

# Theorising sameness and difference in South African television advertisements

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## Abstract

*An overview of current television advertisements suggests that the pre- and post-1994 endeavour to engage directly and explicitly with the differences that constitute this rainbow nation seem to be declining. I find this unfortunate as we are, after all, still a divided nation where pretending otherwise does not solve problems. Furthermore, advertisements that engage with differences are, as argued, often artistically creative and exciting, whereas those that are predicated on human sameness tend to be tired and predictable. This article also argues that advertisements that exploit human sameness are generally speaking more morally dubious than those that engage with human differences. The first part of this article starts by outlining the Continental endeavour to theorise an aesthetic of sameness, drawing parallels with South African branding strategies that advertently or inadvertently subscribe to such an aesthetic. The second part explains the poststructural argument for 'difference' and analyses how this argument opens the way to understand advertisements as being exceptionally well appointed for the metaphoric creation of new meanings.*

## Introduction

In my estimation the pre- and post-1994 South African television advertisements that deal with the diversity of our nation represent a high point in the history of branding in this country. An overview of current television advertisements suggests that this impetus to engage directly and explicitly with differences seems to be declining. I find this unfortunate as we are, after all, still a divided nation where pretending otherwise does not solve problems. Moreover, advertisements that engage with differences are, as this article will argue, often also artistically creative and exciting. The main argument is that South African television advertisements that are predicated on the thinking of human differences are often fresh and engaging, whereas those that are predicated on human sameness tend to be tired

and predictable. In tandem with this argument it is also argued that advertisements that are predicated on the notion of human sameness are, generally speaking, more morally dubious than those that engage with human differences.

To accomplish the above aims the argumentation draws on the Continental philosophical aesthetics tradition.<sup>1</sup> This is done because this influential tradition started out by arguing for the existence of a universal aesthetics of sameness and eventually turned around to deconstruct this possibility and set an aesthetic of difference as well as a metaphoric perspective on art in its place.<sup>2</sup> Considering that in the new South Africa we have the obligation and opportunity to engage with sameness and difference in all spheres of life, the article aims to demonstrate – both through analysis and illustrations – that the aesthetics of the Continental philosophical tradition is particularly helpful in coming to some understanding not only of the artistic merit, but also of the social relevance and ethical position of local advertisements.<sup>3</sup>

For greater focus it is necessary to explain that the attempts made by the aesthetics tradition to theorise a universal aesthetics, entail the notions of both an aesthetic ontology and teleology. Stated in a nutshell, the word 'ontology' means that categories of things and experiences may have universal, irreducible core essences, and the word 'teleology' refers to the idea of inevitable, predetermined historical progress. Seen in this manner, the aim of art is to discover its essence or origin – an aim that supposedly applies equally to all people at all times. In this analysis it is pointed out how Continental aesthetics, through the considerable influence of poststructuralism, eventually deconstructs this notion to arrive at an alternative surface aesthetics of difference.

To set up a counterpoint for arguing for the high ground of a poststructural aesthetics and ethics of difference, the first part of this article starts by outlining the Continental endeavour to theorise an aesthetic of sameness, drawing parallels with South African branding strategies that advertently or inadvertently still subscribe to such an aesthetic. This part also outlines two Continentally inspired aesthetic directions that started embracing difference, simultaneously drawing parallels with South African television advertisements that either eschew or embrace this transition to the thinking of difference.

The second part of this article explains the poststructural argument for 'difference' and analyses how this argument opens the way to understand advertisements as being exceptionally well appointed for the metaphoric creation of new meaning, hoping to convince the reader of the aesthetic and moral high ground of such a position with regard to television advertisements in South Africa.

## Part one

### *Traditional aesthetics*<sup>4</sup>

In theorising sameness and difference one can start with liberal humanist aesthetics as it is predicated on a given, universal, disinterested, pure, ontological aesthetic of sameness. Historic liberal humanist aesthetics attempted to discover in the aesthetic experience a 'common essential feature in terms of which human beings can be defined and understood' (Soper 1986:11–12). In Kant's theorising of the aesthetic experience as a pleasurable, disinterested experience, he means that if one, for example, experiences a landscape as pleasurable because of extraneous aspects such as nostalgia for a place of one's youth, or because one sees farming potential in the land, one is not having a pure aesthetic experience. By removing personal interests from the aesthetic experience, Kant attempts to instil an aesthetic of universal sameness that transcends individual differences and tastes.<sup>5</sup>

Liberal humanist aesthetics is also somewhat oxymoronically concerned with how pure aesthetic experiences can harmonise with universal human values. To understand this, one should note that humanism holds that if individuals are rational and reasonable, differences will dissipate into an ideal state of agreement. Degenaar (1986:43) explains as follows: 'Liberal humanism views the human condition in moral terms, applied in such a way to the individual that it can be universalised.' The possibility of reconciliation between self-realisation and a common humanity is beautifully expressed in the following quote, written in 1793 by the humanist, Schiller (1954:31): 'Every individual man ... carries in disposition and determination a pure ideal man within himself, with whose unalterable unity it is the great task of his existence, through all his vicissitudes, to harmonise.'

For many humanists art was (and for some, still is) exemplary of the possibility

of reconciling individuality with a common humanity as they see in it an activity where individual artistic appreciation or expression can, supposedly, harmonise with a universal, ontological aesthetic essence. For example, think of a tune that one hears for the first time, which (as tends to happen) often has immediate appeal, making one believe that somehow the tune has accessed some deep, universal aesthetic essence. Quotes in this regard are Kant (1952:75) remarking that the aesthetic experience derives from 'grounds deep-seated and shared alike by all men', and Schiller (1954:138) who wrote that 'only the communication of the Beautiful unites society, because it relates to what is common to them all'.

Despite many instances to the contrary, for example the halftones of Eastern music that sound somewhat 'eerie' to the Western ear, many people today still speak of music as a universal language. Although a position that promulgates that deep down inside we are all the same and that the 'universal' language of art has the potential to cement this identity, may seem to be magnanimous, in fact it is not. This is because humanism can be unmasked for hypocritically believing that the 'other' only needs proper edification to embrace the moral high ground of *my* tastes and values. West sums this up succinctly by saying that humanism can be criticised as a 'denial of the "other" [and a] reduction of difference to a devalued otherness for the sake of the security of our own identity' (1996:211). Lyotard (1984:66) is especially interesting in this regard as he emphasises the incommensurability of different language games, arguing that the 'recognition of the heteromorphous nature of language is a first step in [the] direction [of a just ethics]. This obviously implies a renunciation of terror, which assumes that [languages] are isomorphic and tries to make them so.' Lyotard is saying that one is collapsing the otherness of the Other and subsuming it under one's own identity, if one does not acknowledge the real differences amongst language games and groups.

A very high percentage of current television advertisements depict traditional humanist values such as heterosexuality, patriarchy, woman as nurturer, private ownership, the nuclear family and individuality as the only *normal* way to be and live.<sup>6</sup> While this tactic imbues brands with supposedly time-honoured

humanist values that we all supposedly agree upon, it also alienates and devalues minorities of a different persuasion. Moreover, in much humanist branding even the mainstream are devalued as they are stereotyped as insipidly banal. In such branding all people are depicted as aspiring to an idealised, meaningless good life, to 'braaivleis, sunny skies and Chevrolet', to lean bodies and, ironically, at the same time to the rampant consumption of the world's resources. In an off-shoot of humanist branding, the world consists only of sickly sweet, fulfilled or unfulfilled romanticised love (1).<sup>7</sup>

When further considering the question whether a universal, humanist aesthetic of sameness actually exists and whether it lends itself to interesting branding, it is insightful to consider abject aesthetics which, provisionally stated, refers to that which attracts and repulses simultaneously.<sup>8</sup> I start with Adorno as he became suspicious of a harmonious aesthetics of sameness. To him it seemed that such an aesthetic has the potential to sublimate concrete, unfair conditions of existence. Consider the following quote by Wolff (1981:89): 'The arts may express and depict great inequalities and suffering, but because these are transposed on to the aesthetic level, they simply act in a cathartic manner and in the process *affirm* the existing social relations.'<sup>9</sup> Succinctly put, the concern is that beautiful, harmonious art can lull people into accepting

the status quo, similar to the way in which religion is sometimes accused of being the opium of the people.

Because of this concern, as well as the related shock that the enlightenment belief in emancipatory progress could result in the holocaust, Adorno rejected harmonious aesthetics and developed the concept of a negative dialectic in its place.<sup>10</sup> Where the humanist aesthetics of harmonious sameness argued for the reconciliation of the differences that split human consciousness, Adorno's negative dialectic requires the continual disruption of the status quo, and in art (according to him) this equates to a continual disruption of formal aesthetic harmony. Adorno (1997:15) states: '... the concept of aesthetic pleasure [harmonious art] as constitutive of art is to be superseded.' In appreciation of Schönberg's a-tonal music that disrupts harmonies, Adorno (1967:149–150) writes:

Schönberg's music demands from the very beginning active and concentrated participation, the most acute attention to simultaneous multiplicity, the renunciation of the customary crutches of a listening which always knows what to expect ... It requires the listener spontaneously to compose its inner movement and demands of him not mere contemplation but praxis.

Adorno's enterprise of replacing humanist, harmonious, reconciliatory aesthetics with an



1 A compilation of still images from South African television advertisements that are predicated on humanist values.



2 Nando's, *Tribe of peri-peri lovers*. (2006.08.24).

aesthetic of perpetual dissonance and discord foreshadows the current interest in the abject, albeit that Adorno focused on formal qualities and the abject focuses on discernable content.

Abject aesthetics fully acknowledges that people are often fascinated by that which jolts harmonies; by discords, by things so different that they repel and attract at the same time.<sup>11</sup> One can explain further by referring to a much milder form of abjection, namely the desire that people have to travel to exotic places, which are often found appealing by virtue of their otherness. Branding has been relatively slow in cottoning on to the abject. The dominant paradigm still seems to be that advertisements must not 'offend sensitivities' (Agrawal 1995:27), but express widely appealing 'fun' as the aim is to sell products to as many people as possible through positive association.<sup>12</sup> Branding, it is believed, should even avoid setting up a contrast between a 'good' product and other negative aspects and emotions, as consumers mostly do not remember subtleties and may decide against purchasing a brand through misplaced association.

In product branding, the Nando's advertisements are notable exceptions as they exploit our human fascination with that which is abjectly different.<sup>13</sup> A recent 'humorous' Nando's advertisement depicts a tribe of peri-peri lovers with such long, protruding tongues that even their speech is impaired (2). One tribesman is shown lashing out his tongue in a froglike manner to catch a fly to eat! In my estimation most people should enjoy this advertisement, encouraging fast-food junkies to switch to Nando's through *positive* association with abjectness, with the manner in which this advertisement 'spices' up life by disrupting humanist harmonious sameness.

Another noteworthy example in this regard is the Eskom advertisement, which aims to discouraging the stealing of electricity (3). In



3 Eskom, *'Izinyoka'*. (2006.08.14).

it, 'izinyoka' (thieves) are depicted as abject, futuristic, science-fiction characters, complete with eyes that glow in the dark. Although the abject 'izinyoka' end up behind bars for their actions, they are such exciting personalities that one should not be surprised if especially young people are encouraged to follow them as role models, taking their chances at being caught. Personally, I enjoy this advertisement, though I doubt it will have the intended outcome, because it does not take into account the attraction that the abject has for humans.

Next it is insightful to consider formalist aesthetics, as it takes the notion of an ontological aesthetics of sameness to the extreme, eschewing all narrative, 'humanist' content for formal, abstract qualities such as line, form, texture and colour. In this regard Kant (1952:66) writes: '... it will at the same time be observed that sensations of colour as well as of tone are only entitled to be immediately regarded as beautiful where, in either case, they are *pure*.' Furthermore: 'In painting, sculpture, and in fact all the formative arts, in architecture and horticulture, so far as fine arts, the design is what is essential' (1952:67). Following Kant, it is possible to trace a line of theorising and art practice through Baudelaire, Wölfflin, Fry and Bell, to Greenberg, amongst others, in the second half of the twentieth century, who argue that art's principle vocation is to discover the essence of the aesthetic. This supposed aesthetic essence was theorised with reference to formal 'laws' such as significant form, order in variety, idealisation, perfection, balance, proportion and, above all, harmony. These are supposed to be universal aesthetic principles that apply in the same manner to all people of all times.

On the question whether a formal harmony of sameness exists and whether it is self-sufficient enough to form the basis for producing exciting advertisements, it is

insightful to consider the well-acclaimed BMW advertisement that depicts kinetic sculptures. I am referring to the advert that consists only of clips of truly magnificent wind-powered sculptural walking machines, with the artist explaining that his sculptures 'map the progress of mobility' and that 'the walls between art and engineering exist only in our minds' (4). Right at the end of the advertisement the BMW insignia appears on-screen, implying that this brand of vehicle embodies the perfect union between engineering and advanced avant-garde aesthetics.

While it is possible to argue that the success of this advertisement is primarily due to the formal, harmonious beauty of the walking sculptures, and that this applies equally to all people, such a view is reductive. Granted, it may be that the formal qualities draw us towards this advertisement and that most people enjoy them, but thereafter the mediating clues such as the words 'the walls between art and engineering exist only in our minds', set our minds spinning conceptually, and not purely aesthetically, about the relationship between aesthetics and technology.

One can, for example, think about Harley Davidson as they not only patented their technology, but also the aesthetic beat of their engines; car body styling, where drag co-efficiency and lifestyle interact; or interior styling where safety, comfort and 'image' are inseparable. Furthermore, one can think that the modern car is not merely a convenience for getting from one place to the next, but that it also embodies the best humankind can currently produce in terms of both engineering and aesthetics. It also dawned on me that Nietzsche's well-known statement that 'only as an aesthetic phenomenon is the world and existence eternally justified', applies equally to cars as to paintings, to life as to art.<sup>14</sup> So, despite a certain ontological and teleological pretentiousness to the BMW advertisement, one can appreciate it for more than its formal, harmonious qualities. In my view the formal qualities only draw us in and seduce us to take the trouble to engage conceptually with the advertisement and in the process generate meaning.

With regard to analysing sameness and difference it is also worth considering avant-garde aesthetics, which was essentially predicated on the notion that progressive artistic expression opens up a universal utopian

future that applies equally to all people.<sup>15</sup> However, this endeavour, as exemplified in formalist avant-gardism in particular, eventually burnt itself out in the rapid succession of abstract, reductive style-isms of late modern art: cubism, constructivism, abstract expressionism and minimalism. Their teleological endeavour to discover the supposed ontology of visual aesthetics ended in a kenosis – solid black paintings and erased drawings – to my mind the self-realisation and deconstruction of the notion of an ontological visual essence of sameness.

The avant-garde cult of progressiveness had its counterpart in scientific and technological progressiveness, with both art and science today holding a much more guarded view of progress and utopia. As the artistic avant-garde ended in a kenosis, the cult of scientific progress has realised through factors such as AIDS, rampant consumerism, Third-world poverty and global warming, that our human condition is simply one where utopia is unattainable.

However, in branding, many advertisements nevertheless align products with a kind of global, progressive, scientific utopia that supposedly applies equally to all people. Many cleaning product advertisements, such as soap powder commercials, fall into this category with their pseudoscientific 'nonsense disguised as information' jargon. In my view these attempts at universal progressiveness are so terribly insulting to one's intelligence that they should only be screened during the worst soapies (pun intended), where they might be appreciated.

Interestingly, one local Castrol advertisement parodies and deconstructs *international* Castrol advertisements with their pseudoscientific jargon of scientific progress (5). I am thinking of the advertisement where, out in the wilds, garage-hands watch a Castrol advertisement being done in the progressive international style, about how Castrol with 'Magnatech' makes the oil stick to your engine's parts, which, according to the advertisement, is particularly beneficial in the cold. A breakdown in transmission stimulates word-play about the 'parts' of a black man who is having a shower out in the open, and, according to the banter, his 'parts' evidently do not need any protection from the cold. This humour may not be everybody's cup of tea; nevertheless, the deconstruction of international pseudoscientific nonsense through local characters and visuals

makes this advertisement commendable in my estimation.

For the purpose of theorising sameness and difference it is also insightful to consider two opposing feminist art theoretical perspectives, namely Germaine Greer's *The obstacle race* (1979) and Rosalind Miles's *The women's history of the world* (1993). *The obstacle race* aims to discover and reclaim forgotten or neglected female artists and add them to the traditional 'male' canon. In effect, this approach is still predicated on ontological sameness, as it does not deconstruct the notion of an ontological canon, but aims to correct prejudicial exclusion from the canon. In contrast to this, *The women's history of the world* argues that women have their own artistic lineage, albeit a suppressed heritage that needs to be uncovered. The first approach obviously upholds humanist claims of sameness, whereas the latter starts to think 'difference'.

In terms of thinking difference, Kristeva has been particularly influential in writing women into history in their 'irreducible difference', in contradistinction to the manner in which they have been constructed as the 'deficient and subordinate other of man' (West 1996:213). Broadly speaking, the point that feminists such as Kristeva, Le Doeuff and Irigaray make, is that it is not enough simply to accept women into the long-established male order as equals, as a radical re-structuring of society in terms of female principles is required.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, it is only '[w]hen each sex acknowledges the radical otherness of the other [that] mutually rewarding exchanges between them become possible', writes Grosz (1989:179).

In South African television advertisements the radical otherness of women is seldom

recognised, as women are essentially depicted as the 'deficient and subordinate other of man'. Take the old, essentially male-centred triad of sex, power and money, where it is clear that women are at best depicted as willing sub-missives or at worst as behind-the-scenes connivers. One also needs to consider advertisements that degrade female principles. Here it is especially the beautiful principle of nurturing that is turned into something insipid through much branding. I have in mind advertisements that portray women as if their only concerns are protecting the family from germs and dirt and that, ironically, portray these same women mindlessly feeding the family overly processed garbage for food.<sup>17</sup>

Advertisements that actually challenge deficient, subordinate, stereotypical images of women are rare; one notable exception is the *Joko gold* advertisement where a beautiful woman in a service capacity at an airport turns the tables on a self-important, chauvinistic male business-class passenger (6). She does this by deliberately misunderstanding his pompous question: 'Do you know who I am?' and retaliates by sweetly asking (over the public address system) whether anybody knows the man, as he has forgotten who he is. While this advertisement on the one hand deconstructs male superiority, on the other it also recognises the differences between the sexes.

Post-colonial aesthetics is especially relevant when theorising sameness and difference, as it excels in unmasking the myth that Euro-American Western art possesses universal validity on ontological and teleological grounds.<sup>18</sup> Regarding Western metaphysics that, significantly, went hand in hand with Western



4 BMW, *Wind-powered walking sculptures*. (2006.05.15).



5 Castrol, *Magnatech*. (1999.03.28).

art, Derrida (1982:213) writes the following in a well-known passage:

Metaphysics – the white mythology which reassembles and reflects the culture of the West: the white man takes his own mythology, Indo-European mythology, his own *logos*, that is, the *mythos* of his idiom, for the universal form of that he must still wish to call Reason.

Here Derrida deconstructs thinking that evaluates Western thought as objective and rational and therefore applicable to all, and devalues ‘other’ thinking as mythological and irrational. Similarly, post-colonial aesthetics has questioned the universal applicability of Western art by unmasking flagrant Eurocentrism, analysing the tension between globalisation and regionalism, experimenting with homogenisation and heterogenisation, setting up hybridity and creolism against purity, noting inclusivity and exclusivity, destabilising hierarchical binaries and questioning traditional relationships between artistic centres and margins. In the wake of post-colonial aesthetics, nobody nowadays speaks of New York as the ‘centre of the artistic universe’, as the respected Lucie-Smith (1977:49) did in 1966, and gets away with it without being branded a cultural dinosaur. First-World, Euro-American art simply no longer sets a supposed ontological or teleological standard of sameness for the rest of the world to follow.

In advertising, the debate involving First-World internationalism versus regional differences has been going on for some time. Agrawal (1995:26) sums up this debate as the ‘standardisation/adaptation issue’. Here we find that those in favour of so-called international branding tend to justify their preference on

the argument that all people are ‘basically’ the same, just as fine art did before post-colonial aesthetics. Way back in 1967 Fatt (1967:60) wrote of ‘the danger of “local” international advertising’ and also remarked approvingly that ‘a growing school of thought holds that even different people are *basically* the same, and that an international advertising campaign with a truly universal appeal can be effective in any market’ (1967:61).

The quote by Fatt, apart from being tautological, smacks of aesthetic and ethical hegemony that (to repeat a previous quote) boils down to ‘a denial of the “other” [and a] reduction of difference to a devalued otherness for the sake of the security of our own [first world] identity’. Moreover, when unmasking Fatt’s economic agenda, one does not have to be a ‘boa-deconstructor’<sup>19</sup> to realise that under the patronising guise of sameness, First-World multinationals are not only content with hijacking emerging markets, but are also bent on putting local branding houses out of work in the process.

To my thinking that will be a great pity, as many of the advertisements that set themselves apart from international sameness by engaging with distinctly different South African visuals and issues, are very engaging. One example is the Sanlam advertisement of a sweet, middle-class Indian couple having total peace of mind while being burgled by an Indian (7). It raises many differences or tensions regarding stereotyping, class distinctions and political correctness, but provides no visionary solutions. At the start it is somewhat politically correct as it is an Indian burgling Indians of the same class, where both the burgled and burglar are so sweetly civil about the whole affair, so different to what one imagines or has



6 Joko gold, *Turning the tables on a pompous businessman*. (2006.07.23).



7 Santam multimax, *Peace of mind whilst being burgled*. (2005.04.03).

experienced while being burgled, that on the first take it makes one want to redefine one's perception of the 'other'. However, on further contemplation one comes to realise that the advertisement has a morally dubious side, as it firstly turns violence and the violation of privacy into something normal, and it secondly promulgates the notion that peace of mind is a consumer commodity that can be bought like any other. However, as with all things artistic, things are not quite so simple, as my (and other people's) reflections on this advertisement foreground the critical absurdity of the South African crime situation, turning this advertisement into an accomplished piece of open-ended social commentary on the one hand, and into a deconstruction of constructs of sameness on the other.

This part of the article argued that branding that aims for human sameness and universal progress generally ends up being tired and predictable. It also drew attention to the negative stereotyping, coercion, exclusivity and hierarchical thinking that are present in much branding that is based on the notion that deep down we are all the same. It also indicated that feminist and post-colonial aesthetics started to think 'difference' and deconstruct sameness – a shift that is essentially predicated on poststructural insights and strategies – the focus of the following section.

## Part two

### *Poststructural aesthetics*

As stated in the introduction, in this part of the article the aim is to deconstruct a humanist aesthetics of sameness and argue for the artistic and ethical high ground of both a celebration of differences as well as a metaphoric perspective on the likeability and social relevance of advertisements.

Poststructuralism foregrounds language in coming to an understanding of the human psyche.<sup>20</sup> Whereas the idea of a universal aesthetics presupposes that humans have meaningful experiences and insights that are *unmediated*, poststructuralism holds that all meaningful experiences and insights are *mediated* by systems of signs, of which discursive language is exemplary. In other words, there are no meaningful experiences and ideas that exist independently of language. Heidegger (1971:134) makes this point as follows: 'In order to be who we are, we human

beings remain committed to and within the being of language, and can never step out of it and look at it from somewhere else.'

In his influential *General course in linguistics*, Saussure (1986:148) also wrote that there are no 'ready-made ideas before words'. Although Saussure (1986:148–151) starts out by distinguishing between the material signifier (a sound, for example), and the signified (what the sound means) he soon deconstructs this distinction, principally through the insight that in languages there are no 'positive' terms, only differences. Saussure (1986:167) writes that 'in language there are only differences. Even more important: a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences *without positive terms*'. This means that in language there is no one-to-one relationship, no analysable correspondence between a term and a thing, feeling or concept outside of language itself. In this regard Miller (in Neal 1988:152) writes of 'our linguistic predicament in not being able ... to declare what a thing is, except by saying it is something else'.

To explain further, it is insightful to consider an 'abstract' term such as 'love'. When a person declares that they love someone, this can mean many things: I want to make love to you / I will nurture you / I am prepared to make a commitment / I like being with you, and so forth – and all of these meanings again have meanings of their own – and so on and so forth. This is why Saussure (1986:161–165) made the point that language functions like a chain, where one change affects the whole structure. According to Saussure (1986:162) 'language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others'. Echoing this, the influential deconstructionist philosopher, Derrida (1982:11), writes:

... the signified concept is never present in and of itself, in a sufficient presence that would refer only to itself. Essentially and lawfully, every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences.

Meaning is, in other words, not a positive entity out there (for example, a universal aesthetic experience which we discover and for which we later find a corresponding term),



but instead meaningful experiences and thoughts are generated by the play of surface distinctions within systems of signs themselves.

It is illustrative to consider binary opposites, i.e. terms where one cannot imagine one without the other: God/man, high/low, interesting/boring, colourful/bland, rational/irrational, universal/particular and so on. It is by drawing such distinctions that humans create meaning, but, as explained above, simple analysable binaries that can be neatly pinned down do not really occur, as each term in a binary interacts chainlike with a multitude of other terms. For example, an unmediated sunset means very little, because to get meaning from experiencing the play of redness against blueness, we consciously or unconsciously need to 'chain' redness into, let's say, loving, and the changing sky into the transience of life with cycles of birth and death, and the magnitude of the sky into our smallness against sublime expanses, and so on.

Apart from humans not having meaningful, unmediated access to reality, we must consider the nature of language itself. This is because if language itself had a stable, universal structure, an essence that one could fathom once and for all, the possibility of a universal, timeless truth and meaning, or a depth aesthetic, could not be excluded.<sup>21</sup> However, if language proves to be unstable, if the structure through which we make sense of the world is a labile one, the possibility of a universal, timeless depth aesthetic must be excluded. And as we know, language constantly changes. This is borne out by simple observations. For example, the work of grammarians and dictionary makers who aim to standardise and ossify language, is never done. One can consider that those who regard the Christian Bible as an originary truth nevertheless find it necessary to regularly update it through new translations. Also, consider that someone who entered a Trappist monastery 30 years or so ago will understand very little of computer language today.

I have firstly argued that humans do not have access to a reality that is not mediated by a network of signs; secondly, that in this network there are no positive terms; and, thirdly, that this network is labile by nature. Stated succinctly, with a labile network and no positive terms we have no ontologies or origins, which means that the notion of a timeless truth and a depth aesthetics that is the same for all, is merely a fiction.

For those who are made uneasy, even panicky, by the poststructural argument that the human psyche is best understood as a networking play of surface signifiers with no origins, things are made even worse by parallel developments in reproductive technologies. I say this as the effortless multiplying by new media technology of images also undermines the authority of the 'original', often making it difficult to distinguish between the so-called real and the imaginary. According to Kearney (1988:2) '... images have displaced the "original" realities they were traditionally meant to reflect. The real and the imaginary have become impossible to distinguish.' Think of the Gulf War, where televised reporting soon overrode the authority of the event itself.<sup>22</sup>

In writing that has parallels with McLuhan's *The medium is the message* (1989), Baudrillard (1994:3) also argues that we can no longer draw fundamental distinctions between reality and simulations of reality. According to Sim (1992:403) Baudrillard writes as if '[w]e live in a "hyperreality" surrounded by simulacra and simulations ...'. However, we should not make the mistake to regard 'hyperreality' and 'simulacra' as false because as Poster (1988:6) explains '[i]nstead of a "real" economy of commodities that is somehow bypassed by an "unreal" myriad of advertising images, Baudrillard now discerns only a hyperreality, a world of self-referential signs'. Because of this Baudrillard (1988:34) believes that '[e]verything is finally *digested* and reduced to the same homogeneous fecal matter'.

In Baudrillard's view commodities become fetishised; we consume purely for the sake of desire and not to satisfy 'real' needs. Poster (1988:1) explains: 'In a commodity the relation of word, image or meaning and referent is broken and restructured so that its force is directed, not to the referent of use value or utility, but to desire.' Think of the Verimark and Glomail style of branding, where it does not really matter whether a product is functional as long as it lends itself to the stimulation of desire. Take exercising machines for example, that, despite being no more effective than mowing the lawn or taking a brisk walk, lend themselves to show off and stimulate the desire for a lean, perfect body. Or, think of artificial baby milk, where nutritional value is swallowed up into branding hype that glamorises such formulas above good old breast milk.

However, there is also a positive side to the deconstruction of depth ethics and aesthetics, namely that the poststructural deconstruction of unmediated truth and meaning has led to process and context being highlighted in human understanding. In Nietzsche's (1967b:298) attack on the notion of unmediated thinking, he makes this point as follows:

'Truth' is therefore not something there, that might be found or discovered – but something that must be created and that gives a name to a process, or rather to a will to overcome that has in itself no end – introducing truth, as a *processus in infinitum*, an active determining – not a becoming-conscious of something that is in itself firm and determined. It is a word for the 'will to power'.

The crucial point here is that one should not equate meaning with *deep* truth or with *the* meaning of life as such, as surface networking, in other words, conventional and institutionalised meaning can be very meaningful indeed.<sup>23</sup> This is also the mistake Baudrillard (1988:34) makes in his reasoning (although, in my view, he undoubtedly does it for literary, rhetorical and persuasive effect), when he says that the fact that we have no positive, unmediated terms and therefore no *absolute* hierarchies, means that everything is reduced to the same 'homogeneous fecal matter'. The deconstruction of meta-hierarchies simply does not mean that one cannot identify colourful little differences, find these fascinating, air one's preferences and live a meaningful and moral life.

This raises the point that because we cannot fall back on notions of *absolute* meaning, the onus is on each individual to take account of the complexity of surface networks and

differences and create meaning for themselves, whilst at the same time acknowledging their own inter-subjective, decentred position within this network. For example, in my first draft of this article I *immediately* targeted the *Harpic toilet cleaning challenge* advertising campaign as downright irritating (8). However, on *mediated* second reflection it becomes apparent that this campaign is tongue in cheek, as it consciously makes a parody of irritating over-the-top stereotypes. In this advertisement a white male couple (one of whom is overtly camp) is depicted in the role of toilet cleaning experts, with the discord between 'camp' and 'toilet cleaning' being sufficient to jolt one into second reflection on one's own expectations and prejudices. This mediation improved the advertisement for me, but also made me consider why the *Polka* campaign – which follows a similar strategy, in this case by stereotyping the idiosyncrasies of different ethnic groups – works so much better (9). I believe it is due to the empathetic manner in which this campaign pokes fun at ethnic differences, but obviously the nuances and complexities are endless, and an excess of mediated meaning is possible, which will now be unpacked further in the final section below.

### *The metaphoric creation of new meaning*

On the one hand it is possible to equate the poststructural argument (that the human psyche is best understood as a networking play of surface signifiers with no positive terms or origins), with nihilism. However, on the other hand – and this is crucial – the very interactivity of the sign creates the possibility of an endless creation of new meaning. Regarding this Cilliers (1990:3) writes that meaning is 'the effect of play, and not *determined* by



8 Harpic, *Toilet cleaning challenge*. (2007.01.17).



9 Polka, 'Serious'. (2004.01.13).

relationships. Instead of pinning it down, the interactive nature of the sign allows meaning to proliferate, to be excessive'.

In Heidegger's *On the way to language* (1971:136) he pays homage to Von Humboldt (1888), an early language philosopher who was ahead of his time in grasping the potential of language to create new meaning. Heidegger (1971:136) quotes the following:

Without altering the language as regard its sounds and even less its form and laws, time – by a growing development of ideas, increased capacity for sustained thinking, and a more penetrating sensibility – will often introduce into language what it did not possess before. Then the old shell is filled with a new meaning, the old coinage conveys something different, and the old laws of syntax are used to hint at a differently graduated sequence of ideas. All this is a lasting fruit of a people's *literature* and within literature especially of *poetry* and *philosophy*.

The fact that 'old shells and coinage' can start conveying new meaning can be understood as the metaphoric creation of new meaning. In a process that Hegel (1975:404) names 'Aufhebung' he, for all his metaphysical speculation, demonstrates remarkably clear insight into such metaphoric creation:

... every language already contains a mass of metaphors. They arise from the fact that a word which originally signifies only something sensuous is carried over into the spiritual sphere ... [where] gradually the metaphorical element in the use of such a word disappears and by custom the word changes from a metaphorical expression, because, owing to readiness to grasp in the image only meaning, image and meaning are no longer distinguished and the image directly affords only the abstract meaning itself instead of a concrete picture.

One can explain further by considering the word 'nothing'. Where 'nothing' in all likelihood initially denoted 'no thing' – the absence of a physical object – we have stopped thinking like this when hearing this word, but rather think of a kind of abstract nothingness. One can thus think of metaphoric processes as ones where clear meaning and a new unclear 'spin' on that meaning can, as it were, *Aufheben* into new, clear meaning. For example, consider how a phrase such as 'surfing the web' no longer

carries the metaphorical connotation that searching on the Internet is like riding a wave on a board. In other words, it has transformed from a metaphoric into a literal meaning, and in the process new meaning has been created.

One must, however, realise that new terms or meanings, such as 'nothing' or 'surfing the web' (as explained above) are only temporary conventions that are themselves waiting to be either transformed into new meanings or else to fall into oblivion. With regard to the question of what truth is, Nietzsche (1986:219) also highlights metaphors:

[Truth is a] mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins.

For rhetorical purposes Nietzsche celebrates only the labile moments in metaphoric processes and not the points of rest and clarity or new meanings. Negatively speaking, the points of rest and clarity can be understood as dead metaphors, but positively speaking these points of rest and clarity are essential, else we will be living in constant chaotic flux. What is, however, important is that one realises the *provisionality* of such points of rest and clarity, the fact that every new meaning again has the potential to be metaphorised into new meaning through the act of situating signs differently.

However, if Heidegger is correct these provisional meanings must not be discounted or devalued for their provisionality, as they can have very real, concrete consequences for the way we live our lives. Heidegger (1971:62) goes so far as to say that metaphors ('projective saying', in his words) do not only create new meaning – they actually bring a new world, a new concrete reality into being. In *On the way to language* he suggests that even a scientific accomplishment such as space travel was made possible by metaphor, by projective saying. Heidegger (1971:62) explains as follows: '[i]f the word framing that order and challenge had not spoken: then there would be no sputnik'. One can explain by saying if no one had

articulated the dream of flying, we would still be earthbound.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that branding that aims for human sameness and universal progress generally ends up being boring, bland, spiceless, kitsch and irritating. It has also drawn attention to the negative stereotyping, coercion, exclusivity and hierarchical thinking that are present in much branding that is based on humanist sameness. Furthermore, it has also indicated that feminist and post-colonial aesthetics started to think 'difference'. In fact, deconstructive strategies were applied, as arguably best worked out and formulated by Derrida (1982:41):

In a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a *vis-à-vis* (facing terms), but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment.

Although such strategic reversals of hierarchical binaries are essential for levelling the playing field – just imagine a Mrs. Muscle super-heroine flying in to help a man with his cleaning problems! – one can argue that such reversals can get tiresome, as nothing new is created in the process.<sup>24</sup> The section *The metaphoric creation of new meaning* counteracted this misgiving by explaining how poststructural theory also provides insight into processes where we not only allow silenced voices back into the game, but also provide space for voices that have never been heard, where we allow for the unfolding of that which cannot be foreseen. It is crucial to realise that the metaphoric creation of meaning differs vastly

from the thinking of sameness that aims at discovering universal, timeless, pre-existent meaning. Echoing Nietzsche, one can say that the creation of meaning has shifted from the notion of *discovering* unmediated, pre-existing meaning, to the *invention* of new meaning by situating signs differently.<sup>25</sup>

With regard to a new rainbow democracy with place for eleven official languages, humanist, Marxist (Adorno excluded), formalist and avant-garde aesthetics would promulgate attempts to *discover* a harmonious cultural melting pot of humanist values and aesthetics – a universal language, if you like. In opposition to this kind of thinking and in line with poststructural thinking, this article has argued that differences should be celebrated.

However, we should not make the mistake of regarding differences themselves as innate or absolute, for as Nietzsche (1967b:547) astutely points out: 'The old habit ... of associating a goal with every event and a guiding, creative God with the world, is so powerful that it requires an effort for a thinker not to fall into thinking of the very aimlessness [read differences] of the world as intended.' So, following Nietzsche, celebrating differences does not exclude the possibility that through metaphoric engagement with differences we can *invent* new unforeseeable sameness. Who, for example, would have guessed that an advertisement (*Klipdrift*) would have the nation 'eishing' together (10)?<sup>26</sup>

There is fairly high consensus among the world's art institutions that art is an excellent space for metaphorically situating signs differently. However, from a poststructural perspective not only art and creative language, but any human system of signs – where signs may be situated differently (such as engineering, building and branding) – has the potential to create new meaning. So, in my opinion branding has the potential not



10 Klipdrift, 'eish'. (2005.02.09).



11 Castrol, 'Ja, boet'. (1994.07.25).

only to contribute to the essential task of deconstructing old colonial, apartheid and struggle hierarchies, but also to contribute to opening up unforeseeable possibilities that, importantly, stand a good chance of actualising as a result of the high exposure of advertisements. Think of the 'Ja, boet' *Castrol* advertisements which surely played a part in making the new South Africa happen (11).<sup>27</sup>

It is clear by now that the *Castrol*, *Polka*, *Nando's* and *Klipdrift* campaigns have particularly caught my attention. They are engaging because they situate signs differently and celebrate differences, displaying some or all of the following characteristics: (1) they are *differently* South African; (2) they engage with ethnic and other minority *differences*; (3) they are politically risky by playfully deconstructing the authority of the humanist tradition of *sameness*; (4) they don't shy away from abject *differences*; and (5) they are metaphorically open-ended. This article has argued for the high ground of such advertisements, both aesthetically and ethically, and I would urge consumers to reward such advertising campaigns by consciously switching to the brands that they advertise.<sup>28</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Hereafter referred to as 'the aesthetics tradition' or 'Continental aesthetics'. Continental aesthetics encompasses a German lineage that includes Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Benjamin, Adorno, Heidegger, Gadamer and Habermas. This lineage was overlapped and extended by French philosophers such as Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, through to postmodern philosophers such as Foucault, Lyotard, Baudrillard and Derrida. For an excellent introduction to Continental philosophy, see West (1996).
- 2 In this regard see Potgieter (2006:37–47).
- 3 I realise it is not customary to harness traditional aesthetics to engage with consumer culture. However, one must keep in mind that the historic discipline of aesthetics was never exclusively concerned with fine art as such, but rather with sensate experiences and knowledge, which are part and parcel of both fine art and branding. One should also note that around the middle of the twentieth century philosophers of the Continental tradition, to name Horkheimer and Adorno (1944), amongst others, were already analysing consumer culture from an aesthetic position, albeit critically. Moreover, an interdisciplinary approach that cuts across disciplines to form new insights on topics is one of the defining features of current academia; of this poststructuralism is

- a prime example as there is hardly any area of academia that it has not yet infiltrated.
- 4 I envisage that the variety of aesthetic positions and how they stand with regard to sameness and difference that are outlined in this part of the article can all be fruitfully developed into individual topics in follow-up research.
- 5 This is the standard interpretation of Kantian aesthetics, but there are many indications that Kant himself thought he had failed in his arguments for a universal aesthetic.
- 6 For more background into how humanism was initially conceptualised, I recommend that the reader study Alberti's treatise on humanism.
- 7 All the advertisements referred to in this article can be viewed at [www.unisa.ac.za/arts](http://www.unisa.ac.za/arts). Click on *de arte* and then on 'Theorizing sameness and difference'. A special word of thanks to Ornico for making the advertisements available free of charge for academic purposes.
- 8 I have chosen to introduce the notion of an aesthetic that subverts and disrupts harmonious, humanist aesthetics in rather an extreme fashion, namely through abject aesthetics. I have done this due to space constraints, but need to mention that one can identify a number of modern counterpoints to harmonious aesthetics, such as sublime aesthetics, social realism, and aspects of surrealism and expressionism.
- 9 This argument for the possibility of 'absolute' aesthetic sublimation is, of course, predicated on the existence of an 'absolute' aesthetic, which, as I will later argue, has lost currency in postmodern thinking.
- 10 The seed for this was already planted with sublime aesthetics, as theorised by Burke and Kant.
- 11 In abject aesthetics the body and bodily functions have received a great deal of attention, for example amputations, bleeding and urinating. It is especially the theoretical contributions of feminists such as Kristeva and the artists Cindy Sherman, Kiki Smith, Jennifer Linton and Victoria van Dyke that should be noted in this regard. Barring a few exceptions such as Bosch, Grunewald and Goya, traditional male canon forming regarded the abject as inappropriate subject matter for 'fine' art.
- 12 Some people even feel that men and children should be spared advertisements for female sanitary products.
- 13 Perhaps product branders could take a hint from film trailers which often zoom in on abject scenes (as far as age restrictions will allow) to entice people to watch those films.
- 14 Nietzsche makes this claim in a number of places in *The birth of tragedy and the case of Wagner* (1967a).
- 15 For good books on the avant-garde see Weightman (1973) and Bürger (1984).

- 16 See West (1997:212–214).
- 17 I fully realise that branding agencies are not watchdogs over what sort of products are advertised. My point here is that convenience foods lends themselves to being branded under the sign of convenience, instead of under the sign of nurturing and nutrition.
- 18 By this I do not mean that specific locations cannot set trends, as this can and does happen. What I am saying is that such locations cannot claim superiority for their ‘trend’ on ontological or teleological grounds that transcend human relationships of power.
- 19 I get the word-pun ‘boa-deconstructor’ – a play on boa constrictor and deconstruction – from Hartman. See Bloom (1979:ix) in this regard.
- 20 See Rorty (1967), Culler (1983), Norris (1982) and Potgieter (1999:145–153) for further elucidation of poststructural theories of language. Although I refer to Heidegger and Saussure in this section, they are not poststructuralists as such, but rather precursors to the movement.
- 21 In a nutshell, this is what a structuralist such as Chomsky (1957) believes and what Culler (1975) implies in his literary theory.
- 22 See Baudrillard (1995) in this regard.
- 23 It is worth noting that in the wake of the deconstruction of depth aesthetics the philosopher Danto did the groundwork for a theory of art that was later developed by Dickie (1974) and others into the so-called *institutional* theory of art. According to Dickie (1974:i) ‘The institutional theory of art concentrates attention on the ... characteristics that works of art have in virtue of being embedded in an institutional matrix which may be called the “Art world” and argues that these characteristics are essential and defining’.
- 24 In this campaign a male superhero in the style of Marvel Comics comes to the rescue of grateful, insipid women and their cleaning problems.
- 25 Nietzsche (1955:12) mockingly speaks of German romanticism as ‘those bygone days when “discovering” and “inventing” were still thought of as interchangeable!’.
- 26 I am thinking of the Klipdrift advertisement where a white Afrikaner man and a Xhosa man enjoy a drink together and a misunderstanding arises over two near homophones, the Afrikaans word ‘ys’ (ice) and the Xhosa ‘eish’ (an interjection that expresses exasperation). This advertisement also plays on the observation that ‘eish’ is the manner in which a slightly inebriated Afrikaner would pronounce ‘ys’.
- 27 This was a humorous campaign depicting white, out-in-the-wilds garage-hands getting to grips with the new South Africa by taking in a black partner, who normally comes out on top in their playful interactions.

- 28 I am not encouraging the consumption of so-called sin products, but simply the switching of brands by those who consume them anyway.

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