

Consumerism as a Myth

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From an interdisciplinary point of view, l' imaginaire feeds into all domains, the consumer society, as John Barth argues in his celebrated *Mythologies* (1957), being no exception. It is a form of thought where the symbol replaces the concept. Myth can be defined as a cultural symbol which facilitates the comprehension of contradictions, tensions and utopias of today's consumerist society.

My article appeals to social sciences, in particular, to cultural studies in order to highlight the effects of different features of postmodernism, such as consumerism, on today's society and fiction. My interdisciplinary approach to this topic will therefore combine information from different disciplines, ranging from sociology and economy, through psychology and philosophy. The interpretation is based on postmodernist philosophy of language and of culture, which guide and frame my personal deductions regarding consumerism. I have directed my scientific research to the advancement of knowledge on consumerism, as the theme of an interdisciplinary approach to a key aspect of both contemporary reality and fiction. My aim is to demonstrate that, if a society has reached the postmodern stage, it will prioritize the consumption of resources in everyday life. In this context, mass media advertising and market dynamics lead us to a constant search for new fashions, new styles, new sensations, and new experiences.

Studying consumerism from an interdisciplinary point of view, we can associate it with a myth, because it represents a way of thinking in which the symbol replaces the concept. A myth can be defined as a cultural icon that facilitates the understanding of contradictions, tensions and utopias of our present consuming society.

An important issue to be dealt with is the current condition of man as an essentially cultural being in the historical process of globalization. This process involves in its whirlwind all economies, policies, armies, religions, cultures, or to put it simply, all contemporary societies. Marian Aiftincă feels that globalization leads to: "a reconstruction of the concept of culture from an axiological perspective, establishing a natural relationship between the two concepts of culture and civilization" (Aiftinca, 389), provided the current understanding of "the role of tradition in promoting intercultural dialogue and cultural development in terms of freedom, democracy and tolerance, of the connection that exists between cultural identity and globalization and of the free diffusion of values to the benefit of the human condition." (Aiftinca, 158).

In general terms, today globalization designates fundamental changes in terms of essential spatial and temporal forms of human activities. The time required to connect different geographic locations has been reduced dramatically, the effect being a sense of the compression of space itself. Changing the temporality of human activities inevitably generated the changing of the spatial or territorial experiences. Long time ago, in the mid nineteenth century, the German immigrant poet Heinrich Heine confessed to a similar experience in the French capital: "space was murdered by the railway train. I can feel how the mountains and forests from all countries are approaching Paris. Even now, I can smell the German linden trees" (Schivelbusch, 34).

Covering a wide range of economical, political and cultural changes, the term globalization definitively entered into the vocabulary of contemporary philosophy.

Mankind has created things which itself addresses periodically sending them down to later generations by sign, gesture, ritual, symbol, orally or in writing. Myth might be called the root of the tree that blossomed into literature. The close connection between myths and literature was seen by Claude Lévi-Strauss "as fundamental patterns of the original" (Lévi-Strauss, 21).

On the contrary, consumerism relies on proliferation of copies without original.

Because of the constant change that consumerism has brought upon society, the individual is confused. He has to adapt to social and cultural pluralism and disunity. Due to these unclear bases, he experiences a sense of fragmentation, feeling lost, a multiple self of conflicting identities, lacking depth. People are never fully satisfied, being permanently in pursuit of happiness in all the wrong places: shopping malls or through the lines of popular literature. Hypermarkets and Commercial Fiction create fake realities, or copies of a prosperous world, or "simulacra" to use Jean Baudrillard's term.

As well as poststructuralists, Baudrillard rejects traditional assumptions about referentiality. As Lyotard puts it, "the metanarratives of the past have collapsed, creating a new theoretical situation in which the concept can no longer pretend to control or grasp its object"¹ (Lyotard: 24). In Baudrillard's terms, "hyperreality" is the new linguistic condition of society, rendering impotent theories that still rely on materialist reductionism or rationalist referentiality. In these respects, Baudrillard's work is important to the reconstitution of critical theory "which appeals to those who would attempt to grasp the strange mixture of fantasy and desire that is unique to late-twentieth century culture" (Poster [1988] 2001: 2).

Since Baudrillard is so important for our research, we will study his position that shifted in the course of his career and his ideas will be presented in a chronological order creating a brief introduction to the trajectory of his thought, with hints to his relation to other currents of French and German intellectual movements.

In his book written in 1968 entitled *The System of Objects*, Baudrillard initiated a comprehensive rethinking of the thesis of consumer society from a neo-Marxist perspective, one that relied on both Freudian and Saussurean themes. He explores the possibility that consumption has become the chief basis of the social order and of its internal classifications. He argues that consumer objects constitute a classification system that codes behaviour and groups. As such, consumer objects must be analysed by the use of linguistic categories rather than those of Marxian or liberal economics, Freudian or behaviourist psychology, anthropological or sociological theories of needs. Consumer objects have their effect in structuring behaviour through a linguistic sign function. Advertising codes work through symbols that differentiate

¹ In his 2003 Thesis submitted to the University of Calicut), Brindha Kumari discusses Gerald Vizenor novels in light of the phenomenon of the postmodern carnival", exhibiting "a carnivalesque irreverence towards all kinds of authoritarian, oppressive and monologic ideologies". It is in this context that he is quoting J.-F. Lyotard's passage in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984: 24).

products among themselves, thereby objects into series. The object carries out its effect when it is consumed by transferring its "meaning" to the individual consumer: "A potentially infinite play of signs is thus instituted, which orders society while providing the individual with an illusory sense of freedom and self-determination. *The System of Objects* went beyond earlier discussions of consumer society, by systematically imposing linguistic categories to reveal the force of the code" (Poster 1988: 2).

In *Consumer Society* written in 1970, Baudrillard provides numerous examples of the encoding of consumer objects in fields like economics and sociology. These disciplines were unable to decode the new mechanism of consumerism with antiquated notions of *homo economicus* (the free individual acting in the marketplace), or, in sociology, with that of individual taste and a determinist concept of society. Writing in the teeth of such theories, Baudrillard engages in a semiological analysis which identifies the nature of consumer objects as a *system of signs* that engender differences among the population. This system of signs cannot become intelligible if each sign is related to a referent in the world, but only through the play of differences among signs. Baudrillard psychoanalyses the identitarian subject of consumer objects comparing the latter to hysterical symptoms; they are best understood, not as a response to some actually felt need, but as a network of floating signifiers stirring desire. The reproduction of the mode of production is no longer dependent on surplus value, but on the whims of consumption.

Baudrillard extends his theory of commodity culture which was hyperbolized in his book *Simulacra and Simulations*, written in 1981. No longer does the code take priority over or even precede the consumer object. The distinctions between object and representation, thing and idea are no longer valid. In their place, Baudrillard fathoms a strange new world constructed out of models or simulacra which have no referent or ground in any "reality" except their own. A simulation is different from a fiction or lie in that it not only presents an absence as a presence, the imaginary as the real, it also undermines any contrast to the real, absorbing the real within itself. Instead of a real economy of commodities that is somehow bypassed by an unreal myriad of advertising images, Baudrillard now discerns only a hyperreality, a world of self-referential signs. He has moved from the TV which never completely erases the commodity it solicits, to the TV newscast which creates the news to be able to narrate them, or the opera whose daily events are both referent and reality for many viewers.

If Baudrillard's argument of hyperreality has a modicum of validity, the position of the New Critics and deconstructionists must be taken seriously. The self-referentiality of language, which they promote against materialists, phenomenologists, realists and historicists must be seen as the key to textual analysis. Thus, in Baudrillard's hands is the first principle of social existence in the era of high-tech capitalism. Critical theory faces the task of unveiling structures of domination when no one is dominating, nothing is being dominated and no ground exists for a principle of liberation from domination. Auschwitz is the sign of total tyranny as the production of death, the world of "hyperreality" bypasses the distinction between death and life (Baudrillard 1982: 272-293).

The implications of *Simulacra and Simulations* are brought home in *Fatal Strategies*. Here Baudrillard attempts to think the social world from the point of view of the object, a seeming oxymoron. Like the poststructuralists, Baudrillard assumes that the era of the representational subject is past. One can no longer comprehend the world as if the Kantian categories of time, space, causality are necessary, universal paths to truth. Baudrillard takes this to imply that the subject no longer provides a vantage point on reality. The privileged position has shifted to the object, specifically to the hyperreal object, the simulated object. In place of a logic of the subject, Baudrillard proposes a logic of the object and this is his "fatal strategy." As the reader will discover, the world unveiled by Baudrillard, the world from within the object, looks remarkably like the world as seen from the position of postmodernists (Foster 1983: 54).

In his book *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard announces us that reality exists only in the limits of the artificial perimeter. A perfect example is Disneyland in this respect. The modern era, postmodern or hypermodern, whatever we call it, is only a rooted out civilization. He states that “an image has successive phases:

- It is a reflection of a profound reality;
- It masks and denaturated a profound reality;
- It masks the absence of a profound reality;
- It has no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum” (Baudrillard 2006: 6).

In the first case, the image is a good appearance - it is a sacrament representation. In the second, it's just a bad appearance - a sorcery representation. In the third one, the image only plays the role of appearance. In the fourth case, it is not at all in the order of appearance, but that of simulation. The transition from signs that hide signifiers to the fact that there is nothing more to hide marks a decisive turning point. The first ones point to a theology of truth and secrecy and the other launch the era of simulacra and simulation, where there's no God to recognize his people, there is no doomsday to separate the real from the fake, not even the reality of His artificial resurrection, because everything is already dead and resurrected before.

We are undoubtedly situated in the fourth dimension, a place where reality is a straw of fire and where we can not confirm reality because it is simply just a copy, multiplied to infinity.

What is in doubt is the fact that this sort of thinking enables a historically informed grasp of the present in general. The concurrent spread of the hyperreal, through the media and the collapse of liberal and Marxist politics as master narratives, deprives the rational subject of its privileged access to truth. In an important way, individuals are no longer citizens, eager to maximize their civil rights; nor proletarians, anticipating the communism. They are rather consumers, and hence the prey of objects as defined by the code. In this sense, only the "fatal strategy" of the point of view of the object provides any understanding of the present situation.

Due to Baudrillard's work we begin to comprehend the impact of new communication forms on our society. He presented a language-based analysis of new kinds of social experience, which characterizes our advanced societies. For other critical theorists, Baudrillard is the beginning of a new line of thought, one which is open to improvement by others.

Baudrillard attempts to pass from a dialectical system of interpretation into a space where referential values are impossible. It is at this point of saturation by simulacra that the social is pushed beyond its limits to the point where it inverts its finalities and reaches its point of inertia and extermination. This form of inertia, however, is not an empty void that is drained of all meaning, but a fatal site of excessive multiplication that causes a reversion or implosion of traditional value systems (Toffoletti: 85).

The meaning of Baudrillard's theory of simulacra is, in opinion of Doru Pop, to describe the defining condition of postmodern society, as overwhelmed by images (Pop: 275). He thinks that postmodern theories, in general, are more concerned to delineate the "high arts" than to acknowledge the role of television and mass culture in defining postmodernism, Baudrillard's case being an exception. "In one hour of television we experience more images than members of industrial societies did in a lifetime" (Pop: 275). In connection with the failure of the concepts of "reality" or "truth", Doru Pop thinks it's not appropriate to definitively abandon any notion of reality, but rather to look at the concept as a multiple form with everyday realities experienced differently by members of a community (Pop: 285).

Another issue to be dealt with when approaching this topic is the operative definition of the self: "I am what I have", describing the tendency of people to identify strongly with the products and services they consume, especially those with commercial brand names and obvious status-enhancing appeal. As we read in different Chick Lit Books, all cultures have found meanings in material goods. F. de Saussure wrote a long time ago that every object possesses a meaning. Objects may represent our social status or they may be concrete symbols of our most intimate experiences, cultural markers or, why not, even our postmodern society's myths. They may represent a reminiscence of our past, a sign of our current identity, or a symbol of what we want to be. Consumption, then, is something hinging on symbolic meaning. Goods and books are consumed not only for their material or cultural characteristics but, even more so, for what they symbolize. They generate meanings which shape our self-image. These symbolic meanings are certainly social, but that does not mean that society determines the meaning of the object in any absolute way.

In a poem of the 80s by American Diane Wakosky, entitled "A Dissertation on Smallness", the visual image in its aesthetically acclaimed form – "small is beautiful" – serves to maintain a mode of gender recognition. The female speaker in the poem is induced to believe that small sizes are held in higher esteem not only by the catalogues she receives from shops but also by their higher price which is not justified by the costs of production. The effect of the manipulative policies of the fashionable industry is the production of woman as fantasy:

Some women were discussing clothes and weight in my living room last year. One witty woman said, "The size of dress you wear depends on your wealth. If you buy a 100 dollars dress, you may take only a size seven. But if you buy a 15 dollars dress, you may require a twelve. The rich like to think of themselves as small.

The idea of relating size of dress to social status came to Wakoski through the book of a reputed contemporary economist, *Small is Beautiful* (1973) by E.F. Shumacher. The child leafing through her mother's promotion fliers had watched herself growing with anxiety, and the obsession with smallness gets so strong that she applies this yardstick to the wrong situation, infuriating her male friends by making them presents of shirts that are too small. What she trespasses this time is the gendered notion of smallness associated with women and greatness with men. Wakoski realized that in postmodernism the aesthetic is determined not by some philosophy of art but by economic doctrines or by ideology. It's poetics underlined by politics:

In opening her volume with the remonstrance about spectacles, Wakoski establishes three important premises which the discerning reader must attend: first, all persons bring to our vision of the world an ideological bias that determines the location from which we view not just ourselves, but also our world and our place within that world; second, this bias is generated by sets of "technologies" or strategies implemented by a conservative agenda and designed to maintain the status quo, to circumvent challenge, and to prevent change; finally, we often unsuspectingly collude in the strategies of that agenda. She admonishes her readers not to take the world at face value but, instead, to demystify the assumptions that generate the magic of appearances and that are perpetrated by the cultural texts ultimately attempting to determine our subjectivity, identity, experience, and being in the world. (Maxwell Hanemann, 22).

Clio Manescu speaks about the five levels of manifestation of an original myth: the sacred one, the social one, the ethical one, the gnosiological and the poetic one. Linked to the religious manifestations, the sacred level is reality itself in the primordial civilizations. Mircea Eliade concludes that literature is the

daughter of mythology and the interest towards narration is part of the human way of being in the world. He discusses time ambivalence distinguishing the sacred from the profane time.

Contrariwise, for Roland Barthes, the myth is "a secondary semiotic system to the language, myth being a meta-language, a true story and yet unreal that transforms history into nature" (Barthes, 94-112). As such we can understand mythology as a symbolic form of thinking and recognize it as an encompassing force against which other categories of conscience and knowledge are secondary.

We are dealing with a society related to the weak thinking, as G. Vattimo calls it, or a society full of merchants and lacking in heroes, if we choose to express ourselves in terms theorised by economist Werner Sombart (Sombart, 3-6).

After the attempt of trying to empty the significance of the archaic myth (the story) of its religious meanings, the sacred masqueraded as the profane. Through these processes undergone by myth in the modern era, of desecration, the latter loses its archaic form, its sacredness, the substance itself, becoming a mere literary or historical object. Given this gradual degradation, we can even talk about the "death of the myth" (Meslin, 39). Due to the complexity of consumerism in general, I have become stimulated and drawn to this "decadent" topic, as Nietzsche describes it, from the very moment I embarked upon the study of this topic. It is important for us to become aware of our status as citizens of the postmodern civilization, facing popular culture and the consumerist society as the great enemy to humanity's cultural memory and sense of identity.

However, Michel Meslin demonstrates that this process is not irreversible since the modern era brings a reinterpretation of myths, due to the mythical function which exists in every individual.

Through the experience of the sacred, the human spirit came to differentiate between what is looming as a real, strong, rich and meaningful and what is lacking of these qualities, as a flow of chaotic things, with appearances and disappearances which lack depth and are empty of meaning, as Eliade said. (Eliade, 7).

The contemporary renewal of myth is due to the mythical function which exists in any individual, proving the permanence of myth. It continues to be a model for contemporary writers. There is a general feeling nowadays that the modern world needs myths, the eternal return of things to their origins being linked to the idea of perfection and bliss. For modern man, mythology may have a role in discovering the ancient history of human thought, being at the opposite end of temporality. Modern man may be defined as the product of history, and his forebears, as a product of myth.

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