The Mythological Origins of Desire and Marketing Hyperreality

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Abstract: This paper criticizes the profit-driven hyperreality foisted upon consumer goods. The author references Lacan's interpretation of Plato's myth on the self-sufficient, solitary and spherical origins of humankind contained within the ancient work, *Symposium*. The division of these once-whole entities, as described by Plato, resulted in humans being instilled with an insatiable desire for completeness. The author reasons that contemporary marketing strategies prevail upon this desire: transmuting what is real (the product or service) into the hyperreal.

Capitalism as an ideology is fascinating. It has seemingly penetrated the collective unconscious of our modern world eliciting both passionate defences and scathing criticisms. Defenders of capitalism espouse its brilliance in such a way as to portray it as being the only functioning system, the sole viable possibility. In these defences, we often encounter similar arguments for the continued existence of capitalism. It is claimed that capitalism is the only system which truly incentivizes progress. It is furthermore claimed that it is the only system in which all humans have equal potential and the individual is free to pursue their own desires. Capitalism is fast, in your face, presented with glitz and glamour as if it is not an ideological concept but a benevolent unquestionable metaphysical overseer. However, what if we scratch beneath this highly stylized surface, do we not see a world full of false promises? Capitalism has created a hierarchical class system based around the ability to purchase material goods and at the top sits a minuscule minority. The progress supposedly incentivized is hardly progress at all merely the false perception of it. Far from being free to pursue our own desires, desire as a concept is carefully studied and understood by marketing. This clinical understanding of desire leads to an abusive manipulation of the individual and a perpetuation of the capitalist society.

We desire something; be it an object or a person because we recognize in said object something which we ourselves are lacking in. This is called transference. We may observe transference at the most basic level of desiring, namely our natural desires for food or shelter. We desire food first because we recognize in ourselves a lack of *being full* and therefore desire sustenance such as an apple. The apple contains the essence of *fullness* which upon consumption will result in the fulfillment of our desire. This concept of desire as being a lack can then be extrapolated into how we choose friends or romantic partners. In a similar case to that of the apple, the individual of our desire does not contain within them something which the desirer themselves contain, but something (perhaps the essence of confidence or beauty) that will act as fulfillment to the emptiness of the lack. The form of desire adopted here is Lacanian and having accepted this nature of desire we also find it necessary to accept Lacan's view that desire is infinite and total desire satisfaction is impossible. Desire must be looked at as being an act of movement towards a horizon that is satisfaction. No matter how far an individual

may run, the horizon continually stretches out ahead of us. Desire acts as a physical force, driving humans forward, to reach further and create social, technological and philosophical advancements in the hope that the distance between us and the horizon shortens. Without desire as this unachievable end, we would condemn ourselves to a stagnant existence. While we have explored the causation of desire we are still left with the reasoning behind the origin of desire as recognition of a lack in ourselves. In order to understand the origin of desire it is helpful to turn to Plato, who in his classical text *Symposium* brilliantly illustrates both the mythical origin of our desires and the pathological necessity of satisfying them. In the *Symposium*, the comic poet Aristophanes tells us a myth on the original man. In this myth humans were great, round, spherical creatures with eight limbs who lived peacefully on the planet. One day these early humans angered the gods who took their revenge by bisecting each human into two halves thereby condemning humanity to forever feel alone (Plato, 473-474). The point of bisection is the point of origin of desire. Humans as spheres were self-sufficient, able to reside in perfect solitude due to their completeness (Lacan, 88-89). Separated we are divided souls, profoundly lonely and constantly looking for that which will make us whole again and therefore grant true independence. We see in Aristophanes' myth, humanity on a desperate search for reunification and the gods acting as marketers, offering unification whilst simultaneously wielding sharp knives to disconnect us and force the continuation of our search. This is the abuse of the capitalist society. We are given, through marketing, false moments of satisfaction, ones that we always accept because of our longing for the whole of ourselves and yet this satisfaction is continually being shown to be lesser than the satisfaction obtained through the purchasing of the object that supersedes the current, thus perpetuating the endless cycle of the consumption of material goods¹.

The false sense of satisfaction of the lack or the false reality that is projected onto the product is that which we will call hyperreality; a state of being that exists outside of the established order of reality—that which is real; the initial sensory experience that gives to the object the properties that make said object that which it is and the interpretation of the real or the subjective, and often emotional, response that accompanies the sensory experience. This hyperreality comes into existence from the interaction between that which is real and that which is manufactured simulacra (Baudrillard 1-2). Hyperreality carries with it the consequence of portraying its false reality as true reality. There is no doubting the materialistic *realness* of a bottle of Coca Cola, we can see it, touch it, feel it and taste it. We have the ability to experience that which makes Coca Cola, cola and nothing else. Marketing techniques then apply to the product another layer of reality, the manufactured simulacra. As humans, we should perhaps rationally be able to reject the false reality of the consumer product but this is not such an easy feat. To begin with marketers are obsessive with their attempts to attach the false reality to the indisputable realness of the product allowing for the material to validate the abstract and manufactured layer. We also observe that whilst the simulacra ascribed to the object has no concrete grounding in reality it is convincing to us as humans because marketers exploit desires that are inherently attractive to many individuals, to portray the objects as being able to make ourselves once again spherical. This may take the form of an object masquerading as being capable of fulfilling our desire for love or happiness. Take for example Starbucks coffee. The coffee in Starbucks is indisputably real. It has a taste, along with an assortment of other properties that make the coffee,

¹ While this essay is predominantly concerned with the hyperreality of objects, services may be interchanged if wanted, as we observe the same instances of manipulation through marketing. Hospitality, transportation and even schools all contain individual corporations be them government or private that manufacture an image of the type of individual who utilizes said service. Take Porter airlines and their famous slogan “flying refined”. This is an obvious attempt to infuse luxury and higher status into what is fundamentally an airplane, one that is indistinguishable from any other.

coffee. Yet Starbucks markets their product in a manner that goes beyond an endorsement of the real “fruity taste with undertones of chocolate”. Instead consumers entering a Starbucks coffee shop are surrounded by pictures of lush green forests paired with provocative headlines declaring the importance of free-trade movements to combat crippling poverty and of anti-slavery movements in South American countries. This instills the coffee with not only the material sensory reality of the coffee but also the abstract of goodness. The hyperreality has been extended onto your person and suddenly buying a coffee becomes a humanitarian action with the manipulated induced implication that to not buy Starbucks coffee is to be disinterested and unsupportive of ethically important movements and therefore risk being cut away from the community we, as incomplete humans, desperately crave. One of the most successful marketing campaigns of all time, that of the Marlboro Man, is a perfect example of the extension of hyperreality onto the individual. Before the campaign many tobacco consumers viewed the Marlboro brand as being overly feminine and as such would distance themselves from the product. By pairing Marlboro cigarettes with images of ruggedly handsome men, the brand was transformed into being the cigarette of choice for those who wished their person to be identified with the hyperreality of Marlboro; health, virility, attractiveness and (presumably the reasoning behind the choice of portraying models as stereotypical American identities) as men who were following the American dream². Commercials on the television are another source of this phenomenon. In liquor commercials, we will often be greeted with images of beautiful people, partying with each other, intimately enjoying the company of others. Although it seems reasonable to assume that there must be an unconscious recognition of the falsity of the claims made by marketing, it cannot be denied that it is more tempting to accept the existence of the hyperreal than it is to refute it, for refutation is also an acceptance of the lack of being complete. In many commercials, sexual relations are often shown to be approaching and are thereby used as an incentive to obtain the product through the implication that ownership of the product results in the obtainment of sex. ‘Sex sells’ (or better put sex is abused) because it is the physical representation of the reunification of the two halves of the original human. In sex two bodies, with their “blood and fat and muscle and bone”, dissolve into one another. No more physical distance between the two (Dworkin 34).

The phenomenon of hyperreality not only harmfully effects us as individuals, it also has negative repercussions on the manufactured objects themselves. Infused with a false reality, the purpose behind the object’s creation risks being lost. With no purpose an object destabilizes, losing the values of utility and functionality and instead becomes a symbol which is then exploited by marketers to be representative of their vision. A car for instance is no longer simply a means of transportation but instead has become a sign of the virility of the driver. Likewise, the manufacturers of clothes no longer create their products with the intention of creating practical items of warmth but instead fashion their designs to create an identity of wealth and prestige. Further destabilization occurs because of the need of capitalist societies to perpetuate a cyclical nature of production and consumption. As we discussed, for this to occur the marketer must separate the individual from their current object of desire and it is to the corporation’s advantage to induce separation as rapidly as possible. Companies therefore push out products with the labour going into the products conception being misguided. While undeniably the product still satisfies the *real*/basic services of functionality, there are remarkably few improvements made in this area. Instead, labour is guided towards improvements that better and cement the

² The phrase “the American dream” is puzzling. By pairing the idea of the American dream (wealth and happiness) with the word dream, there is a semantic acknowledgment in the inability for the American dream to exist. Nevertheless, here we see hyperreality on a grand scale. An entire country’s political system, economic ideas and social institutions built upon false manufactured hope.

hyperreality of the new and delegitimize the hyperreality of the old. Improvements then become rooted primarily in aesthetics, not in purpose.

The capitalist ideology has become engrained in our existence and with such an entrenchment the question of how we might escape the abuses perpetuated by capitalist agents looms large. This is difficult for the presentation of the hyperreal as the *real* leads many to believe that our current state of being is unalterable reality. However philosophical examination of the current state of our society contributes to the breaking down of the hyperreality of capitalism as we begin to observe the cracks in the facade. The examination of Aristophanes' myth is a position from which to start this philosophical inquiry as we acquire not only an understanding of the nature of desire but also gain an understanding of the creatures we once were and should aspire to be. Instead of allowing manipulating devices to direct our desires in the abusive fashion they currently do, the myth instructs us that outside objects and beings are not that which we search for, instead that which we require can be found inside ourselves. The bisection is a metaphorical operation that can be undone to regain that which the early humans possessed; individual thought, independent expression and with it a true sense of personal identity. With the eventual cementation of these states of existence within ourselves we are in a better position to shed the oppressive capitalist forces and make our journey towards the horizon not one of desperation and false promises but one of blissful enjoyment.

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