

# A Hermeneutics of the Consumer

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## Abstract

*The problem of the consumer must be considered both from his perspective, in his primordial quality as buyer, the one receiving the product, as well as from that of the producer, of the maker, of the one sending a commodity into the world. On the one hand, the producer must sell, must enchant and convince of the necessity that there is in the consumer's world of a particular product, of its great importance and the inescapable need that the potential buyer has for the producer's very product. On the other hand, the consumer, the buyer, must be persuaded into receiving the commercial good, opened arms, (inevitably) at a cost. Consequently, it is vital to comprehend the relation between the two terms, its dynamics and immediate consequences.*

**Keywords:** *reading, morality, manipulation, power, reason.*

One of the few means to understand the marketplace and the manner in which it functions, its very internal dynamics, is through the phenomenological method. At the same time, it shows us both how the producer thinks, his movements in the commercial field, and how the buyer lets himself swayed by his enchanted words, as well as other verbal charms. It needs be said that, in the economic world, there are no people – in the common sense of the word, viewed in their humanity. Yet it is a world inhabited by potential buyers, consumers.<sup>1</sup> Thus, one only exists in one's relation to economics, and not independently, but as an integrated part of the economic system that determines one's status from the very

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<sup>1</sup> For a perspective on consumer behaviour and the formation of consumers, see James U. McNeal, *On Becoming a Consumer. Development of Consumer Behavior Patterns in Childhood*, Elsevier, (published in several cities) 2007, p. xiv, "consumer behavior patterns begin shortly after birth and develop in tandem with physical/motor development and with cognitive development, and, in fact, I found the three so interrelated that they can be separated only for exposition's sake. Thus, I realized that consumer behavior cannot take place until there is adequate motor and cognitive development, but that these do not develop outside/without consumer behavior. Consumer behavior grows the body and the brain and the contents and abilities of each."

first moment. The result is a seller-buyer world.<sup>2</sup> Yet, how does such a hermeneutics of the economical process look like? How are financial articulations detached and intertwined?

First of all, let us linger a moment in the space of the concept of *apparition*. The concept of apparition – or *phenomenon* – is one of the fundamental landmarks of phenomenological thinking. It is here precisely, as we shall see later on, that the very stake of any financial player on the market is hidden. Apparition is that which offers itself primarily, that which lets itself be easier seen, that which lies within our reach, close at hand. And here we find incorporated that which interests us the most, the products proposed for sale.

Heidegger, nonetheless, takes quite a deep insight and pierces the situation through so as to show us that many times an apparition can be taken for appearance. In fact, most often than not apparition can and may be seen as appearance.<sup>3</sup> The cause is that reason, as it is based on sight, can be tricked into interpreting one as the other in a game of what-you-see-is-what-you-get/have. For instance, when we see that the sun is revolving around the earth, or that it fuses with the sea, along with all types of illusions that force language itself to incorporate, render and promote them, to bring them into the realm of the visual, we easily consider our perceptions to be truthful, adequate to reality. Reason takes for true that which only seems so. For that reason we say that the sun has risen – we *see* that it rose to the sky from the ground, and we express it linguistically. However, we are using an archaic, obsolete language, metaphoric expressions, to express truths that are, in their very essence, scientific.

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<sup>2</sup> “We start with the consumer for a couple of reasons [...]. At the end of the day, we sell a commodity. The only thing that really differentiates us is the consistency of our quality, our understanding of consumer behavior, and - most importantly - the power of our brand. We have to know more than our competitors about what consumers want in terms of quality, how they use our products, and the end benefits they desire from using our products. And understanding what consumers think and feel about our brand and the relationship they have with Chiquita is imperative. Why do consumers have such a passionate feeling for our brand and what must we do to keep that relationship alive?” *Consumer-Centric Category Management. How to Increase Profits by Managing Categories Based on Consumer Needs*, ACNielsen, with John Karolefski and Al Heller, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey, 2006, p. 270.

<sup>3</sup> For another perspective, involving the consideration of *appearance* as *simulation*, see Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, Semiotext[e], USA, 1983, p. 83: “Three orders of appearance, parallel to the mutations of the law of value, have followed one another since the Renaissance: - *Counterfeit* is the dominant scheme of the «classical» period, from the Renaissance to the industrial revolution; - *Production* is the dominant scheme of the industrial era; - *Simulation* is the reigning scheme of the current phase that is controlled by the code.”

As Heidegger shows us, we operate with *circumspection*,<sup>4</sup> that is, we bring the world to us, to the natural that lies within us, and not to a mechanical robotization. Yet, if we think more incisively, is it not precisely on this relation, appearance-apparition, that the producer places his bet in his search for his beloved profit? However, it must be said, the relation is no real relation, yet a form of interdependence that seems to tend towards duality. As Heidegger indicated, apparition exists in itself, that is, the thing itself; therefore, it may exist without appearance. On the contrary, appearance has no purpose, finds no ground in itself, it is tied down to apparition.<sup>5</sup> Simpler said, in order for appearance to be possible, it is required that its ground be equally present, and that is apparition. Even more plainly put, in order for a producer to sell you an illusion, a bottle containing some drink, or anything else, he requires a product. And then, how are things really like?

The produces will put everything at stake and bet his fortune on people's perception, on their manner of letting themselves hunted down by publicity and an abstract environment. A seller shall frequently juggle apparition and appearance and almost all the time shall deliver to the market only the appearance, and not the apparition. The motif behind this stratagem is simpler than in plain sight: he cannot do things in any other way for, in the first place, he has – phenomenologically speaking – no real access granted to apparition. In the end, were we to look through Heidegger's eyes, no one has. And yet, without having any knowledge of hermeneutics, the merchant shall play this game instinctively,

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Joan Stambaugh (trans.), State University of New York Press, Albany, 1996, I, III [69], p. 65: "Our association with useful things is subordinate to the manifold of references of the «in-order-to.» The kind of seeing of this accommodation to things is called *circumspection*."

<sup>5</sup> "We say «seeming» and know the rain and the sunshine. The sun shines (*scheinen*: to appear, to seem, to shine). We say: «The room was dimly lit by the light (*Schein*) of a candle.» The Alemannic dialect uses the word *Scheinholz* – that is, wood (*Holz*) that glows in the dark. From depictions of saints, we are familiar with the saint's halo (*Heiligenschein*), the radiant ring around the head. But we also know about false saints (*Scheinheilige*), those who look like saints, but are not. We encounter the mock battle (*Scheingefecht*), a manoeuvre that simulates battle. While it shines (*scheint*), the sun seems (*scheint*) to move around the earth. That the moon, which shines, is two feet wide – that just seems that way, it is just a seeming (*Schein*). Here we come across two kinds of *Schein* and *scheinen*. But they do not simply stand next to each other; instead, one is derived from the other. The sun, for example, can seem to move around the earth only because it shines – that is, glows and in glowing appears (*erscheint*), that is, makes itself manifest (*zum Vorschein kommt*). And in the shining of the sun as glowing and radiant, we also experience this radiation as warmth. The sun shines: it shows itself and we feel warmth. As the lustre of the halo, the shining of the light makes the bearer manifest as a saint", Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (trans.), Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 2000, pp. 104-105 [76], § 37. Cf. Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, Alfred Hofstadter (trans.), Indiana University Press, Bloomington & Indianapolis, 1982, p. 151, §14. [214-215].

using this type of thinking that sees that for a product to be sold, it shall be served as a means to *quench* a false need. And here is an example. Apparition: a costumer shall be thirsty. Appearance: A consumer shall be thirsty *but* thirsty for a particular product. This is the image of the key to economy, whether it be advanced, trivial, barbaric, specialized, technologicalized, things shall never change, shall continue thus endlessly. From here all things sprout, all commercial relations, commerce, commodities and all the rest.

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