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# Postmodernism and the Advertised Life. In Search for an Ethical Perspective on Advertising

BERT VAN DE VEN

*Der Beitrag beabsichtigt einige Aspekte der Postmoderne in Bezug auf das Phänomen des von Werbung durchdrungenen Lebens zu verdeutlichen. Es wird argumentiert, dass Baudrillard's Theorie der politischen Ökonomie des Zeichens verwendet werden kann, um zu verstehen wie Werbung funktioniert. Trotzdem gibt diese Theorie keine Anknüpfungspunkte hinsichtlich der Entwicklung einer kritisch-ethischen Perspektive für die Werbung Fruchtbare sind hingegen die postmodernen Philosophien von Derrida und Lyotard, die Ingredienzen liefern für ein „Gegengift“ zu einer Kommerzialisierung der Kultur.*

“Postmodern nennen wir bekanntlich die Trostlosigkeit, die man nicht einmal mehr originell formulieren kann. Die Moderne hat alle Möglichkeiten, den aufgeklärten Weltverdruß zu formulieren, ausgeschöpft und uns sogar in den aktuellsten Verstimmungen zum Zitieren verurteilt” (Sloterdijk 1989: 213).

“(…) the advertised life [is] an emerging mode of being in which advertising not only occupies every last negotiable public terrain, but in which it penetrates the cognitive process, invading consciousness to such a point that one expects and looks for advertising, learns to lead life as an ad, to think like an advertiser, and even to anticipate and insert oneself in successful strategies of marketing. The advertised life is not merely what you see on television, it is what the television sees” (Vanderbilt 1997: 128-129).

## 1. Introduction

To begin an article with quotations that give a definition of the terms in the article's title could easily be understood as an indication that the author is infected with the perhaps outmoded peculiarities of the intellectual style of so-called postmodernism. First, there is the use and opposition of fragments that seem to miss any meaningful connection. Secondly, the first quotation is, in this context, self-referential. If this is not an example of the playfulness and conceit so often associated with postmodernism, what point is the author trying to make? The answer is twofold. I hesitate to write about “postmodernism” because of its many different meanings and because Sloterdijk seems to be right about the non-originality of formulations of even the most current uneasiness concerning the world.

This is especially true of the uneasiness that has led to this article: The suspicion that, nowadays, advertising has become omnipresent to such an extent, that we, the consumers, form our identities and live our lives to a great extent by consuming lifestyles. The singularity of the individual seems to be nothing more than the pseudo-individuality offered to us by mass-production and mass-consumption (Adorno 1941: 207), as is shown, for instance, by the Chesterfield campaign which associates originality and singularity of human beings with smoking mass-produced cigarettes via the slogan “Be an original”.

Perhaps the human condition in the consumer society should be conceived of as even worse. In the words of Baudrillard, the consumer society is, in effect, a system of signs, a code that integrates all individuals and leaves neither room for authentic meanings nor for the autonomous subject (Baudrillard 1970: 26-34, 59-90, 123-139). According to Baudrillard, we live in an area of appearances. The difference between reality and appearance has imploded into a diversion without any foundation. Because of this implosion of authentic meaning, Baudrillard is often called a postmodern thinker.<sup>1</sup>

If the proposition of the implosion of the difference between reality and appearance is an important feature of postmodernism as a theory of society, then the uneasiness mentioned above concerns the fact that the human condition is postmodern. However, the writings of certain postmodern thinkers like, for instance, Lyotard give rise to a different interpretation of postmodernism, which could be used to develop a critical ethical perspective on advertising. In this case, the unease concerning the pseudo-individuality and materialist lifestyles generated by advertising could be indicative of a growing need for the critical potential of certain exponents of postmodern thought. In other words, postmodernism could serve as an antidote to the commercialization of culture, although it has also been accused of celebrating „a world that has become superficial and flat when seen through the frame of the TV screen” (Goldman 1992: 228-231). This article could be read, then, as *an attempt to clarify some aspects of the meaning of postmodernism in relation to the phenomenon of the advertised life, in order to develop a critical ethical perspective on advertising*

In the second section of this article, Baudrillard’s critique of the economy of the sign will be elaborated briefly. In the third section, the phenomenon of the advertised life will be specified to a fuller extent. In the fourth section, Baudrillard’s proposition of the implosion of the difference between reality and appearance will be criticized. In the fifth section, different meanings of the term “postmodernism” will be distinguished in

order to answer the question whether postmodernism “celebrates” the advertised life, or offers some ingredients for an antidote to the commercialization of culture. In the last section the results of this article will be summarized.

## **2. The Commodity Sign and Advertising**

Baudrillard’s proposition of the implosion of the difference between reality and appearance seems to hold for the way advertising works. For instance, what does one buy if one buys a fragrance? A very expensive odor in a fancy package or a sign value, produced by advertising, to express some aspect of one’s identity to others and also to oneself? In the latter case, the sign value determines the economic exchange value of the fragrance. If there is no difference between what an object seems to be and what it is, then the only thing that matters is how something is presented, how signs are attached to the object that differentiate it from other objects.<sup>2</sup> The difference that matters, both from a commercial point of view and from the point of view of the consumer, is the difference between the sign values attached to the fragrances A and B via advertising.

The fact that these fragrances smell different is, by contrast, of minor importance. According to Baudrillard, such differences with respect to the use value or utility of the product do not make this use value autonomous (Baudrillard 1981: 130-142). The “pure” odor has no autonomous authentic value for the individual. The use value is very much a social relation. Contrary to Marx, this means that the use value of an object should not be understood as a fixed relation between an authentic human need and a certain object. Since the consumer does not have access to an authentic meaning with regard to the product, it makes no sense to criticize the “falseness” of the meaning attached to products by sign values. The sign value is the exchange value of the product, whereas the use value is only an alibi, that is, the use value provides the exchange value with the guarantee of an objective reality, for which, however, the system of use values substitutes its own total logic of exchangeability or utility. That is why Baudrillard calls the use value the ideological completion of the exchange value.

According to Baudrillard the fields of economy and of signification have a homological structure that can be summarized with the following formula (Baudrillard 1981: 143-144):

EV, Sr / UV, Sd ; with EV = exchange value, Sr = signifier,  
UV = use value, Sd = signified<sup>3</sup>

In Baudrillard's opinion ideology should be understood as: "*that very form* that traverses both the production of signs and material production - or rather, it is the logical bifurcation of this form into two terms: EV, Sr / UV, Sd. This is the functional, strategic split through which the form reproduces itself. It signifies that ideology lies *already whole in the relation of Ev to Uv, that is, in the logic of the commodity*, as is so in the relation of Sr to Sd, i.e., in the internal logic of the sign" (Baudrillard 1981: S.144). In other words, ideology ensures that the consumer believes that there is some real use value related to the exchange value, in the same way in which it ensures that we think that there is some reality that is signified (Sd) by a signifier (Sr). According to Baudrillard, however, use value and the signified are not independent realities to which the systems of exchange values and of signifiers refer; they are only their alibis. It follows that the separation between the sign and the world, between exchange value and use value respectively, is a fiction.

Baudrillard radicalizes the homological structure of the fields of economy and signification to an equivalence: The (political) economy is understood as a economy of sign production, as a system of arbitrary relations between the objects of production and consumption that only exist as signs (commodity sign). This means that the commodity signs do not possess any authentic value or identity. They are nothing but the "meaningless" differences of differences. The commodity sign is nothing but pure form. There is no reality behind the commodity sign that can be comprehended.

An advertisement of, for instance, the fragrance of Hugo Boss can serve to illustrate what Baudrillard means. The advertisement shows a young attractive man and woman, and two bottles of Hugo Boss fragrance, one for men and one for women. The caption reads "Innovate don't imitate". Through its form the advertisement connects the signifiers "innovation" and "Hugo Boss fragrance". The signifier "Hugo Boss fragrance" is dominant, because we know that any advertisement is eventually trying to sell something and that the advertisement, therefore, is about a product. The entire sign "Hugo Boss fragrance" as the dominant signifier, is transformed into the signifier of another signified "innovation"<sup>4</sup>. This means that the "Hugo Boss fragrance" is associated with desirable human characteristics like "originality" and "being innovative".

This example illustrates that the commodity sign as a composite of a signifying unit (a word, a picture, a sound, an object) and a signified

meaning (a mental image, concept of impression) suggested by a signifier can be produced by the advertising form. Advertising establishes an exact correlation between a signifier (the product or company) and a certain signified meaning. It is important to note that the signified meaning is not required to be real. In the case of the Hugo Boss fragrance, the signified meaning of “innovative” is very abstract. What does it mean “to be innovative” in a general sense? Does it mean something more than that one should not imitate others? In other words, the advertisement does not provide for a specific well circumscribed sense of “being innovative”. At the same time, the advertisement transforms this abstract meaning of “being innovative” into the signified of the commodity sign that is the Hugo Boss fragrance. One could conclude, therefore, that in advertising there is no reality behind the signs. The only difference between fragrance A and B is that A is associated with, for instance, nature and “being natural,” whereas fragrance B is associated with “being innovative”. In Baudrillard's view, this is no reason to criticize advertising, because the absence of reality (of *Sd*) is true of all signs and not just of commodity signs. The consumer, therefore, can neither refer to what it means for a human being in different social contexts to be *really* innovative, nor to the use value of the fragrance satisfying a real individual need. To *really* enjoy the Hugo Boss fragrance is to consume its sign value. This is what advertising teaches the consumer: to consume signs (Goldman 1992: 39).

Although Baudrillard's proposition of the implosion of the difference between reality and appearance seems to hold for the world of advertising, it does not imply that the difference between reality and appearance has vanished altogether. In the latter case, it would make no sense to distinguish between the economic system of sign values and authentic communication in the lifeworld.<sup>5</sup> There would be no resources available within society to criticize the meanings offered by the system of sign values. This means that society would totally coincide with the economic system of sign values, whereas the only roles available to us would be the roles offered by that same economic system, namely the roles of consumer, employee, employer, manager, stockholder, and so on. Baudrillard leaves us without any hope of a critical assessment of the claims that are implicitly or explicitly made in advertising.

Baudrillard, of course, denies that it makes sense to distinguish between the lifeworld, where people can communicate in a rational way by the free acceptance or rejection of each other's validity claims (Habermas 1981a) on the one hand, and the economic system of sign values on the other. The phenomenon of the advertised life seems to confirm this: There is no life

outside the advertised life. In the next section, we will describe the relation between the production of commodity signs in advertising and the advertised life in more detail. *This discussion should enable us to answer the question whether there is an alternative to the advertised life and whether any system of meaning can be found outside of the economic system of sign values.*

### **3. The Advertised Life**

In the production of commodity-signs, the origin of the exchange value lies in the structure of the communicative exchange set up by ads. According to Goldman, the advertisement's mode of address, not necessarily its content, invites a series of imaginative exchanges between viewers and the advertisements that position viewers as subjects of the discourse. This means that viewers must supply the interpretative labor necessary to assemble sign value (Goldman 1992: 38). Interpreting an ad, constructing meaning and producing sign values are intertwined processes. Goldman points out that each task is accomplished in consumer-good ads via structured interpretative practices of abstraction, equivalency and reification. This means that the logic of these decoding practices corresponds to the logic of the commodity form as analyzed by Marx. Below, we will describe briefly how the logic of the commodity form corresponds with the way advertisers structure ads.

First, advertisements abstract certain social meanings from the lifeworld of the viewers and create a new, but fabricated, context in which the consumption of the product makes sense. Being an original person, for instance, is meaningful in the context of relations between people, and it makes sense to a person who values the freedom to live his life the way he wants to. Chesterfield's advertisement with the caption "be an original" abstracts this meaning from the context of the lifeworld, and attaches it to the consumption of mass-produced cigarettes. The brand "Chesterfield" is the signifier that refers to an abstracted meaning of "being an original human being". Since abstracted relations have been separated from any genuine personal affectivity, Goldman concludes that the commodity imparts their subjectivity. Being a unique, original person is not something that emanates from any individual subject but from the product consumed. In other words, subjectivity is being treated as a tabula rasa that can be filled with desired attributes of the products they consume (Goldman 1992: 24).

Secondly, the abstraction of meaning from the lifeworld makes it possible to establish a system of exchange, because these meanings have become equivalent and thus interchangeable. The abstracted meanings become

available for attachment to a variety of things or for use in exchange for a variety of experiences:

Experiences such as joy, wonder, peace, sexual pleasure and fulfillment are in turn treated as equivalent in that they, too, are reproducible and interchangeable. An advertisement for *My de Myurgia* toilet water shows a man wearing a black tuxedo embracing a woman dressed in a red, flowing evening gown. The caption beneath the picture reads: "MY choice to share with you ... because we have so much in common." Framed beneath this caption is a picture of interlocking bottles of toilet water, one labeled "Red for her" and the other labeled "Black for him". The ad thus equates the interlocking of things with the embrace of a man and a woman. The equivalence expressed in the commodity is transferred to the relationship between man and woman" (Goldman 1992: 27).

This example illustrates that the advertising form itself functions as a transformational field within which the currency of interchangeable equivalents is established and begins to circulate.

Finally, advertisements reify social relations and human characteristics. Reification is a process in which people forget the part their own activity has played in producing the social world. According to Goldman, Marx's metaphor for commodity fetishism was never more appropriate than here<sup>6</sup>: "objects apparently possess human characteristics ("gorgeous, sexy, young"), while humans only appear to possess the qualities of living, active beings when they possess (wear) the appropriate corporately made object-signs" (Goldman 1992: 31). In his article "The Advertised Life," Vanderbilt also refers to commodity fetishism to describe the phenomenon of the advertised life: "Marx's famous fetishism of commodities, once considered a radical notion, is now readily accepted on Madison Avenue [the center of the advertising business in the United States, B.v.d.V.] as the modern way to sell products people do not actually need. (...) But as brand awareness and advertising campaigns become larger than the products themselves, we increasingly identify our place in society through advertising" (Vanderbilt 1997: 133).

#### **4. Beyond Baudrillard: A Critical Perspective on Advertising**

Is Baudrillard right then, when he asserts that there is no use value, no *real* utility to which commodities refer, because advertising teaches us to consume sign values, not commodities? The answer is yes and no. He is right in saying that the advertising form produces commodity signs to increase the exchange value of the commodity by establishing an exact



correlation between a signifier (the product or company) and a certain signified meaning. This is only possible thanks to the structured interpretative practices of abstraction, equivalency and reification as described above. He is wrong, however, insofar as he thinks that to criticize the production of sign values is pointless. In precise terms, the establishment of an exact correlation between a discrete signifier (Sr) and a signified (Sd) can be criticized quite easily by referring to the meaning(s) of the signifier in the cultural interpretation frameworks of the lifeworld. That the advertising form reifies these meanings is exactly the reason that authors like Goldman and Vanderbilt are critical of the consumer culture. The fact that this consumer culture encompasses more and more areas of the lifeworld, from sport to art, from sexuality to the investment hobby of private individuals and from lifestyles to the use of the Internet, does not mean that there is no escape from the advertised life. It means that these areas run the risk of being “colonized” as Goldman asserts (Goldman 1992: 38). This colonization is morally undesirable because it has a dissolving influence on culture. The shared meanings lose some of their meaningfulness when they are abstracted and plundered as a resource to produce commodity-signs. As a consequence, the social integrative function of these shared meanings is lost.

According to Goldman, equivalence does not destroy but redefines individuality. He agrees with Adorno, who saw pseudo-individualization as the other side of the standardization brought about by mass-production and mass-consumption. The examples of the Chesterfield and Hugo Boss ads given above illustrate this point: Mass-produced objects are offered as a means to establish one’s individuality. Contrary to Baudrillard's opinion that there is no reality behind the system of signs, the notion of pseudo-individuality leaves open the possibility of a genuine or authentic individuality. Indeed, its whole significance depends on the assumption of the possibility of an individuality that is not pseudo, but real. The commodification of this individuality, then, can be criticized from the perspective of the lifeworld, that is, the shared meanings and cultural codes that are developed relatively independently from the production of commodity signs.

Such a critical perspective, however, becomes increasingly difficult to develop and to sustain when the lifeworld itself becomes saturated with commodity-signs. According to Goldman, the success of lifestyle advertising has led to such a colonization<sup>7</sup>: “When individuality depends on how one presents oneself as a work of art, then the circuit of freezing and packaging experience as ‘commodity aesthetics’ is complete. Lifestyle has

come to refer to experiences defined by consumption of aesthetically coded sets of commodified appearances” (Goldman 1992: 30). The equivalence between lifestyle image and commodity sign makes it possible for the product to take over the reality on which it was, at first, dependent for its meaning. As a result, consumers do not know of any other way to prove that they are leading this or that life than by buying all the commodity signs that make up a lifestyle.

For the purpose of this article, the most interesting example of the commodification of culture is the commodification of postmodernism as a lifestyle or bundle of lifestyles that can be acquired by buying endlessly varying sets of commodity-signs. In the next section, different meanings of the term “postmodernism” will be distinguished in order to answer the question whether postmodernism has turned out to be nothing but another manifestation of the advertised life, or perhaps offers some ingredients for an antidote to the commercialization of culture.

### **5. Postmodernism, the unmanageable difference**

According to Goldman, postmodernity is partially a product of the history of commodity culture: “Advertising dedicated to generating sign values is routinely grounded in a language disorder, the continuous rerouting of signifiers and signifieds. Postmodern *schizophrenia* is the result of undoing the ties that bind signifiers with signifieds, so they can enter into the exchange process necessary for assembling commodity-signs. When abstracted to their logical extremes, advertising’s rudimentary processes of engineering meaning exchanges - *juxtaposition* and *superimposition* - become the hallmarks of postmodern signification practices. Postmodern aesthetics are an outgrowth of cultural contradictions generated by the society of the spectacle, where the commodity form has re-absorbed and incorporated ideological opposition” (Goldman 1992: 202). Goldman defines postmodernism as: (i) The loss of unified meaning, the circumstance that there is no longer a single authoritative interpretation of a text but a multiplicity of interpretations which lead to a supposed cultural pluralism; (ii) a loss of certainty because of the breakdown of the grand narratives of Western Civilization (Goldman 1992: 202, 213). His observation that postmodernism is partially an outgrowth of advertising that continuously reroutes signifiers and signifieds, however, is not in line with his analysis of the way the meaning of postmodernism is commodified in the Reebok advertisement.

Goldman demonstrates how Reebok's postmodern ad turns cultural critique into a commodity signifier of "the end of desire". This is accomplished by denying its "adness," that is, by encoding a self-reflexive awareness of its own ad-ness. Furthermore, ambiguity is artificially imposed on the ad by explicitly rupturing the conventional. Goldman rightly concludes that certain elements of postmodernism are exploited by advertising to seek commodity differences: "Reebok's ambiguity represents difference - its meaning is defined by that which sets it apart from other meanings. This is not, however, the radical ambiguity which Derrida identifies, but ambiguity generated by intentional discontinuity and suspension of conventional reading rules. Ambiguity has been turned into a signifier. Though ambiguity masquerades as interpretative openness, it is turned to a mere second-order signifier of difference" (Goldman 1992: 212). Here, Goldman acknowledges that the radical ambiguity about which Derrida writes is not the same as the artificial explicit representation of ambiguity in the Reebok ad. It should, therefore, be possible to criticize the so-called "postmodernism" of certain advertisements from a genuine critical (postmodern) perspective. By contrast, Goldman blames postmodernism for abstracting the culture of appearances from the self-contradictory relations of advanced capitalism. According to him, that is why postmodernism, when it makes its way into mass culture, becomes little more than a fetishized fascination with the image. Finally, cynical fascination will replace the postmodern critique and self-reflexive consciousness will materialize as a new form of consumer fetishism (Goldman 1992: 231).

In opposition to Goldman, I will examine briefly whether a postmodern perspective is feasible that can serve as, or hint at, an antidote to the commodification of culture, including the commodification of its own meaning. First of all, we must conclude that if we call Baudrillard's theory of the political economy of the sign "postmodern," then postmodernism in this sense does not offer a critical perspective.

The two other meanings of postmodernism, given above in Goldman's definition, seem more promising, however. The first meaning concerns the loss of unified meaning. Goldman refers to Derrida in this context<sup>8</sup> (see the quotation above). Lyotard of course, elaborated the second meaning, the breakdown of the grand narratives of Western Civilization. Goldman only mentions this second meaning, but does not elaborate a critique.

With respect to the loss of unified meaning, that is the circumstance that there is no longer a single authoritative interpretation to a text but a multiplicity of interpretations, it should be noted that this is also

problematic from the perspective of the advertiser. No matter how “postmodern” the ad in question is, the advertiser wants to communicate a certain preferred interpretation. Such a preferred interpretation can, for example, be that “the viewer is too clever to be taken in by ads”. If it is true, however, that the advertiser cannot control the interpretation of the ad, his efforts to fix the relation between a signifier and a signified will be counterbalanced by the sheer multiplicity of interpretations and the continuous possibility of a deviant interpretation. According to Derrida, the possibility of deviant interpretations is not something accidental to language, but a condition of its proper functioning (Derrida 1972: 365-393). This means that the advertiser can only succeed in fixing a preferred interpretation insofar as misinterpretation is also possible. Furthermore, according to Derrida, experience and language tend to break apart, because the iterability of language leaves open the possibility of clarifying what is said, or to wrench the words from their context, or to juxtapose propositions in order to disrupt what is asserted. For instance, the advertisement of Sprite with the slogan “Image is nothing, thirst is everything” simply asks to be reversed to: Thirst is nothing, image is everything. This reversal of the order of the words brings us closer to the general truth about advertising, namely that in a consumer society characterized by economic affluence, human needs are by itself not enough to sell products, one has to sell illusions, that is, commodity signs as they are created by advertising.

The Sprite example illustrates that advertisers cannot control the interpretation of their work and that from a commercial perspective a lot of waste is produced in the minds of viewers. It follows that one should not be worried too much about advertising colonizing the lifeworld. Of course, consumers will keep consuming commodity signs, but nothing can prevent these commodities and their sign value from becoming meaningful in a different way than was envisaged by the preferred interpretation of the marketers. The circumstance that a lot of commodity signs reify social relations and human characteristics does not imply that the consumers of these commodities are strongly influenced by this reification. In other words, an advertiser is never sure whether his commodity sign will become culturally accepted, that is, that the meaning of the commodity sign is adopted and confirmed by the behavior and judgement of a significant social group. Because of the iterability of language, the lifeworld is too unruly to become totally dominated by commercial language. Another example illustrates this. In the hip-hop community, the emblems of certain cars like Volkswagen and Mercedes were worn as a sign with a meaning

that is only understandable from within this community. Volkswagen and Daimler-Chrysler certainly did not encourage this usage of their emblems.

The antidote that Derrida's theory of the iterability of language hints at consists, therefore, in this parodying, quoting, free interpreting, and other forms of repeating the reified and abstracted commodity signs which will unsettle the preferred interpretation(s) of the marketers. This can but should not necessarily be done intentionally. The deviation of interpretations is something that will happen because of the iterability of language and is not dependent on the efforts of individuals to intentionally create deviant interpretations. Nevertheless, to serve as an antidote, one could use the deviating power of language intentionally to counterbalance an overexposure to advertising.

One could object that to parody and to freely interpret advertisements implies that one is very much involved with commodity signs and that in this way the penetration of commodity signs in the lifeworld will only be furthered. In my opinion, however, nothing is wrong as such with the fact that commodity signs have become a part of our daily lives, as long as their meaning and the reason we buy the products is not mainly determined by advertising. *In a completely colonized lifeworld, the meaning of our lives and lifestyles would be fully determined by advertising.* At the same time, the lifeworld would no longer be distinguishable from the economy at all. The economic system needs a lifeworld, since it depends on it for the continued production of commodity signs. If the economic system were to colonize the lifeworld completely, it would have no raw material to produce new commodity signs. *Complete colonization is therefore inconceivable.*

Let us now turn to the second meaning of postmodernism given above, i.e., the breakdown of the grand narratives of Western Civilization. With the term "grand narratives," Lyotard refers mainly to the philosophies of history that have been developed since the Enlightenment, especially the philosophies of Hegel and Marx. Also, the thought that the purpose of history is the realization of the free market economy or liberal democracy is an example of a grand narrative. What all these narratives have in common is a belief in progress. According to Lyotard, one of the connotations of the postmodern situation is this loss of the belief in progress (Lyotard 1986: 115-116). He thinks that the atrocities of this century have cruelly disrupted that belief.

Lyotard values the breakdown of the grand narratives positively, because of their uncritical nature. They do not acknowledge the gap or heterogeneity between ideas and reality. According to Lyotard, there are different forms of discourse or genres in a language, such as the genres of economics, law,

aesthetics, science and ethics (Lyotard, 1983). Each genre has its own purpose. As a consequence, the genres are heterogeneous, which means that there is *no meta-genre, no rules that can rightly decide which argument is correct if there is a conflict between the different genres*. For example, science cannot prove that the genre of ethics or aesthetics is nonsense, because there is no meta-genre with rules to decide which genre is right. It is possible, however, *to have fruitful exchanges between genres*. For instance, cultural anthropology, economics and sociology can inform ethicists about the conditions which further good behavior, but these sciences cannot answer the normative question why one should obey moral duties.

According to Lyotard, however, the opposite is often the case. Instead of peaceful co-existence or fruitful exchange, the genres are at war with each other. This can lead to a hegemonic position of one of the genres. Lyotard believes that *the economic genre has obtained such a position in capitalist societies* (Lyotard 1988). This hegemony implies that conflicts between the genres are almost always decided in favor of the economic genre, because only the rules of this genre decide what is reasonable and desirable. Since the goal of the economic genre is to win time, other genres that need time to develop fully become suppressed. This hegemony of the economic genre is detrimental to justice, because justice depends on the susceptibility of institutions and persons to the plurality of genres, to ethics and to the voice that has not been articulated yet. This voice is the voice of the child in each grown-up that is not able to use the fancy arguments of the calculating mind of the grown-up. According to Lyotard, childhood leaves traces of undeterminable difference in the grown-up. This is one of the meanings of the “inhuman,” because it does not speak the self-confident language of the grown-up who has internalized the values and interests of civilization (Lyotard, 1988). At the same time and seen from another perspective, however, these traces of childhood are pre-eminently human. They are still present as sensibilities to something that has not arrived yet, that needs time to occur.

On the basis of our description of the phenomenon of the advertised life, one could say that advertising is also a genre that has obtained hegemony over other kinds of genres. With regard to culture, this hegemony means that culture becomes commodified, packaged and sold as a commodity sign, since the goal of advertising is to produce and sell sign value. Of course, there is a close relationship between the economic genre and the advertising genre. This is recognizable in the production process of commodity signs: The time that it takes to produce them should not be too long. Once a commodity sign is established, one should not change the sign

value as long as it is successful. For instance, in the entertainment industry, pop artists, and nowadays also classical stars like “the three tenors,” are created as marketing concepts. When they are successful, record companies often pressure them to do nothing that could endanger their image. No matter how boring their music gets, no matter how strongly they want to explore new musical terrain, they have to do the same trick over and over again. If an artist is too unruly or too many-sided to produce a univocal commodity sign, he simply loses his or her contract, unless the artist has contractually secured his or her artistic freedom.

According to Lyotard, culture needs time to develop. Given time, new creative thinking and art can develop alongside new institutions that are susceptible to each other and to the voice that has not been articulated yet. Although Lyotard himself did not seem optimistic about the possibility of safeguarding one’s time for the economic imperative of saving time, an ingredient for the antidote to the commodification of culture can be derived from his philosophy. This ingredient is to slow down,<sup>9</sup> to stop buying all those books, compact discs, tickets to the film and theatre and so on, and to start (re)reading and listening (not only to music). Slowing down also means that one stops trying to keep pace with all the so-called (?) radical changes of the “new economy,” all its new hypes and products, its globalization and its flexibilization of work and leisure. Such slowing down should create time to do something useless, that is, something that has no apparent utility, such as reading philosophy. Maybe then something will happen, something will take up space and time that was monopolized by the imperative to use one’s time efficiently in order to consume as much commodity signs as possible, or, in the words of Pepsi-Cola the imperative “To live life to the max”.

## **6. Summary**

In this article, an attempt was made to clarify some aspects of the meaning of postmodernism in relation to the phenomenon of the advertised life, in order to develop a critical ethical perspective on advertising. We saw that Baudrillard thinks that there is no real meaning or use value that can serve as the basis for the critique of commodity signs. Postmodernism in the sense of Baudrillard’s theory of the political economy of the sign, therefore, does not provide us with a critical perspective on advertising. Contrary to Baudrillard, we conclude that it makes sense to distinguish a lifeworld, with shared meanings and cultural codes that have developed relatively independently of the production of commodity signs, from the economic system. This leaves open the possibility of criticizing the commodification

of culture. Furthermore, two other meanings of postmodernism proved to be fruitful to the development of a critical perspective on advertising. Derrida's theory of the iterability of language offers an antidote to the commodification of culture, since the deviating power of language can be intentionally used to unsettle the preferred interpretations that advertisers are so eager to communicate. Lyotard's philosophy also offers a possible ingredient for an antidote, namely to slow down. The meaning of this ingredient, however, is only touched upon in this article. Some questions still have to be formulated and answered. To conclude this article, I can only give an indication of the question that forces itself upon me: Can we decide to slow down? Is it within the power of humans to withdraw from the overpowering forces of Western Civilization?<sup>10</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> Baudrillard himself presumably would not agree with this label, because he sees postmodernism as another attempt to establish a certain meaningful unity into the diversity of cultural forms, whereas he rejects such unifying meanings (Van Gils 1986: 64).
  - <sup>2</sup> Compare Lyotard with respect to his remarks about the loss of the object (Lyotard 1993: 33)
  - <sup>3</sup> The distinction between signifier and signified as the two components of the sign is derived from the work of Saussure (Saussure 1972)
  - <sup>4</sup> Baudrillard calls this a staggered scheme of connotation (Baudrillard 1981: 157).
  - <sup>5</sup> The concept of the lifeworld is taken from Jürgen Habermas. With the concept of the lifeworld, Habermas elucidates the social embeddedness of communication, that is, its dependence on cultural interpretation frameworks that are largely given to those who engage in communicative action (Habermas 1981b).
  - <sup>6</sup> It should be noted though that Marx's theory of fetishism refers to the social origin of commodities in abstract labor and not to the social origin of meaning.
  - <sup>7</sup> A good example of a colonization of meanings from the lifeworld, is the commodification of youth culture like the grunge rock scene and hiphop culture in the 90s of the last century (Frank/Weiland 1997: 143-163).
  - <sup>8</sup> Derrida probably would not see himself as a postmodernist thinker. The label "post-modern" is often used to refer to different kinds of philosophies that have in common that they emphasize the meaning of differences (between sexes, language games, within the economy and so on). Postmodern philosophy can be understood as a form of philosophy of difference. Derrida's philosophy of difference can be characterized as a form of poststructuralism, which means a philosophy that is based on the structuralism of Saussure and that radicalizes this theoretical position (Berns 1998: 25)
  - <sup>9</sup> There is an interesting parallel here with Sloterdijk's interpretation of Heidegger's concepts of "Gelassenheit" and "Kehre" as a relaxation of the subject (Sloterdijk, 1989: 203). Elsewhere, Sloterdijk refers to postmodern therapies to slow down which are supposed to counterbalance the inhuman velocity of money and media operations. According to Sloterdijk, however, these therapies are still "weltfromm," that is to say that they do not really counterbalance what he calls the permanent mobilization of mankind by Western Civilization (Sloterdijk 1993: 108).



<sup>10</sup> Sloterdijk is skeptical about the will that wants its own relaxation or that wants to “Go slow” (See also endnote 9).

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