



ARTICLE

Hypermodern Consumption and Megalomania

Superlatives in commercials

SIMON GOTTSCHALK

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, USA

Abstract.

Recent French sociological scholarship suggests the notion of *hypermodernity* to characterize the contemporary moment. While the meanings of this concept vary, the idea of excess seems central. Informed by this new scholarship, this article analyzes the superlative rhetoric in contemporary televised and internet commercials, and suggests elective affinities between this rhetoric and the various trends characterizing the hypermodern present.

Key words

commercials • excess • hyperconsumption • hypermodernity • individualization • megalomania • superlatives

INTRODUCTION: PERVERSE PROVOCATIONS

The commercials soothed America's pain, its head pain, its gas pain, its heartache, its loneliness, the pain of babyhood and old age, of being a parent and of being a child, the pain of manhood and women's pain, the pain of success and that of failure, the good pain of the athlete and the bad pain of the guilty, the anguish of loneliness and of ignorance, the needle-sharp torment

of cities and the dull mad ache of the empty plains, the pain of wanting without knowing what was wanted, the agony of the howling void within each watching, semiconscious self. No wonder advertising was popular. It made things better. It showed you the road. It wasn't part of the problem. It solved things. (Rushdie, 2001:88)

At the dawn of the 21st century, discussing the ubiquity of commercials in everyday life seems as unnecessary as describing the omnipresence of sand to desert-dwellers. From Marshall McLuhan who described commercials as the *Rosetta stone* of contemporary culture, to Barthes's *mythologies*, Baudrillard's *perverse provocations*, Ramonet's *silent propaganda*, and Lipovetsky's *hyperspectacles*, few social scientists dispute their centrality in contemporary society. According to Leiss et al.:

Global advertising in 2003 was a \$471 billion business, more than half of which, \$249.2 billion, were US advertising expenditures . . . Although the numbers fluctuate, agencies employ roughly 165,000 employees in the United States and 20,000 in London . . . Promotional communication permeates and blends with our cultural environment, punctuating our television watching, saturating our magazines and newspapers, and popping up in our Internet surfing, movies, and video games. In short, advertising has become an accepted part of everyday life. (2005: 3)

Moreover, it is not solely the increasing number of commercials or the amount of resources invested in them that is truly stunning but, as Ramonet (2000) documents, more insidious processes whereby the very logic of commercials is rapidly colonizing other mass media formats. While scholars have documented the numerous new tactics commercials deploy to capture our attention and cut through the increasingly loud media 'noise', my review of the literature suggests that most analyze the visual dimension of commercials (see for example Gabriel and Lang, 2006; Goldman, 1992; Goldman and Papson, 1996; Morris, 2005), but few examine the linguistic one (Bottenll, 2007; Hall, 1997; Myers, 1994; Tolson, 1996; Williamson, 1992). To some extent, this focus on the visual dimension is understandable both in terms of the emotional, visceral and psychological immediacy of the image as compared to language, and in terms of recent technological and aesthetic innovations that have radically transformed that dimension (Jhally, 1998). As Morris puts it:

The increased predominance in advertising of image over symbol or text . . . appears to be closely related to the political economy of post-Fordism since images have faster and more flexible communicative power when compared to many other media. Corporate control over popular taste and culture today can hence be described less as ideological than 'iconological' (Mitchell, 1986) or 'spectacular' (Debord (1994), with the semiotics of image and spectacle predominating in politics just as much as in advertising . . . (2005: 707)

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that televised commercials communicate through the artful combination of the visual and acoustic dimensions (language, paralanguage, sound effects, music score, etc.). While we should not minimize the mesmerizing power of the image, neither should we underestimate the importance of this acoustic dimension that is essential to the communicative power of commercial ads (see Gottschalk, 1999).

In this article, I focus on one particular component of the linguistic dimension: the superlative rhetoric. Because commercials are omnipresent in our lives, because they both evoke and accelerate contemporary cultural trends,' a focus on the superlative rhetoric is especially interesting as it documents the idea of excess that is so central to the hypermodern argument. Such a focus also provides a prism through which we can critically examine emerging social psychological trends. Accordingly, the purposes of this article are to examine contemporary televised and web commercial ads by paying particular attention to the use of the superlative rhetoric, and to link it to other trends characterizing the hypermodern moment. In the following pages, I review various sociological insights about hypermodern society, then explain the methods I used in this article, discuss my findings and suggest a few conclusions.

HYPERMODERNISM

'Hyper' is an idiom that designates the excessive, the reaching beyond a norm or a framework. It is located in the field of signification of superlatives, with a connotation of constant overreaching, of maximum, of extreme conditions. (Rheume, 2005:93).²

Recently, a growing number of prominent French social scientists have increasingly used the 'hyper' prefix to discuss contemporary social trends.

Gilles Lipovetsky's *Lc Bonheur Paradoxal: Essai sur la Societe d'Hyperconsommation* (2006) and *Hypermodern Times* (2005), Nicole Aubert's *L'Individu Hypermoderne* (2005a), Francois Ascher's *La Societe Hypermoderne* (2005a), and *Le Mangeur Hypermoderne* (2005b) are but a few examples of this trend. While these authors use the term 'hypermodern' in slightly diverse ways, they do agree about some of its core aspects. Aubert, for example, distinguishes hypermodernity from postmodernity by emphasizing the experience of intensity, instantaneity, urgency, instant gratification, and especially *excess*. As she explains:

By replacing it [postmodernity] by the term hypermodernity, we emphasize the fact that contemporary society has changed The essential mode of hypermodernity is excess, the overabundance of the event in contemporary world. It is this overabundance rather than the collapse of the idea of progress that is . . . at the origin of the difficulty to think the present, because it is overcharged with events that encumber it as well as the recent past. (2005b: 14-15)

Hence, while many of the arguments suggested by hypermodern theorists have already been advanced by postmodern ones, the focus on excess seems especially significant, and has been the topic of a substantial amount of research in areas as varied as occupational pressures, individualism, communication, competition, consumption, information, solicitations, crises, innovations, acceleration, decisions and risks. Indeed, the hypermodern moment is characterized less by a declining trust in what Giddens calls 'expert systems' than by the increasing and realistic certainty of their corruption and impending failures. To add insult to injury, while risks seem to multiply exponentially, we are also increasingly reminded that we bear sole responsibility when we make the 'wrong' choice. Accordingly, the finding not only of an increase but also of *new forms* of depression should hardly be surprising (see Ehrenberg, 2000).

The macro-sociological forces giving rise to and shaping the hypermodern moment are numerous, dynamic, and interact in complex, accelerating and unpredictable ways. Attempting to unravel them is beyond the scope of this article, which focuses on the micro-level articulations and experiences associated with hypermodernism. Because I am chiefly concerned with consumption and commercial ads, I will discuss the hypermodern moment by focusing first on these aspects of everyday life. In this regard, the work of Lipovetsky (2006) is especially interesting, because he

suggests that the hypermodern moment coincides with a new phase in the organization and motivations of contemporary consumption.

Lipovetsky's model: The three phases of consumption

In his most recent book *Le Bonheur Paradoxal: Essai sur la Societe d'Hyperconsommation* (2006), Lipovetsky divides the history of modern consumption in three interrelated phases. Characterized by the emergence of mass production and mass marketing, Phase 1 (from the 1880s to the First World War) was made possible by the modern infrastructure of transportation and communication, new technologies of production and the scientific organization of work. In addition, this first phase saw important inventions, such as brand names, packaging, advertising and department stores inventions that radically transformed the relation among consumers, producers, commodities and consumption itself.

Phase 2 (1950s—80s) is associated with the 'affluent society', the 'abundant society', 'mass consumption society' and other related concepts. For Lipovetsky, this phase signals the emergence of a new society, where constant growth and improved living conditions for all become a national project. Celebrating material comfort and equating it with happiness, this phase democratizes consumption by allowing increasing segments of the population access to material goods once considered luxurious, and witnesses the increasing stimulation of desires and the 'sexualization of signs and bodies'. Here, 'seduction replaces coercion, hedonism replaces duty, spending replaces saving, humor replaces seriousness, and liberation replaces repression' (Lipovetsky, 2006:31—2). Lipovetsky thus associates Phase 2 with a second individualistic revolution, which is characterized by 'a hedonist and psychological cult, by the privatization of life and individuals' experience of autonomy from social institutions' (p. 34). Consumption in Phase 2 is principally ostentatious, and consumers purchase commodities not so much in order to enjoy their use value but to establish their rank, and to classify themselves through a hierarchy of signs.

Phase 3 (1990s to today) designates the contemporary moment in which consumption has colonized every other social sphere. As Lipovetsky notes:

We find ourselves in a consumerist cosmos where antagonistic cultures have been eliminated and where the consumerist ethos tends to reorganize every other social behavior, including those once outside the mercantile logic. Little by little, the consumerist spirit has managed to infiltrate even family relations and

religion, politics and unions, culture and leisure time. Everything unfolds as if, from now on, consumption operates as an empire which never sleeps and whose boundaries are limitless. (2006: 12)

Phase 3 inaugurates hyperconsumption, which is characterized by *experiential* and *emotional* consumption. In this new phase, consumers do not purchase commodities to distinguish themselves from others but to live better, to enjoy fully life's pleasures, and to feel good about themselves (2006: 36). As Lipovetsky explains:

we want objects to live with, not to display them; we do not buy commodities because they enable us to show off and establish our social status, but because they gratify us emotionally, physically, sensually, and because they entertain us. We expect the commodities we buy to enable us to be more independent, more mobile, to have new sensuous experiences, to improve our quality of life, to keep us young and healthy. (2006: 38)

Thus, the motivation explaining the hyperconsumption of objects and services is neither being granted esteem, nor generating envy, nor enforcing vertical distinction between classes, nor announcing horizontal alignment and conformity within classes (Schultz, 2006: 58). In Lipovetsky's words (2006: 39), 'consumption for oneself has replaced consumption for the other'.

In Lipovetsky's model, consumption in Phase 3 has become 'hyper-individualistic' (2006: 95), and consumers increasingly buy what they desire as *individuals* rather than, for example, as members of a family unit, a social class or a status group.³ Many of the very commodities produced during Phase 3 (portable media players, such as the Apple iPod, personal computers, microwave ovens, single-serving frozen dinners, cell phones, etc.) reinforce the sovereignty of individualistic consumers, enable them to gratify instantly their desires, and to structure their own individualized time, space and favorite leisure activities. Moreover, as television, radio, the internet, commercial and other enterprises increasingly operate on a 24/7/365 schedule, consumption becomes 'turboconsumption', and the impatient pampered consumer expects to have 'what I want, when I want it, and where I want it' (Lipovetsky, 2006: 102; see also Gottschalk, 1999).

THE HYPERMODERN CONSUMER: FROM NARCISSISTIC TO MEGALOMANIAC

There is a 'mutual fit', an 'elective affinity', between the inanities of the consumer market and the incongruities of the task which individuals are presumed to perform on their own, their duty to compose individually the continuity which society can no longer assure or even promise. (Bauman, 2001: 24)

In the society of hyperconsumption, everybody feels entitled to the best and the most beautiful. (Lipovetsky, 2006: 44)

The megalomaniac differs from the narcissist by the fact that he wishes to be powerful rather than charming, and seeks to be feared rather than loved. To this type belong many lunatics and most of the great men of history. (Bertrand Russell)⁴

The argument that consumers seek to satisfy increasingly fragile and destabilized identity needs by purchasing commodities and services is not new. It has been the topic of considerable scholarship (Bauman, 2001; Gabriel and Lang, 2006), most famously in Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* (1978). In Lasch's view, commodities become charged with unconscious fantasies and symbolize our increasingly desperate need for an ego ideal:

The world of objects appears to hold the promise of delivery to our ailing narcissism . . . Today's Narcissus . . . sets about busily constructing an ego-ideal around idealized qualities of commodities, aided and abetted by the propaganda of the makers of dreams . . . He yearns for admiration and recognition from others, striving for intimacy . . . (Gabriel and Lang, 2006: 91)

However, as Lipovetsky suggests, today's turboconsumer might be motivated by different yearnings from the classical narcissist. As the consumerist logic is rapidly eliminating all alternatives, as it increasingly colonizes every life sphere, as the modes of production and consumption are being constantly revolutionized and globalized in an increasingly unstable and collapsing natural environment, consumers' motivations are themselves being transformed in profound if still unclear ways. Aubert, for example, remarks that:

this fundamentally individualistic personality develops in a society characterized by instant gratification and the explosion of all limits, a society in which the notion of sense is often

reduced to the instant and present moment, a society that seems unable to provide its members any other common referent than shared risk . . . In this context where one commits to oneself rather than to a cause, and where individuals — who have become first and foremost consumers — must struggle to maintain their social existence, we are witnessing . . . the emergence of new types of pathologies, a permanent hyper-competitiveness, and a completely new relation to time. (2005b: 14-16)

There are other problems as well. While modernity enforced the self as an individual project, and while the postmodern turn denounced the ideological underpinnings of the very notion of a self, De Gaulejac (2005) suggests that hypermodern conditions enforce new and paradoxical requirements:

Individuals are not only expected to be free, responsible, creative, and capable of initiating projects, they must also and simultaneously affirm an irreducible singularity . . . they must be similar yet different, affiliated yet unaffiliated. They must be common and uncommon, ordinary and extraordinary . . . We define ourselves less by our similarities to others than through exception, as if to be like everybody else was to be hopelessly anybody . . . One must thus escape the ordinary, reach beyond oneself, evade common categories, and project oneself in the conquest of the *grandiose self*. (2005: 132, my italics)

More troublesome still, this 'condemnation to succeed' is limitless and restless because it does not aim to reach a set goal but 'simply to be the best.' However, as De Gaulejac reminds us (2005: 131): 'the idea of perfection coincides with a desire for omnipotence . . . When this urge binds with unconscious megalomaniac desires, it is internalized and absolute.'

Combining De Gaulejac's argument about the enforced social psychological project of the hypermodern self with Lipovetsky's insights about turboconsumption, I suggest that the modern *narcissistic* consumer has become the hypermodern *megalomaniac* one. In other words, there are interesting, if troubling, elective affinities between (a) a hypermodern project of the self that fosters *megalomaniac* aspirations, (b) the *excessively hedonistic and individualistic* motivations underlying turboconsumption, and (c) the *superlative* rhetoric that seems so frequent in televised and web commercial ads promoting a variety of products, services, and media

programs. It is precisely this rhetoric that interests me here, and that I attempt to illustrate empirically. Before turning to the data, however, it is important to note that the superlative rhetoric has infamous historical precedents that require examination and reflection.

SUPERLATIVES AND NAZISM: VICTOR KLEMPERER'S WORK

Language does not simply write and think for me, it also increasingly dictates my feelings and governs my entire spiritual being the more unquestioningly and unconsciously I abandon myself to it ... (Klemperer, 2006: 203)

Because the aim of this research is not to assert representativeness but to explore communication patterns in commercial messages, my sampling procedure was purposeful. In other words, although I have collected hundreds of televised and web-commercials, I only selected those that met the simple criterion of articulating the superlative logic in some form. Practically, I manually recorded the slogans, brand names and products of those commercials appearing on television and on the internet, downloading the latter as well. Because of my enduring interest in commercials, I also revisited televised and web commercials I had collected for other papers that I published or presented at professional conferences (Gottschalk, 2007, 2008), and selected those that articulated a superlative logic. I then combined all those commercials in one large list. My final sample consisted of:

- 98 televised commercials, broadcast between 2005 and 2007. I also collected superlative slogans promoting televised programs (rather than products or services) by accessing websites displaying television listings in 2007;
- 52 web commercials, which appeared on the net in 2007. I downloaded all those on my computer for purposes of organization and presentation at professional conferences.⁵

Of course, because of space constraints, I only use a fraction of those here.

I decided to include only commercials appearing on television and the net because these two media seem to be the main sources of information and entertainment in the contemporary moment — a moment that is perhaps best characterized by its overwhelming technological revolutions. If, as Borgmann remarks, 'television remains the purest, i.e., the clearest and most attenuated, presentation of the promise of technology',⁶ the computer *delivers* this promise to literally everyone's fingertips. Since the computer screen is rapidly displacing the television set as the main site of interface

between self and 'reality', these two media seem particularly strategic for the purpose of my research. It goes without saying that a more comprehensive research could also include commercial ads that clutter the public space (billboards, buses, street benches, cars, taxi cabs, subways, airport terminals, train stations), those that adorn individual bodies (T-shirts, baseball caps, jackets, shoes), those that colonize magazines, daily newspapers, mailboxes, and packages of consumer goods, and those that interrupt radio programs, to name but a few possible additional sources of data.

Not being fully satisfied with the various conceptual schemes I developed to organize these commercial ads, and finding little help in the rather thin academic literature on the topic, I found Victor Klemperer's work to be particularly inspiring. A German Jewish professor of linguistics and literature, Klemperer was stripped of his professional title, employment, possessions and most everything else following the rise of Nazism in the 1930s. He survived the war by working in a factory, successfully hiding his Jewish identity and avoiding deportation to concentration camps. It is from that particular position that he wrote fascinating auto-ethnographic descriptions of everyday life under Nazism in *I Will Bear Witness: A Diary of the Nazi Years* (1999). However, his most famous work is probably *Lingua Tertii Imperii* (The language of the Third Reich) (2006), where he described the various changes the Nazi party introduced into everyday language.⁷ Applying his sharp linguist's skills to understand these changes, he reminds us of the importance of language as ideological and psychological agent:

The Third Reich coined only a very small number of the words in its language, perhaps — indeed probably — none at all . . . But it changed the value of words and the frequency of their occurrence . . . The most powerful influence was exerted neither by individual speeches nor by articles or flyers, posters or flags; it was not achieved by things which one had to absorb by conscious thought or conscious emotions. Instead, Nazism permeated the flesh and blood of the people through single words, idioms and sentence structures, which were imposed on them in a million repetitions and taken on board mechanically and unconsciously. (2006: 203—8)

Among the most important changes the Nazis introduced in everyday language, Klemperer (2006: 203—8) notes:

- (a) *Recurrent Words* ('spontaneous,"instinct,"fanatical/fanaticism,"blindly,' 'eternal,"alien to the species');

- (b) *Recurrent Expressions and Motives* ('the war was *imposed* onto a peace-loving Fuhrer,"the Jews' incommensurable hatred');
- (c) *Prefixes* ('world',"grand,"people'); and
- (d) *Neologisms* ('sub-humanity,"to de-Jew,"to aryanize,"to nordnize').

However, he points out that the most significant change in everyday language was the abuse of superlatives.⁸ He categorized those in three groups:

- (a) regular forms of the superlative (akin to adding the *est* suffix to adjectives in English);
- (b) sentence structure (sentences that, as he put it, are 'drenched' in superlatives); and
- (c) single expressions with inherent superlative value.

The third category is especially interesting, as it includes words and expressions that convey superlative ideas without using the regular form (*est* suffix), and while Klemperer did not organize those, his examples suggest the following classification:

- (i) Words and expressions that connote superlative *quality* ('total', 'complete','absolute').
- (ii) Words and expressions that connote superlative *quantity*. As Klemperer notes, the Nazis were obsessively claiming exorbitant numbers of killed enemy soldiers, of captured prisoners, of destroyed enemy tanks, etc., and popularized the expression '100%'.
- (iii) Words and expressions that connote superlative *space* (the frequent use of 'the world' to signify Germany, or territories conquered by Germany).
- (iv) Words and expressions that connote superlative *time* ('for ever','a Thousand Year Reich,"eternal,"everlasting,' etc.).

Using these categories as sensitizing concepts, I decided to re-analyze the commercials I had already collected on TV and on the internet, and through an iterative process, to collect additional ones when my various waves of analysis pointed at new directions, until I reached a point of category saturation (see Charmaz, 2006). As I show below, while the superlatives I found echo the examples discussed by Klemperer, I found new ones as well.⁹

SUPERLATIVE FORMS IN CONTEMPORARY COMMERCIALS

Regular form

In both televised and internet commercial ads, slogans that use regular superlative forms abound. While *Best Buy* is obvious, Nissan claims it sells the 'most powerful' and 'biggest' trucks, and Chevy has the 'most dependable' ones. Gillette promises its new razor gives 'the closest shave', and the Titanium model is the 'best value in shaving today.' Clorox Bleach promises the 'purest clean' and Cingular claims it has the 'fewest dropped calls.' IAMS food guarantees it will help make my cat 'the healthiest it can be' and Victoria's Secret reveals the 'hottest bra of the season.' Western Union declares it is the 'fastest way to send money,' and Oral B announces 'the most intelligent toothbrush'.

These regular forms of superlative are especially prevalent in ads promoting particular programs, series and movies on various TV channels. These include *Best of Sweet 16* or *Best Damn Sports Show Period*. Alternatively, other shows are titled *Worst-Case Scenario*, *Worst Jobs in History*, or *The Worst Witch*. Following the same simple grammatical form, the *Animal Planet* channel claims it is the 'most extreme', and other stations promote shows such as *Most Amazing Prophecies*, *Games' Most Spectacular Dunks*, *Life's Most Embarrassing Moments*, *Most Important People*, *Most Extreme Jobs*, and *Most Valuable Primate*. The otherwise informative National Geographic channel has developed a long televised series around this very superlative logic. It features: *Most Amazing Moments*, *Most Astounding Moments*, *Most Astonishing Moments*, and *Most Daring Moments*. Not to be outdone, the TBS channel claims it is the 'funniest place in prime time,' and other programs offer the *Sexiest Moments in Film*, *Survival of the Richest*, and *Funniest Pets & People*.

While this obsessive use of superlatives can be forgiven when it is used to promote rather simple-minded spectacles, it is especially worrisome when it is also deployed to promote news programs, which — in any rational society—should project a bit more seriousness and moderation (see especially Postman, 1985). Thus, MSNBC claims it is 'the most compelling cable news channel', and CNN declares it has the 'best political team on TV. Pushing the grandiose logic to wider horizons, the otherwise sober *The Economist* anoints itself as 'Arguably the Most Important Magazine in the World'.

Sentence structure

Klemperer's second category refers to sentences that are saturated with superlatives, and these take mainly two forms. The first simply consists of juxtaposing regular superlatives. For example, TV promotional ads

announce 'Hollywood's Hottest Romances and Biggest Breakups', and describe the Grammy Awards broadcast as 'The World's Greatest Night on the World's Biggest Stage'. VHI currently features a program titled *America's Most Smartest Model*, and another channel offers a series called *The Best of the Best*. The second form is more interesting because it combines regular superlative forms with subtler superlative expressions, which I develop below.¹⁰

Single expressions with implied superlative value

While the use and combination of 'most', 'least', 'best', and other regular superlative forms are direct but rather unsophisticated ways of communicating,¹¹ this third category contains more creative slogans that convey superlative ideas through subtler forms.

Quality

Klemperer noted the increasing use of superlative expressions such as 'complete', 'total', and 'absolute' in the Nazi discourse, and those also abound in contemporary commercials. For example, many tout products, services or companies as 'Maximum', 'Ultimate', 'Mega', 'Super', 'Titan', 'Ultra', 'Epic' and 'Absolut(e)', among others. One particularly unforgivable and crass instance of this form must surely be a recent Quizno's televised commercial featuring a rather bland young man, who excitedly declares 'prime rib is the *über* meat'. Less distasteful expressions connote a superlative quality by suggesting the idea of *uniqueness*. Thus, Fox News claims that it is the *'only one* network that has real journalism' and Hyundai states simply *'Only at Hyundai'*. Variations on this theme include for example: 'Look no further' (CMC), 'Like Nothing Else' (Hummer), 'Absolutely nothing works faster' (Tylenol), and 'No feeling like MP3 power' (Gillette). These expressions concretize De Gaulejac's argument that the social psychological compulsion to uniqueness has become de rigueur in the project of the self in hypermodern times. Repeated ad nauseam and referring to a wide variety of goods and services, this compulsion to uniqueness then becomes normalized and perhaps expected in other life-spheres as well. In any case, it perfectly symbolizes a new form of consumerism where every citizen feels 'special' and expects to have his/her unique personality flattered, and his/her needs catered to by the shopping malls, which have long replaced the temple, the mountain and the desert as the sacred sites of personal redemption and transcendence.

Quantity

The Nazi obsession with inflated numbers and percentages afflicts many of our commercials as well. From shows modestly titled *The 10 Most Wanted* or *TV's 10 Most Powerful Stars*, the quantities grow uncontrollably: *Much-Music's 20 Hottest Gals*, *The 30 Most Outrageous Celebrity Feuds*, *The Super-Bowl's Top 40 Commercials*, and *The 50 Most Dangerous TV Moments*. From here, we quickly reach the three-digit level with *The WO Most Wanted Bodies*, *The WO Most Metal Moments*, *The 101 Most Sensational Crimes of Fashion*, and *The 101 Sexiest Celebrity Bodies*, to name a few. The company Netflix claims victory with 'Over 1 Billion Movies Delivered Thus Far'.

While Klemperer observed the increasingly frequent use of the expression '100%' in the Nazi discourse (2006: 203), a contemporary equivalent is the growing use of '#1' to connote absolute superiority over competitors. Thus, for example, *Eyewitness News* claims it is the '#1 newscast', but so does the insufferable *Bill O'Reilly* show, which is also touted as 'the #1 show'. Echoing these claims, the Sharper Image claims '#1 customer satisfaction', ProActiv is the '#1 best acne medicine in America', Beck's is the '#1 export beer', while Hydroxycut is 'America's #1 weight loss program'. This simple expression concretely illustrates hypermodern theorists' observations of the new hypercompetitiveness characterizing contemporary sensibilities, as well as de Gaulejac's remark on the new compulsive imperative to be the best.

Space

Klemperer noticed that the Nazi discourse often used 'Germany' and 'the World' interchangeably to connote superlative space and domination, and the same logic organizes many of our commercial ads as well. Thus, Hyundai offers 'America's best warranty', Nissan declares 'America's most exciting full line', Mazda announces 'America's best economy car', and Cadillac claims 'the best of America's design'. Such claims of regional and national scope are especially prominent on televised commercials advertising upcoming shows. Examples include *Hawaii's Most Unwanted*, *Wild West's Most Wanted*, *America's Most Wanted*, *America's Funniest People*, *America's Most Talented Kids*, *America's Dumbest Criminals* or *America's Ugliest*.

While in the category above (quantities), numbers rapidly escalate from 10 to 1 billion, here also superlatives connoting the national level ('the best of America's design') are rapidly dwarfed by other ones that suggest increasingly larger territories. Thus Gillette claims it has the 'world's closest, most comfortable shave' and Nextel announces the 'world's most powerful Blackberry'. Cylaris claims the 'world's strongest weight loss formula' and

Duracell touts the 'world's longest lasting AA battery'. The same logic obtains for commercials promoting TV programs which carry titles such as *The World's Most Amazing Videos*, *The World's Most Awesome Record Breakers*, *The World's Most Extreme Homes*, *The World's Most Dangerous Police Chases*, and *The World's Ugliest Dog Competition*, among countless others. Raising the ante, the Animal Planet channel features *The Planet's Funniest Animals*, and other commercials use the adjective 'global' to describe products and services as varied as security systems, information, clothes and education. And at some level, there is something quite sinister and implicitly violent in these claims of world domination, which translate into the actual conquest of local and global economic markets, the destruction of other countries' cultural integrity and the ceaseless bombardment of their inhabitants' psychological territories.

Time

The infamous Nazi slogan announcing a 'Thousand Year Reich' constitutes a good example of single expressions that connote superlative time. Here again, similar expressions routinely appear in commercials for products, services, TV programs or movies. Thus, Victoria's Secret announces 'the hottest bra of the season,' TV ads claim that the movie *Night at the Museum* is 'the biggest comedy in history', and that *Bogeyman* is the 'scariest movie ever'. The use of 'ever' is especially interesting because — like 'only' — it also signifies absoluteness. Thus, Dodge announces 'for the first time ever' (although what has never happened before is not altogether clear), Hyundai claims 'lowest prices ever', Coors announces the 'coldest beer ever', Gillette promises the 'closest shave ever' and the internet Oracle service pledges it '*never* fails.' Surpassing these claims are commercials promising 'infinity' in order to sell products as varied as food, pharmaceuticals, publishing, technology management and firearms.

A relatively new expression communicating superlative time is the increasing '24/7' promise. It appears in such commercials as '24/7 Real Media', '24/7 Press Release', '24/7 Media Group', '24/7 Prayer' and even '24/7 Christ' — the latter referring to a website selling Christian apparel for those believers who simply cannot wait any longer. The '24/7' slogan is especially interesting, since it clearly articulates the spirit of turboconsumption, where every wish must be immediately satisfied, and where postponement of gratification is becoming increasingly inconceivable and unbearable (see Gottschalk, 1999). In so doing, these commercials communicate that in the increasingly global mode of turboconsumption, the promise of *instant* gratification is now boosted by the guarantee of a bulimic

constant gratification as well.¹³ While I have discussed elsewhere the fascistic elan driving the acceleration of everyday life (Gottschalk, 1999), the same spirit also informs the implicit claims of temporal saturation.

CONCLUSIONS

All excess leads to crime. (Voltaire, 1736)¹⁴

The decline of a language must ultimately have political and economic causes. The English language becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. (George Orwell, 1946)

In this article, I have explored the superlative rhetoric, which seems increasingly frequent in televised and internet commercial ads, and have compared those to the emerging rhetoric Klemperer observed in Nazi Germany. While it is clear that contemporary commercials replicate the categories developed by Klemperer, it is not my intention to suggest that commercial ads are Nazi-like, that the capitalist mode of turboconsumption is equal to Nazism or that commercial ads aim to produce Nazi personalities. Similarly, I am not suggesting that viewers *believe* that a certain diet pill is the best in the world, or that a certain movie is the funniest ever. But neither is such a belief necessary for a superlative logic to thrive, to become normalized, routinized, and to guide our consciousness, sense of self, desires, behaviors and social relations. As Cournut remarks, the hypermodern can be partly described as:

a collusion between the temptation toward excess and the means to achieve it. We must acknowledge that if the temptation is this intense, it is surely because our era provides ample means to achieve it and actively promotes it. (2005: 64)

Nevertheless, if the superlative rhetoric so audible in commercial ads does not articulate a totalitarian logic, it promotes what Benjamin Barber (2008) calls a *totalizing* one.

Its driving ideology is permanent consumption; its aim is the homogenization and flattening of diversity into the 'no-dimensional' identity of the consumer; its reach is 'the psyche's most remote and private geography,' (2008: 220); and its modus operandi is the infantilization of the adult population. Totalizing therefore, because the hyperindividualistic spirit inherent in the megalomaniac rhetoric helps reduce adult identity from the

responsible and engaged citizen of democratic communities to the isolated, self-centered and pampered consumer driven by an irrational sense of entitlement for unlimited, instant and constant gratification. Totalizing, because - in the last instance — the superlative rhetoric invites every consumer to withdraw within his and her own psychological world of facile self-satisfaction, since everyone is now guaranteed to be the 'best', the 'most', the 'sexiest' or the 'fastest', provided one can purchase the superlative commodity *du jour*. While the totalitarian state promises that surrendering to the party will unleash the *ubermensch*, the totalizing spirit drills the message that surrendering to the hyperindividualistic consumerist ideology will bring forth the superlative and ideal self.

While hypermodern individuals must indeed seek 'biographical solutions to systemic contradictions' (Ulrich Beck in Slater and Ritzer, 2001: 264), the superlative logic of turboconsumption that these commercials so loudly articulate problematizes the 'biographical' side of the equation by normalizing megalomaniac dispositions and aspirations — or an excessive narcissism. One important difference, however, is that the narcissistic personality needs *others* whose positive reflection is of paramount importance to him or her. He or she will experience a variety of powerful emotions when this positive reflection is not forthcoming and will engage in a variety of interpersonal strategies to produce it. As we have seen, however, turboconsumers neither care about others' esteem, nor are interested in generating envy, establishing vertical distinction or displaying horizontal conformity with members of their social class. They only want to gratify immediately exponentially multiplying individualistic wishes,¹⁵ and to ensure immediate and unfettered access to a wide array of commodities whose main function is to convince them that they are — and deserve - the best. Paradoxically, therefore, the very drive for hyperindividualism-through-consumption ends up producing conformity to the sacrosanct consumerist ethos, under the guise of meaningful differences.

In contrast to Lipovetsky, who remains fairly optimistic about hyper-consumption and its effects on contemporary citizens, it is worth remembering that:

consumer hedonism is neither playful nor innocent. Instead, it is the outcome of a culture in which the market becomes the dominant institution regulating relations among individuals and where tastes reign supreme, with little restraint from loyalty, morality, duty or love . . . The consumer becomes an addict capable of inflicting any amount of pain on others in order to

obtain what he or she believes will satisfy his or her desires.
(Gabriel and Lang, 2006: 111)

By normalizing hyperindividualism, megalomaniac aspirations and excessive consumption, the superlative consumerist logic, which replicates itself in other social spheres, erases the essentially social and collective dimension of any biography. When the consuming subject is increasingly seduced to establish relations with others and society at large that are apathetic at best, predatory at worst, and — paradoxically — *both* hyperindividualistic *and* conforming to the consumerist ethos, the task of finding biographical solutions to systemic contradictions is not only severely compromised but is also bound to unfold in pathological forms.¹⁶ By fanning and glorifying infantile dispositions, the megalomaniac rhetoric contributes to this totalizing project whose disastrous consequences are — at the time of this writing - ironically themselves diagnosed in superlative terms in the USA: worst inflation, worst housing market, worst unemployment, worst crisis in government, worst presidency.¹⁷ While prediction is always a risky business, it seems unlikely that either a social or a personality system organized around such principles can sustain itself for very long.

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Notes

1. See also Dru (2006), Jhally (1998), Lipovetsky (1983, 1987, 2005, 2006), Morns (2005), Ramonet (2000).
2. My translation. All the translations of citations by French authors are mine.
3. As Bauman's 'flawed consumers,' (2007) and Castel's 'individuals by default' (2005) amply demonstrate, class has not disappeared as a quintessential factor explaining consumption patterns. However, its meaning and experience have changed in the hypermodern moment.
4. Cited in 'Megalomania', Dictionary.com (n.d.).
5. I must insist that sampling is quite a different activity when conducted within the qualitative tradition. Because we seek to attain depth rather than representativeness, we sample on repeated occasions, guided by our emerging understanding of a phenomenon. Every wave of sampling will thus be different from and more focused than, the previous one.
6. Borgmann, Albert (1984: 52, 130), cited in Fisher, pp. 170-171.
7. Chicago School sociologist Harold Lasswell (Lasswell and Leites, 1965) also produced interesting quantitative analyses of Nazi and Soviet propaganda, among others. On the other hand, he did not detect the use of superlatives.
8. I acknowledge the irony of this statement.

9. I have not reproduced here all the commercials I have found in each category, but only use a few examples to illustrate them.
10. All the examples listed under the 'Space' and 'Time' categories illustrate this second and subtler type.
11. It might be interesting to explore whether different superlative forms are attached to various categories of products and pitched to differently sophisticated audiences. This project is, however, beyond the scope of this paper.
12. As Ritzer (2004) notes, McDonald's was perhaps the first to claim such extravagant numbers
13. See Lipovetsky (2006). That such expectations articulate infantile fantasies should be obvious, and will be the topic of a forthcoming essay.
14. Cited in Evene (1999-2009).
15. Bauman (2001; Rojek, 2004) has also traced the transformation of consumers motivation from need to desire to wish. As he notes: 'Desire has outlived its usefulness: having brought consumer addiction to its present state, it can no more keep pace. A more powerful, and above all more versatile stimulant is needed to keep the acceleration of consumer demand on a level with the rising volume of consumer offer. "Wish" is the much-needed replacement: it completes the liberation of the pleasure principle, purging the last residues of reality-principle impediments: the naturally gaseous substance has been finally let off from the container' (2001:14).
With the new immediacy of consumption enabled by the internet, the 'wish' might soon be replaced by the *impulse*.
16. That such dispositions are also both catastrophically destructive of the natural environment and other species goes without saying and has been the topic of a voluminous literature (see Gottschalk, 2001).
17. This article was concluded during the last months of the Bush administration in 2008.

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Simon Gottschalk is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Nevada Las Vegas. He is the author of dozens of journal articles and book chapters which merge critical theory with symbolic interaction theory to explore the society-psyche link in areas such as youth cultures, mental disorders, technology, mass media, terrorism, hypermodernism, social neuroscience, consumerism and computer-mediated communication. Address: Department of Sociology, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 4505 Maryland Parkway, Las Vegas, NV 89154-5033, USA. [email: karma@unlv.nevada.edu; Simon.Gottschalk@yahoo.com]

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