

The discourse of hysteria as the logic of mass consumption

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Abstract The dynamics of mass consumption – from the 19th century, when its early developments took place, to the 1960s, when the transition to post-Fordist flexible consumption set in – articulate economic, social, and cultural factors. This article describes the mechanisms of mass consumption in terms of the algorithm of the discourse of hysteria, which for Lacan represents one of the fundamental kinds of social links. In this scheme, the consumer, driven by his lack, directs a question about his own desire to the advertiser, to the models used to seduce him, and to the targets that he, in turn, is encouraged to seduce. This interpellation results in a knowledge that attempts to deal with the consumer's desire and projects itself on the universe of merchandise. Such a process simultaneously generates partial enjoyment and dissatisfaction, and both motivate it to repeat itself indefinitely.

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Contextualizing Mass Consumption

Mass consumption in advanced countries is a complex phenomenon that has evolved along various fronts from its early developments in the 19th century to its transition to post-Fordist flexible consumption around 1970. Hand in hand with mass consumption, the importance of commodity culture increased dramatically during this time. A new relationship arose with the world of goods: insofar as consumption began to vie with production as a paradigm of social reproduction, people were led to see themselves as consumers. A decisive intervening role was also played by the mass media. Looking back, one can identify the consolidation of a “consumers’ republic”

as “an economy, culture, and politics built around the promises of mass consumption” (Cohen, 2004, p. 7).

In the second half of the 19th century, the flourishing of a consumer culture transformed the urban landscape and excited the collective imagination by means of posters, shop windows, arcades, international trade fairs, and department stores. In his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx and Engels (1961) observed that “shops huddle together in the busiest streets of London, displaying in their showcases all the riches of the world, Indian shawls, American revolvers, Chinese porcelain, Parisian corsets, Russian furs and tropical spices” (p. 69). It was also under the aegis of this rising consumer culture that Baudelaire discerned the signs of modernity in the Paris of the Second Empire. As Benjamin (1991) remarks, the very energy of the masses strolling through the streets of the French metropolis seemed to spur consumption.

Commodities draw the same effect from the crowd that surges around and intoxicates them. The concentration of customers, which as a matter of fact constitutes the market, which in turn makes the commodity a commodity, enhances its charm to the average buyer. (p. 559)

Nevertheless, it is only since the late 19th century that mass consumption actually began to take shape, notably in the United States. Due to the concentration of population in cities, households became less self-sufficient and came to rely further on the marketplace. On the other hand, urbanization, allied to the spread of transportation and communication networks, induced the formation of increasingly extensive markets. Gigantic corporations, capable of coordinated action in these markets, were constituted. The identity of products was standardized through design, packaging, and brands. Advertising agencies were set up and pushed vigorously for the use of commercials. The rationalization of production – based on component standardization, task optimization (Frederick Taylor’s scientific management), and automation (Henry Ford’s assembly line) – enabled bulk manufacturing of items at a reduced cost, contributing to the way the production of consumer goods gained ground over that of capital goods.

In economic terms, the increment in productivity resulting from this rationalization required an increment in consumption: it would have been pointless to produce more goods if the additional output were not sold. Mass production and mass consumption came to be seen as two sides of the same coin: for businessmen, the challenge was “to furnish the organized mass sales required for the mass production” (Williams, 1920, p. 317). Along these lines, Ford (1922) foresaw a society in which “we become buyers and sellers alike, producers and consumers alike” (p. 244). In the wake of the 1929 crash, chiefly



brought about by a crisis of overproduction (or, from a symmetrical viewpoint, of underconsumption), concern about the congruence between the spheres of production and consumption was even more pressing. A propaganda film commissioned by General Motors in 1937, *From Dawn to Sunset*, depicts repeated images of scores of male blue-collar and white-collar workers receiving their paychecks, interspersed with images of these workers, and particularly their wives, flocking to local stores throughout the United States to purchase all kinds of goods. In the closing sequences, the narrator proclaims triumphantly: “The pleasure of buying, the spreading of money, and the enjoyment of all the things that paychecks can buy are making happy all the thousands of families.” In the context of Fordist regulation (Aglietta, 2001) and Keynesian macroeconomic policy, which reached their heyday in the two and a half decades following World War II, the escalation of wages and the expansion of labor and social rights ensured a surge in purchasing power and a boost in demand, to which the spread of consumer credit also contributed. Added to this, advertising thrived in parallel with the vehicles of mass communication and refined its strategies.

To explore, at a broadly theoretical level, the intersection of the psychic and social domains at play here, I will resort to Lacan’s concept of the discourse of hysteria. The idea (which, to the best of my knowledge, has not yet been explored) is to show that the scheme of this discourse provides the best model to understand, from a Lacanian viewpoint, the mechanism of consumer society up to the 1960s, when the Fordist paradigm still prevailed. Furnishing a blueprint for the application of psychoanalytical concepts to mass consumption, the scheme is precise down to mass consumption’s different elements and their interaction: the consumer himself; his desire; the advertiser and the personalities used to promote consumption; knowledge about the consumer and fantasies around the product; the enjoyment and the dissatisfaction that keep the mechanism working. The scheme also has some implications that extend beyond the scope of this article. If we associate the world of consumption to the discourse of hysteria and other aspects of the process of modernization to the discourse of the university, as I suggest in the next section, we may conceive modernity as a balance between these two sides. Another possibility is to explain the changes that have taken place in recent decades in the realm of consumption, which I outline broadly at the end, in terms of a change of discourse. Additionally, the application of the discourse of hysteria to consumption may illustrate how this discourse itself actually works. Hopefully, this approach will be useful both to Lacanian scholars interested in the subject of consumption and to researchers on consumption interested in a psychoanalytical perspective.

The Modern Lacking Subject as Consumer

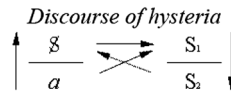


Figure 1

In the algorithm of the discourse of hysteria (Figure 1), the dominant position is occupied by the divided subject (\$). This is quite appropriate, as the hysteric is the paradigmatic barred subject, shrouded in doubt and questioning. In the classic form of hysteria, the so-called hysteria of conversion, the subject bears the scars of the signifier on her own body by way of symptoms. Insofar as she acts as a puzzle to be deciphered, an inquiry which demands an answer, the hysteric resembles a walking question mark: “At the level of the discourse of the hysteric, it is clear that we see this dominant appear in the form of the symptom. The discourse of the hysteric is situated and ordered around the symptom” (Lacan, 1991, p. 48). The frustrating uncertainties for the hysteric are expressed by the questions “What do I want?” and “Who am I?” As someone in quest of fulfillment, she pursues her desire and her identity.

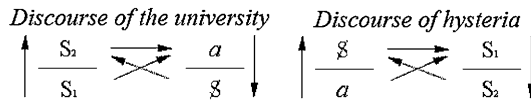


Figure 2

In the Lacanian matrix, the discourse of the university is the exact opposite (and simultaneously the complement) of the discourse of hysteria. Thus, the subject engendered by the former evolves into the agent of the latter. In Figure 2, on the left hand side, the algorithm of the discourse of the university can be linked to impersonal and bureaucratic frameworks, where power (S₁) is not exercised straightforwardly, but disguised by dint of knowledge (S₂). On the right hand side, the same algorithm announces the production of a subject without roots (\$), devoid of what would singularize him (a). This is the case, in modern societies, for the proletarian deprived of surplus value; the citizen stripped of his empirical determinations (race, sex, creed, etc.) and transformed into the abstract “man” of declarations of rights; the anonymous inhabitant of the metropolis; the one who is subjugated to disciplinary institutions. We can thus state that the process of modernization brings about a deficit, with which consumption sets out to cope.

In the scheme I propose, the same modern empty subject produced by the discourse of the university reappears in the dominant place of the discourse of



hysteria in the role of a consumer – a role that this subject, seeking models of what to want and what to be, is admirably able to perform. This obviously does not mean that the consumer is a hysterical subject; such a connection is of a purely structural homology.

In the period I have in mind – roughly from the end of the 19th century to the transition marked by the 1960s – the lack of satisfaction in the daily grind was a pivotal factor that impelled people to purchase goods. Those who came from agricultural backgrounds (including waves of immigrants, as in the case of the United States) experienced industrial labor as monotonous, compulsory, and ungratifying. If the strategy of condensation of work implied a “closer filling up of the pores of the working day” (Marx and Engels, 1962, p. 432), scientific management and the assembly line further intensified routine factory tasks, putting even more pressure on workers. In any event, as far back as the 19th century, activists advocating higher wages argued that the rank and file would accept industrial discipline as something inevitable and pursue their rewards through consumption instead of production (Horowitz, 1992, pp. 46–47). This was the rationale behind Ford’s bold move, in 1914, to implement the five-dollar-a-day minimum wage, which more than doubled the earnings of most of his employees. The income hike compensated for harsh labor, reducing absenteeism and turnover rates, while simultaneously fostering the development of the consumer goods market, including the automobiles manufactured by the company itself. The instrument of collective bargaining, encouraged by legislation enacted under the Roosevelt administration, paved the way for the generalization of this formula: the working conditions imposed by business were accepted by trade unions in exchange for better wages and improved purchasing power. Changes in clerical jobs followed a similar pattern. And, even for individual entrepreneurs, the room for maneuver, aligned to the possibility of accomplishing the ideal of the “self-made man,” was curbed by the “visible hand” – as the witticism of Alfred Chandler (1977) put it – of the corporate model of organization.

Consumption offered the possibility of counteracting some of the limitations of the work realm. Durkheim (1893) argued that “it is because this superactivity of general life fatigues and weakens our nervous system that it needs reparations proportionate to its expenditures, that is to say, more varied and complex satisfaction” (pp. 376–77). Simon Patten (1909), one of the first economists to apprehend the shift from an economy of scarcity to an economy of abundance, contended that “we must make of our streets an institution that shall express, direct, and gratify men’s thwarted necessities for vital excitement” (p. 45). Psychoanalysis also carried some weight in this discussion. Granville Stanley Hall (1920), an early follower of Freud who, as president of Clark University, invited him to deliver a lecture series in 1909 (the single visit Freud made to the United States), asserted that “everyone, especially those who lead the drab life of the modern toiler, needs and craves an occasional ‘good time’” (p. 208). In a



more concrete manner, advertising, while promoting consumption, concealed the source of goods and the drudgery they involve. Eventually a new lifestyle developed that counterbalanced the self-denial characteristic of the Protestant ethic. According to Bell (1978), the same subject was then expected, paradoxically, to adopt an ascetic attitude during his daily work routine and a hedonistic attitude in his free time (pp. 71–72).

In the same vein, consumption dealt with the identity deficit characteristic of modern life. For Simmel (1903), “the mental attitude of metropolitans toward one another [may be] designate[d], from a formal point of view, as a reserve” (p. 195). Thus, it started to become the case that people were often unable to recognize by sight even their longtime neighbors when they came across them. To the extent that identity depends on the feedback afforded by others, the devaluation involved “in the end unavoidably drag[ged] one’s own personality down into a feeling of the same worthlessness” (p. 195). This phenomenon was captured adroitly by American realist author William Dean Howells (1889), born in a very small town in Ohio, who wrote in his novel *A Hazard of New Fortunes* that “there seems to be some solvent in New York life that reduces all men to a common level, that touches everybody with its potent magic and brings to the surface the deeply underlying nobody” (p. 322). Whereas in small communities identity tends to be stable, since the role of an individual hardly changes, in such modern societies identity was up for grabs as the site of a strenuous and continuous effort of construction. By means of consumer goods, however, the subject had access to tokens that helped him in this effort, as Sinclair Lewis (1922) identified in *Babbitt*:

The large national advertisers fix the surface of his life, fix what he believed to be his individuality. These standard advertised wares – toothpastes, socks, tires, cameras, instantaneous hot-water heaters – were his symbols and proofs of excellence; at first the signs, then the substitutes, for joy and passion and wisdom. (p. 95)

As long as these references are shared, envy becomes a customary way to relate to others through consumption. This blueprint was grasped by an English idiom, “keeping up with the Joneses,” which came from a comic strip concocted by cartoonist Arthur R. “Pop” Momand and published in American newspapers for decades, in which the protagonists strive to match the consumer yardsticks of a neighboring family called Jones. The nexus with others was also marked by anxiety, strategically stressed by advertising. This was the feeling, for instance, which plagued an individual before prospective mates about his or her halitosis; a housewife, before guests, about the cleanliness of her home; a clerk, before colleagues in the office, about the whiteness of his shirt. Paraphrasing Sartre, Lears (1983) claims that, “in the new consumer culture, hell was – truly – other

people” (p. 25). Envy and anxiety not only touch upon desire, but point to the leverage of the Other in desire.

Desire as What Drives the Consumer

From an economic standpoint, the consumer tends to be perceived as a rational agent whose choices are guided by maximization criteria. On this ground, each consumer product would have an objectively measurable utility, inasmuch as it is able to meet the consumer’s needs, and comparisons between products would comply with utility parameters. Throughout the 20th century, intellectuals of disparate backgrounds have used this kind of reasoning to try to explain the undertaking of advertising, alleging that it creates additional and somehow less legitimate needs in the consumer. In this context, Keynes (1963) recommended grouping human needs into two classes:

Those needs which are absolute in the sense that we feel them whatever the situation of our fellow human beings may be, and those which are relative in the sense that we feel them only if their satisfaction lifts us above, makes us feel superior to, our fellows. (p. 365)

In *The Affluent Society*, Galbraith (1970) declared:

The fact that wants can be synthesized by advertising, catalyzed by salesmanship, and shaped by the discreet manipulations of the persuaders shows that they are not very urgent. A man who is hungry need never be told of his need for food. (p. 152)

Marcuse (2002) distinguishes between true and false needs and upholds that “most of the prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate, belong to this category of false needs” (p. 7). The idea also surfaces in popular culture. In the movie *North by Northwest* (Hitchcock, 1959), the character of Eva Marie Saint tells the advertiser played by Cary Grant: “You can probably make them do anything for you: sell people things they don’t need; make women who don’t know you fall in love with you.”

This “conventional wisdom” (to borrow Galbraith’s catchphrase), with its hierarchy of values between natural and artificial needs, is in itself spurious, “blind to the limits of rationality and to the ambiguous structure of human desire,” as Stavrakakis (2006, p. 86) remarks. Indeed, in a consumer society, it is not unusual for a consumer to prefer the acquisition of presumably superfluous goods over food. The very act of eating, in fact, may be related to serious disorders such as anorexia and bulimia. To overcome the constraints of

conventional wisdom and shed light on the mechanisms effectively in place in consumption, a psychoanalytical approach is markedly appropriate.

For Lacan (1975a), the passage from nature to culture does not amount to the simple addition of a layer of culture on top of a layer of nature: “The symbolic system is not like a piece of clothing which sticks on to things, it is not without effects on them and on human life” (p. 291). Our access to the symbolic entails a distortion of nature, contravening the idea of pure need as anchored in biology. The needs of the newborn, which may only be met by the Other, are articulated, in an incipient form of language, as a demand addressed to the Other. (In Lacan, the Other with a capital O stands for the symbolic order as well as for its proxies.) But the baby’s demand for breast milk is soon intermingled with a demand for love; there is inevitably “a deviation of man’s needs due to the fact that he speaks” (p. 291). Because this demand for love can never be fully satisfied, when the need is articulated in demand a surplus always remains: “What is thus alienated in needs constitutes an *Urverdrängung* [primal repression], as it cannot, by hypothesis, be articulated in demand, but appears in an offshoot which is what presents itself in man as desire (*das Begehren*)” (Lacan, 1966, p. 690). That is, “desire begins to take shape in the margin in which demand rips away from need” (p. 814).

Emerging in relation to the Other, desire is first and foremost the desire to be the object of desire of the Other. For the baby, the benchmark is the mother’s desire. His illusion is to complete her: he wants to know what the mother wants, to be the meaning of her desire, to incarnate the object of her desire. “The subject identifies himself in the mirror to what is the object of desire of the mother” (Lacan, 1998, p. 192). Here, Lacan goes back to the Hegelian dialectic of master and slave, read through Kojève. The desire for an object is human in that it is mediated by the desire of the Other, that is, when one wants something that is desired by the Other, or specifically because it is desired by the Other. “Thus, an object perfectly useless from the biological point of view (such as a medal, or the enemy’s flag) may be desired because it is the object of other desires” (Kojève, 1979, p. 13). The desire for recognition by others is therefore supported by traces of identification with them. We can also say that desire is the desire of the Other in the sense of desire for the Other: in French, “*désir de la mère*,” for example, admits a double reading, conveying the desire of the child for the mother as much as the desire of the mother herself.

The gap that opens in the articulation of need and demand reflects the impact of language, on which, therefore, desire depends to come forth: “It is only once it is formulated, named before the other, that desire, whatever it is, is recognized in the full sense of the term” (Lacan, 1975a, p. 207). In other words, desire is the desire of the Other because it is guided by the symbolic order: “Speech is this millwheel whereby human desire is ceaselessly mediated by reentering the language system” (p. 203). However, desire cannot be fully articulated through language, since there is a “mismatch of desire to speak” (Lacan, 1966, p. 641).



For Lacan (1977–1978), alluding to Paul Henry’s *Le Mauvais Outil*, “the language is certainly imperfect,” is a “bad instrument”. When we talk, there inevitably ensues a discrepancy between signifier and signified, so that in the end we never say exactly what we intend. Because it cannot be fully articulated through language, moreover, desire has no fixed object, being always a “desire for something else” (Lacan, 1966, p. 518). Unlike need, desire cannot be satisfied. The object *a*, which represents, according to the testimony of Lacan (1973–1974), his most original contribution to psychoanalysis, is not exactly the object of desire, but the object cause of desire, associated with lack.

What is stamped on the discourse of hysteria is not only the condition of the human subject, the desiring subject that emerges through the symbolic order, and whose desire is the desire of the Other, but also the object *a* as the lack, the motor behind the subject, the truth of this discourse. The desiring subject is not conflated with the consumer, since desire may manifest itself in several other ways, but the mass consumer is essentially a desiring subject, driven by a lack which is deliberately emphasized by advertising. As such, the consumer had imprecise, variable, multifaceted motivations. Ford (1922) declared that, at first, consumers had no interest in automobiles: “The ‘horseless carriage’ was considered merely a freak notion and many wise people explained with particularity why it could never be more than a toy” (p. 35). In their trade, advertisers ascertain that the consumer does not know what he wants; or, when he does, cannot express it; or, being able to express it, does not do so. Thus, to inquire bluntly about consumer wishes tends to produce unreliable answers, which, strictly followed, could lead to resounding commercial failures. “In very few instances do people really know what they want, even when say they do,” asseverates *Advertising Age* (cited by Packard, 2007, p. 37).

The Master as Advertising and Media

The desire of the hysteric reveals itself in the form of an interpellation, addressed to another, which deals precisely with the truth to which the hysteric has no access: who am I? what do I want? In this process, the hysteric tends to identify with this other and to convert his desire into her own. This was the case of Dora, the famous patient of Freud: “It is through Mr. K. that she desires, but it’s not him that she loves, but Mrs. K” (Lacan, 2001b, p. 429). In other words, her connection with Mrs. K. (Dora’s true focus of interest) was not direct, but presupposed a libidinal rapport with Mr. K., the assumption of his putative desire for Mrs. K. as her own desire: “It is through Mr. K., to the extent that she is Mr. K., she is at the imaginary point which constitutes the personality of Mr. K., that Dora is linked to the character of Mrs. K.” (Lacan, 1994, p. 138). By questioning the one who settles for the position of other of the discourse, the hysteric engages him to provide answers, gives him the power to give meaning

as a master signifier, transforms him into a master (S_1). Understandably, the hysteric tends to put the psychoanalyst in this place too, but he refuses to be fixed there.

In the same way, in order to know about his own desire, the consumer (\$) in the era of mass consumption resorts to advertising (or media in general), that occupies the position of other in the discourse of hysteria. And, as the preceding paragraph shows, this instance – which responded to the demands of the consumer – played the role of a master (S_1). Since the 19th century, shopping has acquired an impersonal aspect: it no longer depends solely on direct exchanges between a buyer and a seller separated by a counter. At first, the department store itself, structured in a manner to guide the consumer through the merchandise, became the main mediating instance, before the mass media assumed this role. As Barthes (1977) points out, “mass culture is a machine for showing desire: here is what must interest you, it says, as if it guessed that men are incapable of finding what to desire by themselves” (p. 163). Thus, in a 1933 promotional pamphlet, *Esquire*’s founding editor Arnold Gingrich (1971) pledged that his magazine would be “one that will answer the question of What to do? What to eat, what to drink, what to wear, how to play” (p. 102). The consumer, Baudrillard explains (1986), could read at any time in advertising “what he is and what he desires” (p. 314), which is exactly what the hysterical subject expects from the master. Actually, what we have here is a two-way movement: looking for an answer, the consumer of the mass consumption era focuses on advertising, which, in turn, actively tries to deal with his desire. The task is not modest: “After all, it takes time, effort and considerable financial outlay to arouse desire, bring it to the required temperature and channel it in the right direction” (Bauman, 2000, p. 75). So, despite the fact that the advertiser ordinarily depicts himself as someone who is at the humble service of the public and merely addresses its call, he ultimately behaves as a master who knows the consumer’s desire and how to manipulate it. If, *pace* Adorno (2003), the spirit insufflated in mass culture is “the voice of his master,” (p. 338), this is even truer in the case of advertising.

People forge their own self-image based on identification with others, since they imagine themselves in the mirror of social interactions, detect themselves in the eyes, gestures, body movements and demeanors of their fellows, or recognize themselves in images manufactured and distributed for consumption (Feldstein, 1996, p. 158). The models to which the consumer adheres also stand in for a master and can assume many forms. It was in the era of mass consumption that idealized figures – actors, singers, celebrities of all ilks – started to become the most prominent *loci* of identification, attracting fans and followers who took inspiration from them, even in their consumer choices and decisions. Capitalizing on their condition, these figures increasingly endorsed products in commercials, licensed their names as trademarks, publicized brands on their outfits (a practice common among sportspersons), and so on. Another



possibility of identification that came increasingly to the fore was to be found in groups that coalesced via shared consumer tastes. Even in social youth movements that evinced dissatisfaction and rebellion against the establishment, like the beatniks of the 1950s or the hippies of the 1960s, identity was assigned in good measure through elements – a particular haircut, clothing style or musical genre – that did not circumvent the tenets of consumer society. Of course, the models emulated by the consumer could also be purely fictional, as was sometimes the case in advertising. The figure that serves as a model, as a rule, is an avatar of the advertiser within the ad, “sit[ting] like a dummy on the lap of the ventriloquist – the advertiser – who speaks through her,” something that is reckoned with explicitly by some ads (Schutzman, 1999, p. 36).

But the game does not end with the figure with whom the consumer identifies. In the circuit of consumption, the desire of the Other unfolds in several instances; the status of S_1 is transitive. Besides being transmitted from the advertiser to the model, it migrates to the targets the consumer is invited to seduce. For, ultimately, advertising teaches what to desire for the sake of being liked by others: the seduction occurs in both directions. The boilerplates through which the consumer tries to seduce his targets typically differ, in a mass consumption society, according to gender. For men, they are in particular assets: what to have in pursuance of seducing the other. For women, they mainly involve appearance: what to be to seduce the other (although it is not difficult to connect “to be” and “to have”: clothes, make-up, etc.). Their appeal, however, is not confined to the sexual orbit, but covers all the areas in which the consumer aims to make an impression. And the models of identification can match the targets to be seduced: the consumer society puts forth the coordinates to follow to gain its own approval. Thus, following the example of advertising, the models of identification it supplies, and the goods it promotes, the consumer himself is offered up as something to be consumed.

The Manufacturing of Fantasy

With her challenge, the hysteric compels the master to render knowledge (S_2): “The hysteric is the divided subject, in other words the unconscious at work, who pushes the master into a corner to produce knowledge” (Lacan, 2001a, p. 436). The hysteric makes the man, a man who does not confine himself to reproduce fixed knowledge, who is driven by the pursuit of knowledge: “What leads to knowledge is (...) the hysteric’s discourse” (Lacan, 1991, p. 23). It is this knowledge that tries to explain the cause of the hysteric’s desire, object a .

In order to respond to the consumer’s demands ($\$$, in the place of agent), those in charge of promoting consumption (S_1 , in the place of other) produce knowledge (S_2 , in the place of production). In consumer society, this knowledge

consists of what Lacan (2001a) called the “means to act on psychism” through “a combined manipulation of images and passions” (p. 120).

The first authors to write about advertising, in the early decades of the 20th century, often emphasized the psychological knowledge that underlay it. At this juncture, the knowledge at issue bore mainly upon experimental psychology. Münsterberg (1912), a pioneer of applied psychology, noted that “the professional advertisement writer today looks into the psychology of suggestion and attention, of association of ideas and apperception” (p. 156). The features used in this phase were not sophisticated:

Psychologically, repetition is one of the most effective methods of driving a thought home. [...] So the constant, persistent and consistent tapping at the mental attention of the possible customer eventually leads to the opening of the door, when the rest is easy. (Lewis, 1908, p. 281)

Thus, it is significant that, in the early 1920s, John B. Watson, a founder of behaviorism, resigned his post at Johns Hopkins University to be hired by the advertising agency J. Walter Thompson, where he rose to vice-president. Empirically, however, the professionals working in advertising perceived that “the genuine power of advertisements comes from the unconscious influence which they exert on the reader’s mind rather than on any conscious mental process set up” (Hollingsworth, 1913, p. 229).

Therefore, it is not surprising that psychoanalysis came to be used to cultivate consumer subjectivity. The pioneer on this path was Edward Bernays, a nephew of Freud born in Vienna and settled since childhood in the United States, where he received the epithet (sometimes also assigned to Ivy Lee) of “father of public relations.” In *Propaganda*, Bernays (1928) writes:

This general principle, that men are very largely actuated by motives which they conceal from themselves, is as true of mass as of individual psychology. It is evident that the successful propagandist must understand the true motives and not be content to accept the reasons which men give for what they do. (p. 52)

This principle guided Bernays’ own actions. One of his most famous works, commissioned by the American Tobacco Company, stimulated smoking addiction among women. With the consultation of A. A. Brill, who introduced psychoanalysis in the United States, Bernays proposed an equivalence between cigarette and penis and based his strategy on the premise that smoking, theretofore practiced only by reputedly vulgar women, should be associated with female emancipation – a way for women to have their own penis. To this end, he prepared an event during the Easter Parade in New York in 1929, in which twenty elegantly dressed models lit cigarettes and flaunted posters

labeling them as “torches of freedom.” Another character worth mentioning is Ernest Dichter, a Viennese psychoanalyst who had a private practice in a building opposite Freud’s in the 1930s. Fleeing the Nazis, he settled down in the USA and went on to give advice to advertising agencies. To probe the unconscious catalysts at the bottom of consumer behavior, Dichter devised what he called “motivational research,” using procedures taken from psychoanalysis, such as the “deep interview,” inspired by free association. Taking credit for several successful ventures, including the “Put a tiger in your tank” campaign for Esso and the Barbie doll concept for Mattel, his name achieved great prominence.

The knowledge reaped through advertising as a battery of signifiers attempted to match what moved the consumer, projecting itself upon the universe of merchandise in the form of a manufactured fantasy. S_2 (in the lower right hand position of the algorithm) cannot in fact reach the object cause of desire (a , in the lower left hand position), but targets the consumer’s fantasy: the Lacanian matheme for fantasy ($\$ \langle \rangle a$) looms, vertically disposed, on the left hand fraction ($\$/a$). This shows that fantasy depends on external input, which comes to the subject through the diagonal arrow connecting S_2 to $\$$. To reach consumers, fantasy includes ingredients like magic, romance or adventure, and makes use of what reinforces the connotation of lack, for being inaccessible, distant or forbidden.

Fantasy is not just a narrative about merchandise, altogether foreign to it, but the development of a whole “commodity aesthetic” (Haug, 1986), a semblance of use value, involving design, packaging, display, etc. (It is this semblance, and not the use value itself, that ultimately triggers the purchase.) Investment in the image was already apparent in the novel *Sister Carrie* (originally published in 1900), where Theodore Dreiser (1917) described the atmosphere of a fairy-tale department store:

Each separate counter was a show place of dazzling interest and attraction. She could not help feeling the claim of each trinket and valuable upon her personally, and yet she did not stop. There was nothing there which she could not have used – nothing which she did not long to own. (p. 24)

The image of goods was synthesized to a considerable degree by the brand, in which the signifier dimension of S_2 is patent. This power of the brand is the theme of another novel, written by H. G. Wells in 1909 and centered on a fictional drink, Tono-Bungay (probably an allusion to Coca-Cola). Upon hearing this name for the first time, the protagonist focuses on it and starts to repeat it: “It roused one’s attention like the sound of distant guns. ‘Tono’ – what’s that? and deep, rich, unhurrying; – ‘Bun-gay!’” (Wells, 1916, p. 145). Devoid of all sense, the signifier can bespeak anything here, serve as a vehicle for

any fantasy. More generally, S_2 , as a battery of signifiers, projects itself over the entire universe of goods. This is the world of “generalized hysteria,” Baudrillard (1986, pp. 107–108) argues: in the same way that organs and body functions decline symptoms, the objects of consumption decline social codes.

There is an essential discrepancy, however, between the clinical use of psychoanalysis and its application to advertising. Psychoanalytic knowledge itself, when put into action, causes the sliding of a quarter turn from the discourse of hysteria to the discourse of the analyst. *Per contra*, advertising knowledge, despite its loans from psychoanalysis, obviously did not have the cure as a goal: it was content to mimic the symptoms of the subject, reproducing the discourse of hysteria in a loop and sustaining the individual consumer in a condition resembling that of a chronic hysteric.

Dissatisfaction, Enjoyment and Repetition

There is no arrow between the lower elements of the algorithm of the discourse of hysteria, which hints at a disjunction ($a//S_2$), as expounded by Lacan (1975b): “That’s not it’ is the very cry by which the enjoyment obtained is distinguished from the enjoyment expected” (p. 101). In the domain of consumption, the disjunction on the lower line indicates that the merchandise, along with the fantasy that envelops it (S_2), does not correspond to what was desired (a). According to Horkheimer and Adorno (2003), “the promise to which the spectacle is actually reduced is illusory; it means that the thing will never be reached, that the diner must be satisfied with reading the menu” (p. 161). This metaphor finds a felicitous illustration in a scene from the movie *Brazil* (Gilliam, 1985), in which customers are served in a restaurant with a plate containing an anodyne dish, to which is juxtaposed an image of the pleasurable delicacy *de facto* ordered. Here, a (which in Lacanese also has the import of a leftover) designates the actual content of the plate, while S_2 refers to its supporting fantasy – both, in contrast to the usual, clearly dissociated. The outcome of this process is a consumer, in the words of Lasch (1979), “perpetually unsatisfied, restless, anxious, and bored” (p. 137).

To be sure, the consumer of the mass consumption era found some enjoyment; dissatisfaction is not to be confused with an absence of enjoyment. In Lacan’s terms (1991), a , in the position of truth of the discourse of hysteria, betokens not only the object cause of desire, but also the surplus enjoyment (“*plus-de-jour*,” a syntagma inspired by Marx’s “*Mehrlust*”), the “nuggets [*lichettes*] of enjoyment” (p. 124). In keeping with a famous formula used by Lacan (1966), if “castration means that enjoyment has to be refused in order to be attained on the inverse scale of the law of desire” (p. 827), surplus enjoyment indicates precisely the bit of enjoyment that is recovered. To a great extent, what we have here is the “illusory enjoyment” provided by the imaginary



(McGowan, 2004, p. 18). Surplus enjoyment was experienced in the act of wishing, in the promise of pleasure, in the fantasy always present in advertising, even if it did not materialize. Sometimes what was consumed was just the spectacle of the product, offered as entertainment in shopping windows or in ads; in kindred cases, there was no need to come into possession of the product to have some enjoyment. Surplus enjoyment was also a component of the shopping experience. In Victorian times, curiously, the term “spending” was used as a synonym for orgasm, anticipating the link between “spending,” in the current sense of paying out for goods, and enjoyment. And surplus enjoyment is still manifested in the limited enjoyment of the purchased object.

When taking the floor in a symposium in Baltimore in 1966, Lacan (1970) alluded pointedly to this bit of enjoyment in consumption, reporting that his attention was caught on the way by the neon inscription “Enjoy Coke!” (p. 194). The peculiar and indefinable flavor of this soft drink points to a core of the real (in the Lacanian sense of a thing beyond the symbolic, a thing that cannot be put into words) that is even more explicit in the slogan “It’s the real thing,” launched in the United States in 1969. Coca-Cola, as Žižek (2000) points out, “functions as the direct embodiment of ‘it’: of the pure surplus of enjoyment over standard satisfactions, of the mysterious and elusive X we are all after in our compulsive consumption of merchandise” (p. 22).

Coupled with limited enjoyment, dissatisfaction ensures the unfaltering reproduction of the act of consumption. The consumer, kept in a state of frustration, yields again and again to the appeal of advertising and its seductive fantasies, reviving the surplus enjoyment (the oblique arrow between a and S_1 indicates the iteration of this appeal outright from a , as both lack and surplus enjoyment). Even the product already consumed but not fully satisfying can be purchased over and over again, as in addiction. But this process often involves the search for something new to offset dissatisfaction, which leads us to the brave dynamic world of planned obsolescence, fashion and innovation.

The importance of enjoyment has increased progressively: along with its role in the reproduction of consumption, it has tended to displace desire as the true motor of consumption.

From the Discourse of Hysteria to the Discourse of Capitalism

In the last few decades, the transition from mass consumption to post-Fordist flexible consumption has gone hand in hand with other changes, which I intend to explore at length in another article. Consumption has been transformed into the key vector of social reproduction (Bauman, 1992, p. 49). The work ethic has been replaced by a different set of values and lifestyles. Instead of repressing enjoyment, society now bolsters it, particularly through the media. We have come to live in a fully-fledged consumer society, an environment defined by

what Lacan (1975b, p. 10) calls the imperative of enjoyment, brought about to a great extent by the diffusion of consumption itself. In this new context, the discourse of hysteria no longer reflects so closely the mechanism of consumption, and Lacan himself seems to relate this mechanism to another discourse – that of capitalism.

At the threshold of this new period, the conventional wisdom about how to advance consumption has come under attack. At the same time that psychoanalysis and its insights into the human mind have been incorporated into mainstream culture, the psychoanalytic techniques those marketers took advantage of were unveiled. Landmarks in this direction are Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* (Packard, 2007), originally published in 1957, and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan, 1963). In the light of more liberal mores, the ordinary premise of manipulating deep repressed affects receded. Advertising availed itself of new strategies in the wake of the so-called “creative revolution” of the 1960s. A complicity was established between advertising and the public, as if they were both on the same level. This was characterized by a change in the subject: although he is in the dominant position in the discourses of both hysteria and capitalism, in the former he demands something from the master signifier, while in the latter he seems to command it.

If, in the period of the making of a consumer society, advertising created a lack and therefore a desire in order to turn people into consumers, in mature consumer society, in which people already define themselves as consumers, the place of lack has been fetishistically pre-empted by a particular class of objects of consumption that define one's style, and desire has given way to enjoyment. Thus, the object *a*, in the discourse of capitalism, represents at the same time that class of objects worshipped by the subject and the enjoyment derived from them. The Lacanian “paradigm of enjoyment,” to use the expression of Miller (1999), has also changed. Instead of surplus enjoyment, it is now the enjoyment of the One that apparently prevails. While the former results from a failed attempt to fulfil a lack defined basically in comparison to others, the latter occurs in the individualistic relationship of the consumer with the commodity, reflecting the decline of social bonds that seems to characterize our times, and is indicated by the discourse of capitalism.

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