how little responsibility it takes for its pollution.

Steve Jobs retained the halo of his storied origins as a garage entrepreneur to the end, but Apple's rebel cachet was the product of carefully choreographed myth-making by professional ad wizards. Its brand first took a step towards icon status with the [landmark "1984" commercial](#) that launched the Apple Macintosh. (Produced by the L.A. firm Chiat/Day, directed by Ridley Scott, and debuted during the Superbowl, the promo essentially invented "event advertising.")

Still affecting, the ad features a righteous female warrior heroically storming past hordes of mindless workers who have apparently been reduced to automatons. A Big Brother-style face on a giant screen hectors an audience: "Today, we celebrate the first glorious anniversary of the Information Purification Directives," it intones. "We have created, for the first time in all history, a garden of pure ideology — where each worker may bloom, secure from the pests purveying contradictory truths. Our Unification of Thoughts is more powerful a weapon than any fleet or army on earth...."

The woman flings her hammer through the screen, shattering it. A voice-over intones that the Macintosh would prove "why 1984 won't be like '1984.'"

The mindless automaton workers were supposed to be PC users, of course. But today it is funny to reflect upon this commercial, amid all the venting of bereft Mac-heads who have lost their idol. The unification of thoughts is, indeed, a weapon more powerful than any army. These days, [the Daily Mail says](#) that the factories that produce Apple products are the center of a system of "Orwellian control." And what were Steve Jobs's meticulously

choreographed product launches but a chance for him to play the Big Brother role, spellbinding the crowd with his directives? The irony is thick.

The cult of Steve Jobs is the cult of the commodity triumphant. Mourn him if you like. I for one still identify with the rebel, and not with man on the screen.

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