

Objects of Consumption, Causes of Desire: Consumerism and Advertising in Societies of Commanded Enjoyment

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Today consumption, advertising and branding constitute central aspects of social life, shaping economic, cultural and even political identifications. How can one make sense of this hegemony of consumerism in (late) capitalist societies? How can we account for the centrality of advertising discourse, which is now emerging as our predominant fantastic horizon? Can psychoanalysis be of any help here? Drawing on the Lacanian theorizations of desire and enjoyment, this essay answers in the affirmative. It registers the symbolic coordinates of consumerist desire, traces the imaginary lure of advertising fantasies and locates the real support for consumer culture in the (partial) *jouissance* entailed in desiring and consuming products as well as advertisements. The last section of the paper attempts to map the implications of the consumerist administration of desire and enjoyment on the way the social bond is politically instituted and morally justified in late capitalist societies.

Strictly speaking, the humans of the age of affluence are surrounded not so much by other human beings, as they are in all previous ages, but by objects. . . . We live by object time . . . to the rhythm of their ceaseless succession.

Jean Baudrillard¹

Psychoanalysing Consumerism

To be sure, nobody will be surprised if I argue that today consumerism constitutes one of the most central aspects of social life or that advertising is one of the hegemonic discursive tropes in late

1. Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society* 25.

modernity, staging the fantasy frame that ensures that our identity as consumers sticks. As Garry Cross has put it, consumerism, despite all the opposition, seems to be “the ‘ism’ that won” (1). It succeeded where other ideologies and discourses failed. Indeed, in capitalist - especially late capitalist - societies it is the role of consumption and consumerism and the function of advertising, public relations and branding, that offer perhaps the best example of how new interpellations and commands can re-shape social structure by imposing their hegemonic grip on individual and group identifications and behavior. The question is how? How was the act of consumption instituted as the undisputable nodal point of a whole culture, a whole way of life?² In this essay I will argue that the emerging hegemony of consumerism cannot be explained without taking seriously the dimensions of desire and enjoyment. Psychoanalytic theory - along its Freudian-Lacanian axis - can paradigmatically accomplish this task, revealing how the symbolically conditioned desire for consumption acts is stimulated by advertising fantasies and supported by the (partial) enjoyment entailed in desiring and consuming products as well as advertisements. Channeling desire in particular directions, consumer culture marks a significant shift in the way the social bond is structured in relation to enjoyment and reveals its central role in sustaining the current, late capitalist economic-political nexus.

What, however, legitimizes this recourse to psychoanalytic theory? Ironically, psychoanalysis was present at the “birth” of public relations and continues to be an indirect resource for the advertising industry. For a start, the so-called “founder” of public relations, Edward Bernays - branded by his biographer “The Father of Spin” - was no less than Freud’s nephew. In his biography of Bernays, Larry Tye has included a chapter with the characteristic title “Uncle Sigi,” which recounts the quite close but at times bumpy relation between Freud and Bernays, who had an active role in translating and publishing some of his uncle’s first texts into English.³ From the 1950s onwards, having gradually realized that it is not rational argumentation but emotional ties that bind, the advertising industry has adopted tech-

2. Throughout this essay I will be using the word “consumption” mostly to refer to the acts involved, while reserving “consumerism” for the way of life founded on the centrality of consumption acts. In this sense, the category of “consumerism” attempts to conceive the psycho-social implications of consuming experience and to capture the interaction between personal appeal and ideological power underlying its success (Miles 4-5).

3. On the pioneering role of Bernays also see Ewen.

niques of *motivational research* - a research branch developed by Ernest Dichter, who was also influenced by Freud - which target the unconscious motives of consumer behavior and have often drawn on psychoanalytic technique. Hence the analogies between psychoanalytic free association, depth interviews and focus groups (Andersen 79). If, on the one hand, a certain appropriation of psychoanalytic ideas was utilized in the development of some of the most important pillars of contemporary capitalism and consumer culture, on the other, advertising has also come to preoccupy psychoanalytic reflection. Lacan himself referred to advertising - to the slogan "Enjoy Coca-Cola" - while speaking about *le sujet de la jouissance* in his Baltimore lecture in 1966, associating thus advertising and consumerism with the whole psychoanalytic problematic of enjoyment, a problematic deeply revealing of the foundations of capitalism (*Séminaire XVII* 123). Is not enjoyment, either as a signifier, as an image or as a subtext, always at the kernel of the promise entailed in advertisements, a promise stimulating consumer desire and reproducing consumer culture? Isn't real enjoyment what we expect from consumption acts? These days it is only the particular nature of this enjoyment which is at stake, with a certain car manufacturer promising a surplus - a *plus-de-jouir* - of "advanced enjoyment" against the supposedly banal enjoyment offered by other cars. Similarly, a cigarette manufacturer has articulated its ad for a new cigarette brand around the promise of "clean enjoyment" against the supposedly impure enjoyment offered by competitors. And doesn't enjoyment exhibit all the paradoxical characteristics of Lacan's *jouissance*?⁴

All these hypotheses inform the orientation of this essay. Such an orientation, however, is far from self-evident. For a long period, both the industry and research on consumption - especially economic analyses - have largely been dominated by a rational choice model of consumer behavior. Emanating from mainstream economics and premised on the ideal-type of the "rational economic individual," the utility maximization paradigm se-

4. In Lacan, the term "*jouissance*" denotes a paradoxical enjoyment beyond socially sanctioned pleasure, a pleasure that borders with displeasure, a satisfaction tied to dissatisfaction, an intensity that fails to be adequately represented and explained through symbolic means. In the psychoanalytic clinic such would be the enjoyment of the symptom - an unconscious satisfaction implicit in an experience consciously perceived as unpleasant but which does not fail to stick and repeat itself, providing some sort of gain within the psychic economy. Introductory accounts of the Lacanian conceptualizations of *jouissance* can be sought in Declercq, Evans, Miller, Pat-salides and Malone.

verely restricted the scope of analysis merely to exploring “the logical implications of man’s rationality” (Scitovsky 15). As a result, “the understanding of consumption by mainstream economics is shallow to the point of being paper thin” (Fine 125). What is astonishing is that many radical critics of advertising and consumption have adopted an equally essentialist position blind to the limits of rationality and to the ambiguous structure of human desire. These critics have often seen advertising as a brainwashing activity which, by stimulating false desires, deepens our enslavement to consumerism and capitalist exploitation. There are two main axes of such a critical approach. First of all, that consumerism is founded on the distortion of *real/natural human needs* and on the creation and proliferation of “false desires.”⁵ Second, that these false desires are stimulated and disseminated through advertising discourse, which sustains the *false consciousness* required for their acceptance.

Ironically, the hypothesis of the “rational consumer” has been falsified by the advertising industry itself. In fact, as early as 1923, Ivy Lee - one of America’s prominent corporate public relations experts - had realized that in order to be effective, public relations had to limit its reliance on factual argument and rational persuasion and target emotion and sentiment (Ewen 131-32). This realization of the importance of often unconscious identification processes that escape the limits of rationality has led to the establishment of a class of “public relations experts, advertising strategists, image managers, and architects of calculated spectacles” paid to “manufacture the terms of public discourse” (173), *crystallize public opinion* and *engineer consent* - to draw on the titles of two books by Edward Bernays. No doubt these ideas have not managed to displace completely the rationalist paradigm and thus while advertising practice had to take into account the non-rational character of desire and human motivation, advertising theory occasionally “continues to pay lip-service to the traditional liberal philosophy of informed, rational consumers” (Qualter 89). However, as already mentioned, in its effort to reach an adequate self-understanding of its own operation and to develop more effective *strategies of desire* - and here I am drawing on the title of a book by Ernest Dichter - the advertising industry transformed itself into an advanced psychological laboratory (Packard 29) and engaged with certain aspects of psychoanalytic theory and method. If psychoanalytic insights are considered

5. Even Guy Debord’s analysis does not escape such a reference to “pseudo-needs” entailing a “falsification of life” (44).

by the industry itself as able to provide a more adequate understanding of the mechanisms at work in consumption - even though what underlies this interest for psychoanalysis is a fantasy of an ultimately rational, instrumental control of the irrational forces operating on the masses by the *subjects supposed to know*: advertising executives - then surely no critique of advertising would be wise to ignore these insights and psychoanalytic theory more generally.

In this sense, psychoanalysis may be able to illuminate and overcome the limitations of more traditional approaches. Outside the advertising industry, these limitations are also being revealed by the inability of radical critiques of advertising to displace consumerist identifications and to lessen the ideological grip of advertising fantasies, to reintroduce the importance of the *political act* alongside the ubiquitous *act of consumption*. It is more than revealing that even people who question the *status* of both market economy and advertising seem unable to organize their desire in an alternative way; thus advertising discourse enjoys a passive legitimization that adds to its hegemonic hold. Despite the revival of the culture of constraint in the 1960s and 1970s - partly in the work of figures associated with the Freudian Left - no effective defence "from the power and appeal of an ever-advancing consumerism" has been established (Cross 140). Furthermore, as a result of the difficulties in effectively dealing with the status of desire in a consumer culture, no really appealing alternatives have been created (130). And the situation today is not markedly different.

The typical jeremiad form of critique has proved unable to seriously reflect on these failures. And the problem persists. A good case in point is Lodziak's recent book where consumerism is castigated as a substitute for autonomy, able to satisfy "only the most fickle" (158). Lodziak concludes: "It is for the majority an inadequate compensation for the denial of a more meaningful life, but a compensation that has been tolerated in the absence of alternatives" (158). The obvious question here is that if consumerism is so inadequate, how does it manage to resist the unmasking operations of its critics, how does it retain its hegemonic grip? As I shall be arguing in this essay, "the jeremiad," the dominant type of radical critique, could never imagine the dynamics of *jouissance* underlying consumer culture, and was thus trapped within a "false consciousness" paradigm, reducing what was a question of desire and enjoyment to a question of knowledge and rationality, unable to offer any realistic alternatives. The result has been the defeat of the ultimately impotent culture of constraint. There is nothing to gain in denying that advertising is capable of *enchanted* us in a variety of ways.

This is how it has managed to become a major force in structuring everyday life, our identifications, aspirations and imaginations; it is for the same reason that demystifying the normalizing tendencies of advertising and consumerism presupposes that we learn to appreciate the affective mobilization entailed in the *presence* or the *promise* of commodity consumption (Bennett 113-14).⁶

All this is not to say that there have been no economists aware of the constitutive antinomies of satisfaction which destabilize the ideal type of rational choice theories - consider, in this respect Scitovsky's lacanesque observation that "the most pleasant is on the borderline with the unpleasant" (34). Albert Hirschman has also highlighted the limitations of the rational-choice model, and attempted to construct an enriched version of it drawing on a variety of sources, including Baudrillard (36). Obviously, there have also been critics of advertising and consumerism, especially from a sociological perspective, that tried to move away from the naturalist/essentialist paradigm in order to take into account the plasticity, the metonymic character of desire. Already from Baudrillard's 1970 book *The Consumer Society* and up to more recent texts the problematic of desire is becoming more and more central. With this trend, however, a new problem appeared, one associated with the increasing dominance of social constructionism: what was stressed was the symbolic, culturally conditioned aspect of human desire, sometimes at the expense of affect and real enjoyment. In what follows, I will be providing an overview of the limitations of both the naturalist/essentialist camp and the constructionist/culturalist camp, mapping, at the same time, the radical implications of a Lacanian approach. If consumerism has been victorious, it is because it has managed - through the fantasmatic effects of advertising and experiences of partial *jouissance* - to register and re-shape the logic of desire and no critique will ever be effective without acknowledging this fact and formulating an alternative administration of enjoyment.

Need, Desire, Fantasy . . . and Beyond

During the last decades, we have been witnessing a gradual shift from a naturalist to a culturalist conception of need and desire, to the reign of *Ho-*

6. It is worth noting that Bennett's understanding of enchantment is, in certain respects, extremely close to Lacan's *jouissance*. This is the case when she associates enchantment with a pleasurable feeling coupled with uncanny disruption (5) or when she defines it as "a mixed bodily state of joy and disturbance" (111).

mo Symbolicus, which pushes the centre of gravity in the relevant discussion closer to certain (constructionist) insights of Lacanianism. Drawing on traditions of thought that stress the predominance of the symbolic function over biological necessity and posit a “radical discontinuity between culture and nature” (Sahlins 12-13), many consumption researchers have begun to realize that there is a fundamental material-symbolic correlate to human needing (Jhally 20). To put it more clearly, “the recognition of the fundamentally symbolic aspect of people’s use of things must be the minimum starting point for a discourse that concerns objects. Specifically, the old distinction between basic (physical) needs and secondary (psychological) needs must be superceded” (4). Nevertheless, many radical critics of consumerism still remain stuck to the idea of universal basic needs, which may be culturally loaded but yet remain anchored in a certain type of (biological) necessity: “there are universal needs relevant to an individual’s survival and well-being, whereas wants tend to be associated with the mere preference of particular individuals” (Lodziak 4). Still common in mainstream economies and among leftist critics, an influential view remains that preferences “are considered to be given . . . as a result of psychological needs and psychological and cultural propensities” (Hirschman 9). How can Lacanian theory intervene at this point?

No doubt, the Lacanian understanding of the relation between need, demand and desire dynamitizes the foundations of this obsolete critique according to which consumerism neglects genuine needs and creates false needs or desires. Entrance into the *symbolic*, the world of language, presupposes the sacrifice of all unmediated access to a level of “natural” needs and of their quasi-automatic satisfaction. Needs have to be articulated in language, in a demand to the Other (initially the mother). As soon as the satisfaction of need enters into this relation of dependence from the Other, every demand becomes, above all else, a demand for the Other’s love. What we have here is “a deviation of man’s needs due to the fact that he speaks: to the extent that his needs are subjected to demand, they come back to him in an alienated form” (Lacan, “The Signification of the Phallus” 579). This is an insight of value both to psychoanalysis and socio-political analysis: “needs have been diversified and geared down by and through language to such an extent that their import appears to be of a quite different order, whether we are dealing with the subject or politics” (Lacan, “The Subversion of the Subject” 687). There is something in need (a certain real) that cannot be symbolically articulated in demand, and “appears in an offshoot that presents itself in man as desire” (“The Signification of the Phallus”

579). Alienated from natural need, incapable of any immediate access to “real,” “natural” objects of satisfaction, human desire is always a desire for something else (“The Instance of the Letter” 431), for what is lacking, for the part of the real impossible to articulate in demand. As a result, desire has no fixed object; strictly speaking, there is no object of desire, an object that could satisfy desire, only object-cause of desire: something that incarnates the lack and entails a promise of dealing with it. From this point of view, desire and lack always go together, overdetermining the dialectic aporia of human life. In that sense, the reliance of consumerism on the continuous production and stimulation of new desires by advertising, on the *manipulation* of the dialectic between lack and desire, is not alien to the symbolic constitution of human reality. It does channel it in particular directions but, strictly speaking, neither distorts nor de-naturalizes it. Subjected to drives and not biological instincts, obliged to articulate need in demand, we are always already de-naturalized.

In that sense, there is no point in referring consumerist desire back to a notion of a prior or superior need. Constructing their own symbolic/imaginary reality, humans are able to ignore and/or transform such dichotomies. We know that we cannot survive without food, but the anorexic and the political prisoner on hunger strike follow their fantasies despite the pressure of biological necessity. Furthermore, our calorie requirements reveal nothing about our culinary preferences, about the food we like and the food we hate, whether we prefer French cuisine or Chinese, fast food or tavernas. In psychoanalysis, the object of the drive is not the object of biological instinct. Although from a biological point of view, the anorexic refuses to eat, *does not eat*, from a psychoanalytic point of view, he or she *eats nothing*. Simply put, the anorexic “employs his refusal as if it were a desire” (Lacan, “The Direction of the Treatment” 524). *Nothing* here functions as a perfectly “legitimate” object. The same applies to the political prisoner whose hunger strike does not deny him or her access to an abundance of nourishing ideals, to the joy of fighting for a cause. In a certain sense - and here Lacan’s neologism of the *parletre* is deeply revealing - symbolically conditioned desire is our most pressing biological necessity: “A smoker’s demand for cigarettes, for example, is no less inelastic than his demand for food” (Scitovsky 107). Doesn’t that destabilize the simplistic dichotomy between natural needs and false desires? Marx would certainly agree with such a conclusion, as everybody who has gone through *Das Kapital* knows. In the first page of the first chapter he defines a commodity as “an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another” only to add

that “the nature of such wants, whether, for instance, they spring from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference” (35).⁷

Contrary to the traditional leftist critique, if consumerist hegemony is possible it is precisely because human desire is not given or natural. And it remains a puzzle if symbolically conditioned desire is not sufficiently taken into account. But that does not mean that desire is easy to stimulate, cultivate and fix. Consumerism, however, effects such a (partial) fixation of desire. What are the vehicles that perform this fixation? Although advertisements technically don't lie (at least not in a straightforward way, which might harm, in fact, the product that is being advertised) they can stimulate and channel desire only by constructing a whole mythology around the product. Furthermore, they do so by using a multitude of rhetorical, imaginary and other devices. But even if advertisements were lying this would not reveal much about the way their mythologies are accepted by the consumer. One would end up with a “false consciousness” argument and a critique of advertising which has been proved both short-sighted and counter-productive: “Consumer capitalism is not about false consciousness as such because many consumers are fully aware and critical of the sorts of inequalities and injustices that are associated with consumerism” (Miles 156). Žižek would probably formulate it like this: *they know very well what they are doing and they are doing it*. As Guy Cook has put it in *The Discourse of Advertising*, “in many discourses, the underlying factual or logical content is either non-existent or of secondary importance; yet this does not deprive them of value” (206). In fact, “the relationships of manufacture and consumption, and their discourses, of which advertising is one, are as real and natural (or, if you prefer, as unreal and unnatural) as those of any other discourse” (208). In that sense, concentrating on the truth/falsity issue constitutes one of the bigger impediments in understanding the way advertising functions, the way it constructs and “sells” its desirable mythologies and the way this whole organization of desire guarantees the reproduction of market economy and capitalism. As Jean Baudrillard has put it in an early text with (what seem to me) a lot of Lacanian overtones, the aforementioned *The Consumer Society*, “the truth is that advertising . . . does not deceive us: it is beyond the true and the false . . . Advertising is a prophetic language, in so far as it promotes not learning or understanding, but *hope*” (127, emphasis added).⁸

7. Here Marx draws on Barbon's observation, made in 1696, that the appetite of the mind is “as natural as hunger to the body” (Marx 35).

8. Another important book by Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, employs a semiotic

Now, how and where can one locate this element of hope, the promise which supports advertising, with reference to the Lacanian logic of desire? And what provides this hope with credibility?

If advertising attempts to stimulate, to cause our desire, this can only mean that the whole mythological construction it articulates around the product is a social *fantasy* and, furthermore, that this product serves or functions as an object that causes desire, in other words, as an object-cause of desire, an *objet petit a* in the Lacanian vocabulary. This fantasmatic dimension has been acknowledged by many critics of advertising, from Aldous Huxley to Raymond Williams. More recently, Baudrillard has highlighted the fact that what is actually bought and consumed in our consumer societies is not objects defined by their natural or physical properties, but the fantasies surrounding them, the fantasies articulated in advertising discourse (*Consumer Society* 33). In effect, products may even be absent from an advertisement. In the brand-age, with major companies sub-contracting their manufacturing operations, it is also not products, commodities, things, that are primarily produced, but mainly images of brands. This “divestment of the world of things” now affects not only consumption but also the world of production. The real work of many large corporations lies not in manufacturing but in marketing their brand names (Klein 4). What we buy, above all else, is promises associated with these brands:⁹ “We buy advertising messages, which promise happiness, fun, popularity, and love” (Andersen 89). No wonder then that the truth value of ads becomes of secondary importance: “consumers seek much more than purely factual knowledge, because they do not look at things simply as factual objects” (Qualter 91), but as embodiments of the fantasmatic promise articulated in advertising discourse. What we buy is what we fantasize and what we fantasize is what we are lacking: the part of ourselves that is sacrificed/castrated when we enter the symbolic system of language and social relations. As Lacan has formulated it, the subject is symbolically deprived of it forever. This loss, however, the prohibition of *jouissance*, is exactly what permits the emergence of desire, a desire which is structured around the unending quest for the *lost/impossible jouissance*. It is *impossible* because if the subject does not have it, nei-

approach with an equally distinct Lacanian flavour and characteristically concludes with this lacanesque sentence: “Consumption is irrepressible, in the last reckoning, because it is founded upon a *lack*” (224).

9. As Klein has put it, “Think of the brand as the core meaning of the modern corporation, and of the advertisement as one vehicle used to convey that meaning to the world” (5).

ther does the big Other, the socio-symbolic system. Both subjective lack and the lack in the Other are lacks of *jouissance*. It is *lost* because, in its fullness, it is posited as lost, introducing thus the idea that it can be refound (through consumption acts).

Fantasy is a construction that stimulates, causes desire, because it promises to cover over the lack created by the loss of *jouissance* with a substitute, a miraculous object, the *objet petit a*. In Lacan, the structure we always find in fantasy is this relation between the split subject, the lacking subject, and the *objet petit a*. The idea behind the category of *le sujet de la jouissance* is that the human condition is marked by this quest for a lost/impossible enjoyment. Fantasy offers the *objet petit a* as the promise of an encounter with this precious *jouissance*, an encounter that is fantasized as covering over the lack in the Other and consequently as filling the lack in the subject. Within such a framework, brand names become “channels of desire, emblems of a world denied, embodiments of wishes unfulfilled” (Ewen and Ewen 46).

It is precisely a piece of this enjoyment that is promised in slogans like “Enjoy Coca-Cola.” Advertising discourse functions as a fantasy, it can persuade and cause desire, because it promises to cover over our lack by offering us the product as an *objet petit a*, as the final solution to all our problems, as the creator of an ideal harmony: “This is it!” - to remain within the Coke framework. Within the advertising universe, every experience of lack is projected onto the lack of the product that is being advertised, which thus assumes the status of “our only desire,” as a recent car advertisement claims; projected, that is to say, onto a singular lack that one simple move promises to eliminate: the purchase of the product, the act of consumption. Advertising fantasy reduces the constitutive lack in the subject to the lack of the product that it simultaneously offers as an *objet petit a*, as a promise for the final elimination of this lack. Baudrillard gives a very “poetic” description of this *utopian* element in advertising: “The manifest presence of surplus, the magical, definitive negation of scarcity, the maternal, luxurious sense of being already in the land of Cockaigne . . . These are our Valleys of Canaan where, in place of milk and honey, streams of neon flow down over ketchup and plastic” (*Consumer Society* 26). A recent observation by Žižek summarizes very well this argument: “As we know from Marx, a commodity is a mysterious entity full of theological caprices, a particular object satisfying a particular need, but at the same time the promise of something more, of an unfathomable enjoyment whose true location is fantasy - all advertising addresses this fantasmatic space” (*The Puppet and the Dwarf* 145).

However, what is not to be missed here is that, exactly because we are unable to fully recapture our lost/impossible pre-symbolic *jouissance*, advertising fantasy attempts to exorcize the *malaise* of everyday life by, in effect, reproducing the system within which this *malaise* is constitutive. Desire can only be sustained by the dialectic of lack and excess; in order to remain attractive, the promise of excess relies on the continuous renewal of experiences of lack. Thus capitalist society “is geared both to *structural excess* and *structural penury*” (Baudrillard, *Consumer Society* 53, emphasis added). “The system only sustains itself by producing *wealth* and *poverty* . . . as many *dissatisfactions* as *satisfactions*” (55, emphasis added). This paradoxical dialectic has not escaped the attention of Albert Hirschman. Acts of consumption - and the same applies for active participation in public affairs - “undertaken because they are expected to yield satisfaction, also yield disappointment and dissatisfaction” (10). One can certainly recognize here the true Lacanian definition of fantasy not only as a screen which promises to fill the lack in the Other, but also as what “produces” this lack, what stages a domesticated scenario of castration. Only by staging this scenario of lack can fantasy move to its promise of covering over this lack in some distant or not so distant future - only thus can the fantasmatic promise sound appealing: “to produce desire is also to produce the lack or scarcity that will intensify desirousness and increase the anticipation of *jouissance*” (Goux 200).

As a result, the capitalist utopia is predominantly a virtual utopia. We all know that the harmony promised by advertising fantasy cannot be realized; the *objet petit a* can function as the object-cause of desire only insofar as it is lacking. As soon as we buy the product we find out that the enjoyment we get is partial, that it has nothing to do with what we have been promised. “That’s not it! Is the very cry by which the *jouissance* obtained is distinguished from the *jouissance* expected,” Lacan points out in *Encore* (*Seminar XX* 111). With every such experience a lack is re-inscribed in the subject. But this resurfacing of the inability of fantasy to lead to a full satisfaction of desire is not enough to put in danger the cultural hegemony of advertising in late capitalist societies. It could even be argued that exactly because the “product never fails to reduce to a mere promise the enjoyment which it promises,” it gets to rely even more on advertising; it needs it all the more because it “cannot be enjoyed” to the extent that we are expecting it to be (Adorno and Horkheimer 162). As Slavoj Žižek has put it, the aim of fantasy is not to satisfy desire, something that is ultimately impossible. It is enough to construct it and support it as such: through fantasy we “learn” how to desire. As far as the final satisfaction of our desire is concerned this

is postponed from discourse to discourse, from fantasy to fantasy, from product to product. Yet, everything remains intact as long as new products are produced and new fantasies are advertised. The incapability to produce the satisfaction promised does not kill desire but, on the contrary, sets off a “cyclical quest” (Andersen 90). It is this continuous displacement that constitutes the *formal kernel* of consumer culture.

Tim Burton’s film *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005), based on Roald Dahl’s story, offers one of the most amusing illustrations of this fantasmatic play between lack and excess and of the cathectic displacements it generates. Willie Wonka, played by Johnny Depp, decides to allow five children into his impressive but inaccessible Chocolate Factory. The process of selection is random and boils down to finding one of the five “golden tickets” hidden in Wonka’s chocolate bars. One of the “chosen” children turns out to be the utterly spoilt offspring of an English millionaire, Veruca Salt. Under hysterical pressure from Veruca, her father buys millions of chocolate bars to ensure that his daughter will get one of the precious “golden tickets” so that he is spared the screams: “Where’s my golden ticket? I want my golden ticket!” What is at stake then is obviously more than mere caprice: it is happiness and desire. As he himself points out: “Well, gentlemen, I just hate it to see my little girl feeling unhappy like that - I vowed I will keep up the search until I could give her what she wanted!” Eventually the ticket is found and presented to the girl. Here we encounter the moment of the revealing twist that encapsulates the central paradox of consumption: she looks at it for a couple of seconds with joy painted all over her face, and then turns to her father exclaiming the following words: “Daddy, I want another pony!”¹⁰ Hirschman is absolutely correct when he concludes that the world we are trying to understand, the world we live in, “*is one in which men think they want one thing and then upon getting it, find out to their dismay that they don’t want it nearly as much as they thought or don’t want it all and that something else, of which they were hardly aware, is what they really want*” (21). Spinoza and Immanuel Kant already knew this much. For

10. Exactly because the enjoyment experienced is never the enjoyment promised and expected - and thus a certain lack is bound to be re-inscribed - many brands have vowed to compensate for this lack in advance. Hence the preoccupation with products like the Kinder egg - a chocolate product that everybody buys for the non-chocolate gift found inside - and offers like the following: “Buy this toothpaste and get a third extra for free” or “Look on the inside of the metal cover and you may find that you are the winner of one of our prizes, from another free coke to a brand-new car” (Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf* 146).

the former, desires were “often opposed one to the other as the man is drawn in different directions and knows not whither to turn” (126), while the latter, in one of his letters, articulates the following view on desire: “Give a man everything he desires and yet at this very moment he will feel that this *everything* is not *everything*” (qtd. in Hirschman 11).¹¹ In our age, this metonymic status of human desire so essential to consumerism is acknowledged by authors as diverse as Richard Sennett¹² and Guy Debord.¹³

Yet, the symbolic conditioning of desire - the foundation of the culturalist paradigm - cannot adequately function without a real support. Albeit partial and not identical to the *jouissance* expected, there is nevertheless a certain enjoyment entailed in *consuming a commodity* and also in *consuming an advertisement*. Without the unique bodily satisfaction - the bizarre feeling of irritation in the mouth and throat effected by the fizzy cold liquid - of drinking a Coke - and I speak here as a Coke connoisseur - the Coke fantasy would not be able to sustain itself. From a study of brand failures it becomes obvious that both the fantasmatic representations attached to a brand and the real (the bodily enjoyment-value) of the product are of paramount importance. When, in 1985, and on the basis of hundreds of thousands of blind taste tests, Coca-Cola decided to withdraw its original product and replace it with a new formula with a new name (New Coke), the result was disastrous (Haig 12). This was obviously not a matter for “objective” tasting; the original formula had been invested (both at the symbolic, the imaginary and the real level) with a value that was impossible to displace. This is the revealing way in which industry executives accepted their blunder:

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11. It is fair to conclude, then, that while we can reach a formal understanding of the logic of desire, particular desires are imperfectly understood even by those who hold them (Qualter 90). This is what explains the ultimate failure of most new products advertised. 86% of the 85,000 new products advertised in the US in the 1980s did not survive beyond 1990, while in 1994 90% of the 22,000 products advertised failed (Fowles 19, 164). Of course this does not affect the cumulative economic, cultural and political effect of advertising discourse and consumerism as a whole.
 12. Consider, for example, Sennett’s observation that “our desire for a dress may be ardent, but a few days after we buy and wear it, the garment arouses us less. Here the imagination is strongest in anticipation, grows weaker through use” (138).
 13. Debord states: “Each and every product is supposed to offer a dramatic shortcut to the long-awaited promised land of total consumption. As such it is ceremoniously presented as the unique and ultimate product ... But even this spectacular prestige evaporates into vulgarity as soon as the object is taken home by a consumer - and hence by all other consumers too” (45). Now, its inadequacy is revealed: “For by this time another product will have been assigned to supply the system with its justification” (45).

The simple fact is that all the time and money and skill poured into consumer research on the new Coca-Cola could not measure or reveal the deep and abiding emotional attachment to original Coca-Cola felt by so many people. The passion for original Coca-Cola - and that is the word for it, passion - was something that caught us by surprise. It is a wonderful American mystery, a lovely American enigma, and you cannot measure it any more than you can measure love, pride or patriotism. (Keough qtd. in Haig 12-13).

Such attachments have very precise fantasmatic and real conditions of possibility. When these are threatened - try selling "New Coke" or drinking warm Coke, for example - the mystique evaporates.¹⁴ Similarly, ads themselves can be enjoyable; for example, they are often very funny, visceral, ambiguously obscene, and subversively entertaining. They often function as vehicles of the enjoyment in meaning Lacan calls *jouis-sens* (*Séminaire XVII*). Simply put, advertisements are not only determinants of consumption, but also "objects of consumption" (Baudrillard, *System of Objects* 189) - moreover, objects that can be enjoyed *gratis* (187). The symbolic aspect of motivation, identification and desire cannot function without a fantasy support and this in its turn - the imaginary promise entailed in fantasy - cannot sustain itself without a real support in the (partial) *jouissance* of the body.

Consumerism, however, also reveals the enjoyment entailed in desiring itself, an enjoyment of desiring and buying, as distinct from the enjoyment of the object of purchase or from the enjoyment entailed in consuming advertisements. Already in 1937 a Chevrolet public relations film emphasized "the pleasure of buying" in itself along with "the enjoyment of all the things that paychecks can buy" (Cohen 20). It is here that the symbolic, intersubjective conditioning of desire meets the problematic of enjoyment in the most unequivocal way. The partial enjoyment supporting fantasies of consumption is an enjoyment procured not only by consuming commodities and advertisements, but also by desiring itself. The desire implicit here is not only a desire for objects, but *a desire for desiring*: desiring itself functions as an *objet petit a*, as a cause of desire, and a source of (partial) *jouissance*. This Lacanian insight was already captured in Kojève's reading of Hegel. According to Kojève, "Human Desire must be directed toward another Desire" (5):

14. Another example worth noting is the failure of Kellogg's *Cereal Mates* due to the terrible taste of warm milk with which they were usually consumed (Haig 34).

anthropogenetic Desire is different from animal Desire . . . in that it is directed, not toward a real, “positive,” given object, but toward another Desire . . . Desire directed toward a natural object is human only to the extent that it is “mediated” by the Desire of another directed toward the same object: it is human to desire what others desire, because they desire it. Thus, an object perfectly useless from the biological point of view (such as a medal or the enemy’s flag) can be desired because it is the object of other desires. Such a Desire can only be a human Desire, and human reality, as distinguished from animal reality, is created only by action that satisfies such Desires; human history is the history of desired Desires. (6)¹⁵

We can see now how private acts of consumption are inextricably linked to an inter-subjective conditioning which marks fantasy, desire and enjoyment. The important by-product of all the processes and mechanisms described up to now is a specific *structuration* of desire. It is this particular *economy of desire* articulated around the advertised product and desiring itself *qua objets petit a* and supported by experiences of partial *jouissance*, that guarantees, through its cumulative metonymic effect and the fixations it creates, the reproduction of the capitalist market within a distinct “promotional culture.”¹⁶ In other words, the hegemony of the capitalist market depends on the hegemony of this particular economy of desire, on the hegemony of this particular *administration of enjoyment*. The complex multi-directional relationships between all these moments demand all our attention so this is where my argumentation will focus in the last section of this essay.

Consumption, Enjoyment and the Social Order

Although the Lacanian problematic of enjoyment is not compatible with the classical leftist critique of advertising, it does permit a new articulation of the problematic of market economy and a new understanding of what supports the institution of the social order in late capitalism. What we see emerging here is a variety of relations of *overdetermination*. I take my lead in this respect from the work of Jean-Joseph Goux who, in *Sym-*

15. As Bauman has recently put it, “solely the desiring is desirable - hardly ever its satisfaction” (88). Žižek has also highlighted this manipulation of “desire to desire” by capitalism (*Parallax View* 61).

16. This term is introduced by Wernick.

bolic Economies (1990), highlights the structural homology (or equivalence) between the way the monetary system is structured and the functioning of the phallus, and from Alain Grosrichard, who has especially stressed such (over)determinations. For Grosrichard, for example, surplus value goes hand in hand with surplus enjoyment. He goes back to this Lacanian insight in order to show that these are two sides to the economy (“subjective” and “objective,” individual and collective) which “serve mutually to mask one another as circumstances demand” (138). This double is what one also finds at work in the functioning of advertising. Advertising fantasy supports capitalism and *vice versa*. Consumerism registers the dialectics of desire and enjoyment marking human society, but this registering entails a domestication of desire, a particular channelling of enjoyment:

As soon as the intensity of desire . . . has become the subjective law that standardizes values, the libido becomes the silent hostage of the political economy and has no choice but to be manipulated by it. If market value is simply the effect of the libido, conversely the libido is reduced to a mere cause in the marketplace, and this is the (increasingly well-executed) design of the capitalist market economy in its political-economization of social life in general. (Goux 202)

Here, however, desire and enjoyment also emerge as political factors. In fact, it is Lacan himself who, in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, connects an “economic” analysis of the good(s) with power relations: “The good is at the level where a subject may have it at his disposal. The domain of the good is the birth of power . . . To exercise control over one’s goods, as everyone knows, entails a certain disorder, that reveals its true nature, i.e. to exercise control over one’s goods is to have the right to deprive others from them” (*Seminar VII* 229). In fact, Lacan even points to the political dimension of what governs consumerism and advertising, namely the metonymy of desire: “The morality of power, of the service of goods is as follows: ‘As far as desires are concerned come back later, Make them wait’” (315).

In other words, as Mladen Dolar argues in his introduction to Grosrichard’s work, any administration of enjoyment “demands and presupposes a certain social organization, a hierarchy, which is in turn supported only by the belief in the supposed supreme enjoyment at the centre” (xvii). Thus we have a tripartite nexus connecting *economy* (capitalist market economy), inter-subjective *desire* (a particular *socio-cultural* administration of desire), and *power* (a particular power regime) - a nexus reminiscent of Lacan’s Bor-

romean knot.¹⁷ And what about consumerism and advertising? Together they constitute the *symptomatic* element which holds together the three rings (economy, desire, power), the element - related to enjoyment - which knots together our present economic, cultural and political structures.

Recent Lacanian theorizations of consumer society have highlighted these political implications of consumerism, and especially its central role in instituting and reproducing the social order in late capitalism. Todd McGowan's recent book *The End of Dissatisfaction?* deserves much praise in this respect. McGowan starts by registering the enjoyment explosion surrounding us in consumer society and develops the hypothesis that it marks a significant shift in the structure of the social bond, in social organization (1). In particular, he speaks of a passage from a *society of prohibition* into a *society of commanded enjoyment* (2). While more traditional forms of social organization "required subjects to renounce their private enjoyment in the name of social duty, today the only duty seems to consist in enjoying oneself as much as possible" (2). This is the call that is addressed to us from all sides: the media, advertisements, even our own friends. Societies of prohibition were founded on an idealization of sacrifice, of sacrificing enjoyment for the sake of social duty; in our societies of commanded enjoyment "the private enjoyment that threatened the stability of the society of prohibition becomes a stabilizing force and even acquires the status of a duty" (3).

This emerging society of commanded enjoyment is not concomitant with capitalism in general; it characterizes, in particular, late capitalism. In its initial phases, with its reliance on "work ethic" and Max Weber's delayed gratification (Sennett 31), "capitalism sustained and necessitated its own form of prohibition" (McGowan 31). Simply put, early capitalism "thwarted enjoyment to the same extent that [many] traditional societies did" (31). Indeed, the classical bourgeois attitude - and bourgeois political economy - was initially based on "postponement, the deferral of jouissances, patient retention with a view to the supplementary jouissance that is calculated. Accumulate in order to accumulate, produce in order to produce" (Goux 203-4). It is the emergence of mass production and a consumer culture that signifies the beginning of "the turn to the command to enjoy," but it is only

17. The Borromean knot is a topological structure involving three rings linked in such a way that when one of them is cut the other two are automatically released. Lacan uses this knot or chain to present the way the three registers of the real, the symbolic and the imaginary are linked together. This structure was included in the coat of arms of the Borromeo family whence it gets its name.

with late capitalist globalization that the transformation is completed (McGowan 33). In *The System of Objects*, Baudrillard had also described this shift from an ascetic model of ethics organized around sacrifice to a new morality of enjoyment: “the status of a whole civilization changes along with the way in which its everyday objects make themselves present and the way in which they are enjoyed . . . The ascetic mode of accumulation, rooted in forethought, in sacrifice . . . was the foundation of a whole civilization of thrift which enjoyed its own heroic period” (172).

In societies of commanded enjoyment duty makes sense predominantly as a duty to enjoy: “duty is transformed into a duty to enjoy, which is precisely the commandment of the superego” (McGowan 34). The seemingly innocent and benevolent call to “enjoy!” - as in “Enjoy Coca-Cola!” - embodies the violent dimension of an irresistible commandment. Lacan was perhaps the first to perceive the importance of this paradoxical hybrid when he linked the command “enjoy!” with the superego: “The superego is the imperative of *jouissance* - Enjoy!” (*Seminar XX* 3). He was the first to detect in this innocent call the unmistakable mark of power and authority. Thus Lacan is offering a revealing insight into what has been described as the “consuming paradox”: while consumerism seems to broaden our opportunities, choices and experiences as individuals, it also directs us towards predetermined channels of behavior and thus it “is ultimately as constraining as it is enabling” (Miles 147). The desire stimulated - and *imposed* - by advertising discourse is, in this sense, the desire of the Other *par excellence*. Already in 1968, Baudrillard had captured the moral dynamics of an “obligation to buy,” and recent consumption research is becoming increasingly more alert to this *forced choice* of consumerism: “It is now something of a duty to explore personal identity through consumption” (Daunton and Hilton 31).¹⁸ In late capitalist consumer society this is the interpellating command that constructs us as social subjects: thus, apart from products and advertising fantasies, what is also manufactured is consumers (Fine 168). It is here that “the triumph of advertising” is located, as Adorno and Horkheimer already knew: “consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them” (167).¹⁹

18. Lodziak also cites Anthony Giddens’s observation that “in conditions of high modernity, we all not only follow lifestyles, but in an important sense are forced to do so - we have no choice but to choose” (Giddens qtd. in Lodziak 66). He concludes that “we are compelled to consume,” although he means that in a more structural sense and links it to the dependence on consumption through resourcing (income) and constraining autonomy through under-resourcing of time and energy (Lodziak 89).

19. It is important to emphasize, however, that to accept the enjoyment command, to

Let me make clear, however, that what we encounter here, albeit an important moral shift, is not some kind of radical historical break of cosmological proportions. From a psychoanalytic point of view, the administration of enjoyment and the structuration of desire are always implicated in the institution of the social bond. Every society has to come to terms with the impossibility of attaining *jouissance* as fullness; it is only the fantasies produced and circulated to mask or at least domesticate this trauma that can vary, and in fact do vary immensely. Prohibition and commanded enjoyment are two such distinct strategies designed to institute the social bond and legitimize authority and power in different ways. Nevertheless, in both cases, certain things remain unchanged. What remains the same is, first of all, the impossibility of realizing the fantasy: “The fundamental thing to recognize about the society of enjoyment is that in it the pursuit of enjoyment has misfired: the society of enjoyment has not provided the enjoyment that it promises” (McGowan 7). We have seen throughout this essay how dissatisfaction and lack remain firmly inscribed within the dialectics of late capitalist consumerism. But if this is the case, then the command to enjoy is only revealed as “a more nuanced form of prohibition”; it continues - with other means - the traditional function of symbolic Law and power (39).²⁰ This was something also observed by Baudrillard. In our consumer societies, authority and symbolic power are as operative as in “societies of prohibition”: “enforced happiness and enjoyment” are the equivalent of the traditional imperatives to work and produce (*Consumer Society* 80). Indeed, McGowan

obey the new morality, was not an automatic process, especially for subjects socialized within societies of prohibition. Advertisers themselves became aware of this problem in the 1950s and 1960s:

The problem confronting us now is how to allow the average American to feel moral even when he is flirting, even when he is spending money, even when he is buying a second or third car. One of the most difficult tasks created by our current affluence is sanctioning and justifying people’s enjoyment of it, convincing them that to take pleasure in their lives is moral and not immoral. (Dichter qtd. in Baudrillard, *System of Objects* 202)

20. In *The Parallax View*, Žižek associates the society of prohibition with desire and the permissive society of enjoyment with demand. Even in this case, however, the difference between the two modes is not radical and a similar “continuity in discontinuity” can be observed to the extent that both “desire and demand rely on the Other” (296). Moreover, one should not forget that the gesture of renouncing enjoyment, within a society of prohibition, can also “generate a surplus-enjoyment of its own” and thus, “the superego injunction to enjoy is immanently intertwined with the logic of sacrifice: the two form a vicious cycle, each extreme supporting the other” (381).

uses the word “obedience” to refer to our attachment to the enjoyment commandment. The command to enjoy is nothing but an advanced, much more nuanced - and much more difficult to resist - form of power. It is more effective than the traditional model not because it is less constraining or less binding but because its violent exclusionary aspect is masked by its vow to enhance enjoyment, by its productive, enabling *facade*: it does not oppose and prohibit but openly attempts to embrace and appropriate *le sujet de la jouissance*.²¹ However, in opposition to what McGowan seems to imply, recognizing the extent of our “obedience” to this enjoyment commandment cannot be enough to “find a way out of this obedience” (194). Not only is this novel articulation of power and enjoyment hard to recognize and to thematize; it is even harder to de-legitimize in practice, to dis-invest consumption acts and dis-identify with consumerism. However, without such a dis-investment and the cultivation of alternative (ethical) administrations of *jouissance*, no real change can be effected. These two interrelated tasks comprise the very core of our ethico-political predicament in late modernity.

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21. Foucault's discussion of the passage from a negative to a positive, productive, conceptualization of power is of much relevance at this point. On the relation between Foucault and Lacan with regards to the conceptualization of power, see Newman's "Interrogating the Master" and "New Reflections on the Theory of Power," and Stavrakakis.

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