The Economy of Attention in the Age of Neoliberalism

On the Transformation of Media Culture[*]

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Abstract

In the context of the economy of attention, media are information markets. The distinctive feature of old and new media, accordingly, is a business model rather than a technological base. Old media are those information markets where information continues to be exchanged for money, new media those which have left the exchange of information for money behind only to attract attention. The business model of new media relies on selling the service of attraction to the advertising industry. This paper points out the parallelism between the rise of the new media and the ascent of financial industries. Both these developments were triggered by the neoliberal agenda of deregulation and have resulted in a sphere of unleashed capitalism removed from the "real" economy. In both culture and finance the neophyte forms of capitalism prove to be superior in profits and dynamics. In both money and attention capitalism we have to deal with a new class of rich. In the economy of attention the new class are the celebrities whose wealth of attention is activated as a capital yielding interest in terms of attention income. The paper investigates the question of how celebrity culture could grow into the paradigm of advertisement financed media culture.

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Creatures of Deregulation: New Media and Financial Industries

The age of neoliberalism is an era of unleashed market forces, symptomized by the flourishing of vanity fairs. The unbound forces of capitalism are epitomised by what are now called the financial industries. The recent upsurge of vanity fairs has discharged in so-called celebrity culture. The question thus is: are we facing a merely accidental correlation or is there a common causality waiting to be identified?

The answer is not quite obvious. First, it is unclear whether there is a correspondence in the economy of attention to the neoliberal agena in money driven capitalism at all. Second, vanity fairs still await to be taken seriously as economic phenomena. Celebrity culture, much more than a category of serious analysis, is anathema of cultural criticism. Third, the answer depends on how neoliberalism is distinguished from classical liberalism. In the jargon of its left-wing critics, neoliberalism is just radical, and thus ruthless, capitalism, fighting the political endeavours to tame the beast. What tends to be overlooked in the heat of the debate are its origins in economic theory.

Let us start with the latter point. Traditionally, economic theory deals with the working of markets. In theory, markets can be shown to be very capable, and indeed unbeatable information systems regarding the allocation of scarce resources according to needs and wants (expressed as preparedness to pay). Classical liberalism transforms this finding into a political agenda. It accepts state intervention into the working of markets as long as there are boundary conditions that hinder the smooth working of decentralised decision making. Neoliberals are less resilient against state intervention. They criticize classical liberals for assuming the state to be a neutral, i.e. not self-interested agent of social welfare. In fact, so runs the argument, politicians and bureaucracy are no less egoistic and self-interested than business people. Accordingly, market failure must not be compared with the working of an ideal state, but market failure with state failure. Only in the case that market failure significantly outdoes state failure is state intervention justified. Suspecting that state failure is grossly underrated in public opinion, neoliberals generally vie for re-privatizing public goods and state-run services. Their battle cry is deregulation.

Markets presuppose private property of the goods negotiated and exchanged. Markets, moreover, connect exchange with valuation, i.e. pricing. The working of markets thus turns the goods and services offered into commodities: into items made up and priced for being sold. Privatization of public goods and state-run services thus includes the commodification thereof and the subsumption of the pertaining parts of the life-world under the reign of commerce. Since markets are much more flexible in responding to individual preferences than government bureaucracies, commodification is prone to expand far beyond to once state-run services as soon as areas such as health care and therapeutic services, care of the elderly, education, security, cable and wireless communication are deregulated. Since competitive markets enforce efficiency and sustain a constant search for niches on the part of the suppliers, neoliberalism should prove a powerful amplifier of the general trend towards the commercialisation of the life-world.

This tendency, though, is much older than neoliberalism. A telling example is the history of today’s popular culture. Popular culture, in its form that most massively influences today’s life-world, is industrially manufactured entertainment. Entertainment, however, could not grow into an industry before media were available that technically realise the reproduction of the information supplied. It was media such as rotary printing, film and musical recording that transformed traditional folk art into what we now call popular culture. By being distributed as copies for sale, entertainment became a marketable consumer good and thus a commodity. The media, in turn, assumed the character of information markets, combining technical reproduction with distribution. This transition was, on the one hand, enforced and, on the other hand, obstructed when broadcasting became an option for distribution. Broadcasting the information means to forego its commodity character. By being broadcast it assumes the character of public availability, i.e. a commodity that is freely available and consumable in a non-rival way. The consumption by an individual consumer does not detract the amount available for others. Remarkably, radio programs featured as the paradigm case in Paul A. Samuelson’s introduction of the concept of public good to economics in 1954.

Broadcasting skips the barrier of the sales counter, making the information freely and thus maximally accessible. By thus being turned into a public commodity, broadcast information looks as if calling for state action to be provided according to demand. This call was understood wherever broadcasting started as a public service. According to this understanding, state action is called for by a paradigm case of market failure. In order to turn this information into a marketable good, its most progressive property would have to be sacrificed: it has to be encrypted to re-privatise it. Even though its consumption is non-rival, it has to be turned back into an exclusive good. Insofar state intervention, even at the cost of a state-run monopoly, seems to be justified. Not so for neoliberals, of course. As an information monopolist, the state is a failure as such. The problem is just: how to privatise the public good without destroying its most efficient distribution channel? The solution consisted in creating a business model that accounts for another peculiarity of information goods. In contrast to tangible consumer goods, the consumption of information does not cost only money. Information is nothing fixed and ready but the surprise value we extract from patterns. In order to realise the surprise value, the patterns have to absorb live attention. Consuming information goods thus means paying attention to what the pattern is supposed to represent. Marketing information therefore need not mean selling it. It can also mean to market a medium that is capable of attracting the attention of the general public. Media attracting the attention of the general public is what the advertising industry is desperately seeking. Hence, the business model for privatising broadcast information lies in turning the provision of information from an end to a means. The public commodity of broadcast information is re-privatised by utilising it as a means of producing attraction services for sale to the advertising industry.

At first glance, this business model looks odd. Distributing the expensively-produced good for free, only to attract attention that can be sold in the form of the service of attraction? Since it indeed looks odd, it took some time to make its way through the business world. For the Avant-Garde of neoliberalism, however, this business model was a godsend. It came as a promising agenda for popularising the deregulation campaign. At the same time it was to usher in a new era of the economy of attention. Media, understood as information markets, underwent a momentous change. It was the business model much more than the technological base that became the distinguishing feature of so-called new, distinct from old, media. Old media are those still selling information for money (press, books, CDs, cinema, theatre etc.), new media are those bypassing the exchange of information for money in order to fully concentrate on the saleable service of attraction (commercial TV, the Internet).

Capitalist traits were not altogether foreign in the business of old media. The press, cinema, the recording industry had already developed into mass media professionalising the business and introducing technologies of mass attraction. Traditionally, strategies and techniques of attraction had been cultivated in crafts involved in fashion and furnishing. By virtue of the technical media, mass attraction became a matter of calculable costs and results. Vast sums of attention could be collected by cheaply disseminating technically reproduced patterns if only the right stimuli were coded. By thus collecting attention in novel orders of magnitude, wealth in attention could grow into novel orders of magnitude. A new class of attention rich appeared on the scene: the stars. With stardom, wealth of attention showed to be capable of being activated as an income-generating asset. As a star, you get attention not only for your appearance and achievements, but also for being such a big earner of attention. The wealth of attention a star enjoys is not only conspicuous, but yields interest. It has turned into financial capital: wealth multiplying itself according to its order of magnitude.

The reason for this wondrous property lies in the attractive force exerted by the display of prominent people. You can observe this attractive force at any event or party where people known to be known appear. Suddenly, the expression of your interlocutor becomes anxious and you find yourself listend to with only half an ear. The prominence of a lecturer can easily multiply an audience of an otherwise equivalent speaker. Stars move the masses even if the performance to be expected is far from breathtaking. Or, to put it differently, you need famous in masses if you want to run attraction as a mass business.

With media such as TV and the Internet, the technical hardware grows into an infrastructure that supplies information to every household just like water or electricity only to collect the attention spent in realizing the information. The yield, moreover, is measured by way of audience ratings and visitor counts, thus rendering the attraction of attention as a quantified, commercial service. By thus measuring the attention channelled and redistributed by the media, the economy of attention comes to exhibit a social product corresponding to the Gross National Product in money economy. Even as firms pursuing profit maximisation as the final goal, media are competing for shares of the social product of attention in the first place. Greatest attention is attracted by the media that most accurately find out what the masses want to see, hear and read. However, the business of attraction does not stop at the publication of eye-catchers, sensational headlines and catchy tunes. It has to proceed to recruiting and building up the crowd pullers suited for the battle for attention. Nothing seems to be fitter to attract attention in masses than the display of wealth of attention. In order to run the large-scale business of attention you have to make those who are attention-rich display their wealth. Before being capable of being displayed, though, the fortunes have to be made. It is only through the media themselves that conspicuous wealth of attention can be built up. In fact, the media themselves act as credit backers, financing this build-up through granting attention income in advance.

The media invest presentation space and time in people whose appearance promises to raise ratings and visiting figures. Ratings and visiting figures measure performance ex post as well as the prospective power of generating income of attention. They thus also measure the attention that the medium can grant in advance to those displayed. The credit is granted in form of the presentation space and time that the medium invests. The value of the invested presentation space and time depends on the medium’s profile, i.e. how much attention one can expect from appearance in this medium’s programme formats. The person invested in enjoys thus a credit of guaranteed attention from her of his appearance. The borrower has to practise usury with this credit, so thereby it all the more provides opportunities that would otherwise remain fantasy. If the investment works out, the medium succeeds in a new field of banking whereas the creditor proves promising for further investments. Both partners, moreover, are envisioning a longer-term goal. They know that there is a critical mass at which the wealth of attention starts to self-amplify. It is only when reaching this critical mass that you are selected as a candidate for being raised to celebrity. And it is only here where the economy of attention enters the phase of high finance. The power of media to rise to the peerage of celebrity relies on their capability to collect unprecedented amounts of attention by triggering a kind of chain reaction of investments in presentation time and space.

Celebrities are the new class of super-rich who live on the social product of attention, as channelled and redistributed by the mass media. In the age of neoliberalism, celebrities are made by the media. It is only the media that have the means to collect the huge amount of attention which feeds the new class of the super-prominent. The media, of course, are not a charitable institution. They are the banks and stock exchanges in the economy of attention. The people whom they have elevated to celebrity status promise, through their own popularisation, to enhance the medium's popularity. Investments into the building-up of attractors are highly speculative and rather risky, to be sure. It is speculative in the sense not only that wild betting goes on, but also in the sense that the bet influences the business result. The higher the expectation of the attraction, the better prepared and targeted the placement will be. So the placement quotes a market value, which is in itself dependent on this quotation. The quotation can —like a self-fulfilling prophecy—harvest the income, which is expressed by its expectation. Windfall gains thus may suffice to trigger a self-enhancing snowball effect.

This has an effect on the newly gained wealth. Media celebrities find their counterpart in the *nouveau riche* who make easy money on the stock market. You need neither be a child prodigy nor a stunning beauty nor a brilliant performer in order to be carried up by the chain reaction of self-fulfilling prophecies. You just have to enter the right bet in the right mood of the investor's market. This 'fast happiness' is accompanied by the events which started the career will soon be forgotten or at least be superseded out by other events. The star is a rising one because and as long as everybody assumes that all the other eyes are also directed on her or him. The foundation for this wealth is far from the solid factual basis relied on by the prestige of old, Bourdieu style elites. As foundation, nothing more is needed than mass suggestion entertaining itself. Paris Hilton, to name a case in point, is a celebrity indeed. But to which elitist standards should she comply? She will be a celebrity as long as the pertinent media will invest enough presentation time and space to keep her ranked in the quoted market values.

The similarity to investment banking is not by chance. The new media function as banks and as stock exchanges in their own way. The investment of presentation time and space measures the expected strength of the candidate to attract attention. This strength is to a crucial extent dependent on already gained prominence or, alternatively, the prominence pre-produced by manipulative presentation of the person. Therefore it can be said that the presentation space and time invested quote a market value of capitalised income in attention. Audience ratings and visitors' counts measure the business result. Comparing investment with a business result is the way the stock exchange prices capital shares. Because this pricing significantly influences the subsequent development of market value there is more at stake for the person presented than just the immediate gain in attention. Of concern is is always also the maintenance of market value of the capital one calls one's own.

Material and Mental Capitalism

By leaving behind the exchange of information for money, the new media perform a decoupling from the 'real' base of the economy strikingly analogous to the one performed by finance in money economy when developing into what then came to be called the financial industries. Financial industries do not sell credits to borrowers to be turned into real investment, but only package such credits to derivative capital that entitles subscription for profits. Trading with derivatives has proved much more profitable than the retail trade of loans. By the same token, the new media do not sell the information to the consumers demanding it, but package the attractive force of the information disseminated into the derivative form of a marketable service. Again, trading with the derivative has proved much more profitable than the retail trade of information. The analogy, above all, is not by chance. In both cases, we have to do with a second-order kind of capitalism ushered in by deregulation.

Deregulation lay at the base of the transformation of classical finance into the neophyte financial industries. Traditionally, client-based deposit banking was clearly separated, both by written and unwritten law, from transaction-based investment banking. The business of deposit banking is the translation of deposits into credits. It is committed to the long-term interests of the clients. The business of investment banking used to be the trading of shares, conducted verbally, face-to-face, on the market floor of stock exchange. Stockjobbers, making the market in shares were separated from stockbrokers who carried out trades on behalf of clients but were not allowed to act as market makers themselves. This professional divide was abolished by Thatcherian deregulation politics in the 1980s, allowing the whole industry to become broker-dealers. At the same time, the screaming crowds on the market floors were replaced with online communication between traders' floors spread across the globe.

Online trading in globalised capital markets is short-term and fast, exploiting price fluctuations through comprehensive overview, analytic power and speed. A keyword of online trading is arbitrage: the exploitation of price differentials between markets or between observed prices and prices estimated by data analysis. These price differentials tend to be small and short-lived, but can be exploited profitably with computers examining a large number of prices and exercising trade automatically. Those arbitrageurs with the fastest computers, shortest reaction times and most expertise take advantage of series of small differences that it would not pay to react to if taken individually. Small price differentials amount to considerable sums when multiplied by huge transaction volumes. Accordingly, the financial industries are addicted to cheap money. They are the clientele best served by so-called quantitative easing, the low interest-rate policy of the central banks. Quantitative easing, targeted officially to stimulate the retail business of granting loans to the real sector, proves to be much better suited to fuel speculative investment banking, thus continuing deregulation by other means.

The exalted school of investment banking is the ‘making of markets’. To make a market you have to do something that is noted and reacted to by the scene. One of the best proven strategies of doing this is to come up with a novel kind of product. In fact, a flood of new financial products in the 1980ies announced the arrival of a new kind of capital markets. The financial industries started by switching from selling credits to borrowers to only packaging sold credits to derivative capital entitling to subscription for profits. Even though this new business model looked odd to mature business people, it was soon noted that trading with the derivatives, particularly on globalised online markets, opens opportunities that leave the retail trade of loans far behind. The new markets opened, providing unprecedented opportunities for market-making strategies. By packaging credits into derivatives, immediate assessment of the creditworthiness of the creditors and detailed oversight over the deposited securities tends to get lost for the purchaser and instead to be delegated to rating agencies. Loosening the connection to the real economy opens a leeway for speculative betting, i.e., for a second order of making markets. Making markets in an environment highly susceptible to price fluctuations, you have to perform transactions that raise a stir in making things look different. When successful, the strategy triggers the snowball effect on which you had betted. Most probably, the initial move, having caused the price movement, will soon be forgotten, leaving the fluctuation as such as a reason to which the market can react.

It was in remarkable analogy that finance and media took the opportunity, opened by deregulation, for a revolutionary change of their repective business model. Instead of directly responding to the demand for credit or information respectively, they introduced an intermediate trade with derivative services, thus establishing another stage of commerce. On capital markets, there is not only a constand demand for opportunities, but also of services that support the handling of risks. In the media, there is a constant production of patterns that are not only supposed to meet the attention turning them into information, but also an inherently joint production of effective attraction. Since investment is unavoidably risky, there is a constant joint demand on capital markets for services of risktaking such as insurance and hedging. However, as soon as there is an intermediate market for credits, these services can also be packed alongside other derivatives into so-called structured products, i.e. just a sort of more complex derivatives. Since risk is nothing plainly given, but relative to the level of information, overview and reaction time, risk can thus be taken by way of arbitrage. The higher the risk, as assessed by the market, the the higher the chances of the well equipped arbitrageur. In the media, the derivative service meets an external demand. The service is produced as a by-product of the provision of the population with information. By finding the attention needed to realize the information, the service of attraction is implicitly co-produced. The attention thus attracted can be foisted information that is not actually demanded but realized inadvertently. The service of this attraction only awaits packaging into a marketable commodity. The pecularity of the attention thus seduced is particularly suited to address sub-conscious wishes and longings prevented from being professed. It is this kind of attention that advertising is desperately seeking.

It was only by decoupling an intermediate level of commerce from the 'real' base of the economy that those forms of second-order capitalism could take hold. This is not to say, however, that the real base of the economy does not matter. Quite the contrary is true both in the money-driven economy and in the economy of attention. The real base of the stunning upturn of financial industries was a global trend of redistribution. Up to the 1980s growth, characteristic of industrialised post-war economies, was grossly distributed equally between capital and labour, i.e. profits and wages. By globalising the value chains, jobs were mobalised towards low-wage countries to the effect that the bargaining power of the labour side in the organised distribution battle was appreciably weakened. Since then, the capital side could appropriate the growth dividend exclusively. In constant dollar income, the median U.S. household income in 2012 was the same as in 1989, whereas the Dow-Jones index grew from 3.000 in 1989 to 15.000 in 2012. Capital gains thus grew by a factor of five (the wealth of the 400 Forbes billionaires even grew by a factor of 7).[1] Profits, in contrast to wages, tend to be re-invested instead of consumed. The flood of money thus seeking investment opportunities was further magnified by the flood of cheap money generated by the low-interest policy of the central banks. It was by absorbing this unleashed supply of money that the financial industries could grow so large in such a short time.

Again, there is a striking analogy in the changing real base of the attention economy. Since the introduction of technical media, there has been a constant trend of popular culture to be absorbed by the media. With the advent of multi-channel TV and the Internet, this trend went on the whole. Now households nationwide and around the clock were supplied information like water and electricity. At the same time, the

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[1] The figures are from Stockman 2013.

attention paid by the population was measured in homogeneous units (quota and visits), thus turning individual, incomparably heterogeneous attention into an anonymous, homogenoeus magnitude capable of being treated like money.[2] The economy of attention thus underwent the transition that the money economy experienced when regulated accountancy and its declaration to the tax revenue became an obligatory part of running a business. Since then, we have a GNP measuring the value creation of the real economy and thus the sum total of income capable of being distributed within society. It was only on the basis of this institutional setting that new media could overshadow old media so rapidly.

The changing real base, as necessary a condition as it was for allowing those second-order forms of capitalism to emerge, must not be confused with the impact of neoliberalism. Deregulation, both in finance and in the media sector, has its main effect on the competition in exploitation. Both trading with financial products and supplying attraction services do not add to the social product, but concern the distribution thereof. The intermediate trade of capital allows those gains that otherwise would accrue to the savers to be distributed among the traders. The attention whose attraction is sold to the advertising industry would otherwise be paid to the information actually demanded. Nevertheless, the secondary markets had a deep impact on social stratification and on the cultures in which they were embedded. The stratification has deepened by the advent of new classes of super-rich; the cultural impact includes, but by far exceeds the one attributable to the change of information and communication technology.

Advertising and the Wage of Fame

How far the impact of the economic innovation exceeds the one attributable to the so-called digital revolution reveals a closer analysis of the economy of attention. The economic impact of information and communication technology remains poorly understood as long as the perspective is fixed on information as a scarce and thus valuable commodity. In this perspective, information finds itself conceived as a product traded on conventional markets and valued in terms of money. As a matter of course, communication is perceived only as an exchange of information only. What is thus overlooked is the constant excess of information supply characteristic of

[2] See Franck 1989.

the so-called information society, by which the capacity of realising content is turned into the scarcest of resources. If communication were an exchange of information only, it would be paradoxical that in conversations the competition is on speaking, not on listening time. When listening, you are served, when speaking you have to to produce. Accordingly, it seems downright irrational to compete for speaking time. Things change, however, as soon as you look at communication as an exchange of attention. In this case, you are paid attention while speaking and paying attention while listening. In order to get to grips with the economic significance of information, you have to ask what the properties are in virtue of which attention finds itself economised.

In its property of the capacity of realizing information, attention is a scarce resource, in its property as received heed, it is a kind of income. In both these properties, attention needs to be accounted for overcoming the biased view of barren information economics. In order to exemplify, a glance at finance is in place. Even though information and information processing technology are of prime importance, it is not information as such that is the most critical factor, but the capability of dealing with information overload and the capacity of economising attention in the sense of thought economy. Nor is the making of markets a question only of the money you have at your disposal. In order to make a market, you have to invest your attention in the first place to get the attention of others. This is not to say, of course, that information and money don't matter. It means, rather, that disregarding the economy of attention seriously weakens the analysis of today's economy. It even obstructs analysis when the cultural impact of information and communication technology is at issue.

Talking of the cultural impact of technology means to assume an understanding of culture different from that generally encompassing the world of artefacts. Culture in the sense thus adressed is what traditionally has been opposed to commerce. Culture and commerce encompass the roles that production and consumption play in social life. The divide is constitutive for culture as the field where values escaping the valuation by money are created. According to this understanding, culture and commerce both deal with goods and services offered to the general public, but differ in the personal motives and organisational goals thereby pursued. Commerce deals with things for reasons of economic gain, i.e. for ends different from those lying in the things themselves. Culture, in contrast, is supposed to deal with things for their own sake. The paradigm case is art. Even though art can treated as merchandise, artistic practice is supposed to be autonomous, i.e. serving only self-selected purposes and rules.

It was due to this understanding of culture in the course of industrialisation that the introduction of those technical media was experienced as a severe crisis by cultural criticism. With technical means of reproduction, artistic information became a mechandise free of auratic originality; copies capable of being mass-reproduced no longer claim to be produced for their own sake. Rather, it was noted with horror that the more popular genres of culture were on their way to becoming regular industries, thus subverting nothing less than the essential difference between culture and commerce.

The strategy of defence that the elite of cultural criticism called for was an an increased commitment of high culture to a decidedly anti-populist Avant-Garde ethos, thus including strict discrimination of whatever tendencies tolerated non-artistic motives in cultural production. Ironically, the strategy suffered from a birth defect insofar as its premise was a little bit shaky. It is simply not true that art flourishes only in an atmosphere uncontaminated by non-artistic motives. The reason is even quite simple: a piece of art, in order to acquire artistic value, has to pass a test going further than artistic beauty or truth. It has to be recognised in the field, which means it has to attract attention in the art appreciating community. Cultural workers, accordingly, are expected to work for the 'wages of fame'.

To make this point quite clear, a comparison to scientific production, another heavyweight of culture, is in order. A discovery, as great as it may be when taken as such, remains without scientific value if not recognised by the scientific community. Truth is not a sufficient condition of scientific value. A piece of information acquires scientific significance only by gaining attention in the community supposedly capable of understanding it. Scientists, like artists, cannot help working for the "wages of fame" even when despising popularity. Earning attention, however, is certainly a non-epistemic or, repectively, non-artistic motive. Nor is the pursuit of fame committed by itself to scientific or artistic truth.

If cultural workers work for the wages of fame in the same manner as merchants work for money, the essential distinction threatens to dwindle down to that between goods markets and vanity fairs. Scientific communication is rightly called a vanity fair since scientists do exactly what they are supposed to do if maximising the income of expert attention as businessmen maximise profits.[3] Artists not competing for attention are suspect as amateurs. And rightly so. They don't care for participating in a so-called discourse which, in fact, is much more a market where information is exchanged for attention than just an exchange of information. Today, is is the mainstream opinion in art theory that it is the discourse that determines what belongs to art and what not. It is even one of the hallmarks of modernist avant-garde that it has replaced the authority of convention by that of professional discourse.

The strategy of high minded cultural criticism did a disservice to the art. It prepared the imminent end of the Modernist Avant-garde, which soon after found itself overtaken by the deconstruction of the divide between high and low. Remarkably, however, even the discourse preoccupied with deconstruction obediently continued the neglect of the economy of attention, which by now was on the verge of mental capitalism.[4] The change now dominating the media was narrowly conceived as that from analog to digital technology. The cultural impact thus had to be ascribed to globalised on-line communication and the vanishing difference between copy and original, as if e-mail, e-commerce and special effects in cinema were the transforming forces of mainstream culture. What was overlooked was that it is the business model much more than the technological base that distinguishes new from old media.

What was overlooked, accordingly, was on what the daunting power of new media in transforming the cultural landscape relies. Instead of focusssing on the difference between culture distributed over the sales counter and culture-driven by advertising, technology was attributed magical powers. Even though technology is far from insignificant in explaining the transformative power of media such as commercial TV and the Internet, it only touches the crux of the matter. The question that indeed lies at the heart of an explanation is: what gives advertising the power to finance an industry as large as that that encompassing advertising agencies and broadcasting corporations as well as their ramified chains of supply industries?

The industries funded directly or indirectly by advertising account for the lion's share of today' culture appearing in public. Or, to put it bluntly: the dominant culture today is manufactured for the sake of advertisment. In order to understand what this means we should strictly refuse any technological explanations. We have to

[3] Cf. Franck 1999, 2002.

[4] On the concept of mental capitalism see Franck 2005a, 2005b.

look for the motivations at the end of the service chain: who is it, in the last analysis, who pays the advertising? The answer is quite clear. No-one other than the consumers who buy the advertised goods bear the costs of the whole industry. The purchasing power of the advertising industry relies on the willingness of consumers to pay a premium for goods enriched by sales promotion. Uttering willingness to pay is a language in which it does not pay to lie. Being prepared to pay is how we reveal our preferences. Hence, for what are consumers prepared to pay the premium? It certainly is not sales promotion as such. It is a service included in sales promotion. One such service could be the disclosure to the general public that the consumption of the goods in question signifies status or belonging to a noted scene.

This lesson, if learned, amounts to loading the commodity with a meaning it might otherwise lack. The best proven and standard practiced method of loading consumer goods with a meaning that meets demand is branding. Branding is a technique of exploiting the fact that consumption is noticed by other people and thus cannot help to disclose taste and lifestyle. If your taste is insecure and your expression of lifestyle feels hard to control, a complementary disclosure of what the commodity signifies is welcome. The meaning, of course, has to be understood not only by the prospective buyer but also by the general public. That is why the public has to be mercilessly bombarded with presentations of the brand. Everybody has to grasp the mantra: not only can I not help being aware of the brand, everybody around the globe is also aware of it. A brand is implemented not before it has reached prominence: it has not only to be known, but generally known also to be known.

Brands are what advertising is all about today. You can even say that the names or logos of things, by being heavily advertised, unavoidably become brands. They are indicators of earning attention and thereby messaging what it means to be seen with the item. Brands are those components of goods that deal with the social significance of consumption. We not only know that we are in view of our fellows, we also know that we are what we are perceived. The reason is subtle but painfully hard. It lies in the fact that self-consciousness is not only cognitive, but also affective. We not only know about our selves, but involuntarily evaluate ourselves. Our affective self-consciousness is called self-esteem. What is so unpleasantly hard regarding self-esteem is that we are far from being as free and autonomous as we would like to imagine. Our self-estimation eminently depends on what others think of us. The self-esteem we can afford is a question of our income of appreciating attention.[5]

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[5] Cf. Franck 1993.

Consumption is a field of practice that is particularly rich in opportunities to influence what others think of us. Moreover, it is a particularly non-invasive way, the one best suited to hide one's intention. It allows one to act as if you love the things on which you spend so much for their intrinsic value only while purchasing them just to make other people notice. In this regard, you are not even compelled to be honest with yourself. You cannot help, however, to be concerned about your self-esteem and thus of your income of appreciating attention. The bigger this income, the bigger the ego can grow. Since the growth of the ego knows no organic limits, the appetite for attention knows no saturation. Hence, there is a constant excess demand for what contributes to the attractiveness of the person. Branding is the empirically-discovered and professionally proven way of incorporating a product the promise that attractiveness is something you can buy.

This promise is what advertising has to contribute to the production that is not completed prior to the sale of the product. It is the service that sales promotion must include in the package in order to mobilise preparedness to pay the premium. Advertising, accordingly, is only marginally concerned with product information. The product information that advertising is supposed to deliver is rather hidden in the fine print. The advertisment absorbing the media production of attraction services is concerned with the promotion of images and telling of stories that contextualise the brand in the life-world as shown in the media. Hence the dual use of celebrities built up by the media as both attractors for the media's own programmes and as actors in the advertiser's stroytelling.

What the buyers of advertised goods thus find themselves paying for is the counseling of how to turn money income into attention income. What sales promotion basically deals with is the economy of self-esteem, the economy that transforms reception of apreciative attention into self-estimation.[6] The pursuit of self-esteem, though suspected as vanity and pathologized as narcissm, is a drive we, as humans, cannot easily suppress. Nor should we. An intact self-esteem is of immediate relevance to our moral feelings. In order to maintain self-esteem intact, we need a minimum income of apreciative attention. Decaying self-esteem ends in cynicism. Being recognised by our fellow humans is as basic a need as is food and drink. As soon, however, as the basic needs are satisfied, the growth of self-esteem is

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[6] For an extensive discussion of the economy of self-esteem see Franck 1998, ch. 3. See further de Botton 2004, chs. 2f.

the outstanding principal goal of life. The pursuit of self-esteem, accordingly, is an almost inexhaustable source of energy.

It is this source of energy that advertising has learned to exploit. Or, to put it differently, professional advertising today differs from mere salemanship by making use of a proven technology of harnessing the economy of self-esteem. This technology, to be sure, is not based on scientific theory. It is based on business acumen and the learning by doing way of artistic research. It is definitely not art in the sense of art for art's sake, but it is a developed body of know-how and in constant flux as is the technique that a professional artist controls. It is a body of empirical knowledge as was medicine, e.g. in the time of Paracelsus. It is the working proof, however, of the existence of the source of energy it so effectively exploits.

The pursuit of self-esteem, as basic and inborn a drive it is, is not a constant regarding significance and intensity in history. An appreciable upturn, rather, has been diagnosed as a concomitant of neoliberalism. As early as the 1970s sociologist Charles Derber[7] observed a change in the attitude to the procurement of attention. Since receiving attention means to receive an honour and since honour is nothing to be negotiated, conventional decency suggests that the prospective receiver patiently wait until a granting party takes the initiative. This patience, Derber observes, is on the decline. More and more, those longing for attention take the initiative themselves. Increasingly, people feel encouraged to engage as entrepreneurs in getting the attention they feel they deserve. Not only the style of public debate and professional discourse, but also of private conversations is tinged with strategies of getting more than merely paying oneself. Historian Christopher Lasch seconded this in his remarks regarding *Zeitgeist* as a culture of narcissm.[8] He observed that social events increasingly assume the character of vanity fairs. Both Derber and Lasch identify a tendency towards an economic rationalization of the life-world over and above that of money-driven commodification.

Ironically, we have here a perfect correspondence between– nay, reflection of – the economic base and cultural superstructure. The economic base of mental capitalism is reflected not only in celebrity culture, but in the culture of narcissm by and large. If confronting Derber's and Lasch's accounts of *Zeitgeist* with the account of the social product of mediated attention we even face a paradigm case of Leninist reflection

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[7] See Derber 1979/2000.

[8] See Lasch 1979.

theory. The irony, of course, is that the economic base of this production is definitely not material but purely phenomenal. We are dealing with conscious phenomena that do not exist in the mode of (physical) reality, but only in the mode of (mental) presence. They do not exist but by being actually experienced. They do exist actually, but can be denied reality. According to devout materialism they are but subjective illusions. What devout materialists do not understand is that economy is a principle of objective existence. Nothing can be scarce, e.g. without truly existing. Sometimes, business acumen is smarter than scientistic ontology.

Business acumen, though, is a disconcerting placeholder for common sense. The suspicion that the mentality of neoliberalism would not mind the takeover is what conjures up its downright dystopian connotations. However, in the case that both the diagnosis of the narcissic turn of culture and the analysis of mental capitalism hold, neoliberalism has infected contemporary culture further than both left-wing and conservative cultural criticism have realized so far.

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