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The Brandworld as Ontological Metaphor

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is twofold: to argue in favour of the thesis of the reality of brands as distinct artefacts and to make the anatomy of this kind of entities as transparent as possible. The steps I take are the following: first, I establish similarities and differences between brands and other categories of artefacts. Secondly, I plead for identifying certain local, specific mechanisms that guide the genesis of social and cultural artefacts: thus, I indicate a way to understand the fundamental differences between the different classes of artefacts beyond their common features. Thirdly, I make an analogy between what Arthur Danto calls *the artworld* and what I call *the brandworld*: just as the artist posits a world of rules and artistic significations through which a common object can be transfigured and regarded as a work of art, so do the branding specialists advance a world of significations and stories through which a common industrial product (be it cultural or political) is transfigured and turned into a brand. Fourthly, I investigate the extent to which the model of possible and fictional worlds can help us better understand the anatomy of brandworlds. Fifthly, drawing on Jean-Blaise Grize's concept of discursive schematization, I analyse the possibility of understanding the mechanism through which brands are generated as discursive micro-worlds. Sixthly, I dismantle and reject the most important counter-arguments levelled at the realism of brands. Finally, I believe that the reality of brands can be supported by emphasizing the multiple causal effects they generate in the economy, in society but also on the level of the life of individuals. If we refuse to accept the full reality of brands, we are left without sufficient grounds to explain certain phenomena that give complexity and additional meaning to the world we live in.

Keywords: ontology of brands, artefacts, brandworld, artworld, possible worlds, fictional worlds, discursive schematization, branded products, Danto, Grize.

Identifying entities, spotting their essence and grouping them into more accommodating categories have been imperatives and practices of science and philosophy of all times. Two or three centuries ago there were endless discussions on assigning the platypus to a particular class of beings (reptiles or mammals) or on assigning monsters (mutant individuals) to certain natural kinds. Today, the discovery of a beached sea monster on the shores of the Pacific would not raise very many questions within the community of zoologists. The debate would open towards issues concerning the influence of radioactive spills on the marine fauna or the protection of the ecological balance in certain areas. In the public sphere, debates regarding international security, financial mechanisms, economic crises, the extinction of species, depression, global warming, euthanasia, publicity communication tend to push debates on nature topics in the background; the Higgs boson or quantum gravity only seriously interest those who master the mathematical kabala of theoretical physics. I believe that the economical, political, ecological, psychopathological, communication and marketing realities will surpass their status as secondary entities, gaining recognition in the debates of contemporary ontology, since such entities play a much more important part in our everyday life than those assumed by quantum field theory or the theory of general relativity.

1. Brands as a species of artefacts

The purpose of my investigation is to clarify the ontological status of brands among other types of artefacts. The complexity of contemporary society is not generated, first and foremost, by natural systems or kinds, but by the complexity of artefacts.[1] Governments, companies, banks, theatres, fashionable clothes, stylized cars, novels, plays, paintings, all these are pieces that make up the universe in which

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[1] From this point of view, there is an assimetry between natural kinds and artefacts: if the apperance of natural kinds is conditioned by changes at a geological, climate or evolutionary scale, the appearance of artefacts is conditioned by human ingeniousness and the ability to find the resources to translate human thought into reality alone. This explains why, in their lifetime, humans always interacts with the same natural kinds, but the universe of the immediate world in which he lives is continually re-organized due to the fast-paced appearence or new artefacts. Without exaggerating much, one could assert that the slice of universe that each human inhabits constitues a complex artefact resulting from the combination of other artefacts. Only birth, serious illness and death remind contemporary humans that there are limits of principle and major risks in their wish to transform the sociosphere in a global artefact.

the post-industrial human lives. If the history of certain types of artefacts matches, in length, that of the human community, brands are the latest species of artefacts to enter the category. Traditionally, the ontology of artefacts acknowledges the existence of three different species of entities: *technical entities* (light bulbs, ships, trains), *cultural entities* (novels, films, paintings) and *institutional entities* (banks, governments, universities etc.). Besides being ontologically subjective, all artefacts share another feature: they are intentional entities, they are, in different ways, *about something* (Jacquette 2002, 272). Without trying to impose the hypostatisation of a word, I believe that brands are types of artefacts with an essence of their own, impossible to reduce to technical, artistic or institutional entities. Many brands are remarkable technical artefacts, but posses a surplus that not even one of the most complex industrial products have: a wealth of meanings and narrative complexity.[2] From this point of view, brands are very similar to works of art – only they can boast such a richness of signification, only they are able to posit worlds. The major difference between a work of art and a brand is that the significations of the former initiate, *in a unique heuristic way*, the idea of beauty or a local artistic creed. For instance, "a painting and its copy have the same pictural structure, but are not the same work, the type-event is different since the heuristic way is different. In the first case, a work of art is made, in the other, copies of the work of art are made" (Pouivet 2009, 122). The conceptual uniqueness and the heuristic uniqueness transform the work of art in an artefact with an aesthetic function that is more or less obvious. The aesthetic function is entailed by the fact that the state of things accessible to the senses (the work of art as an empirical given) is *transfigured* through the means of associate concepts and significations (Danto 1981, 98-99). Works of art are not mere sensory entities, nor do they populate the universe of usefulness. On the other hand, even if brands transfigure artefacts by added signification, their finality does not target the articulation of an aesthetic function, but the inclusion of the branded artefacts in a universe of usefulness and profit. The meanings associated with a product through branding become sufficient reasons in shaping a strategic selling proposal and fundamental components of the brand capital. Insofar as it is a type, any brand is the result of a unique heuristic path, but insofar as it is a token, any brand is multiple. If the

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[2] I refer to brands here not from the point of view of the branding specialist (always tempted to see the brand in technical terms, as a brand identity), but by borrowing the consumer's perspective, who meets the brands through a publicity campaign or at the place of purchase.

empiric double of a work of art raises the problem of copy and artistic fake, each empirical instance of a brand is an original-free copy.[3] Furthermore, a brand, even if not an empirical entity in its conceptual core, is often confused with the material constituents of its identity (elements of visual or verbal identity, for instance). From this point of view, brands resemble institutions: although the essence of an institution lies in its constitutive rules (abstract, intangible entities), accepted and followed based on a collective intentionality, an institution only exists insofar as it is rooted in the matter of society and as it actually functions. However, as in the case of purely technological entities, what separates a brand from a simple institution is the wealth of embedded significations and, last but not least, the narrative world it posits.

What is it that radically distinguishes brands from any other category of artefacts? *Firstly*, brands are entities generated through a controlled viral process in which "product" is contaminated by a kind of philosophy or concept. Regardless of the nature of the entity touched by the "conceptual virus" (country, city, industrial product, work of art, writer, university etc.), this entity becomes a brand through the injection of a new identity. A brand's concept or DNA is capable of connecting to the DNA of a physical, cultural or institutional entity, the result being a modification of their real and perceived identity. Brands are not necessarily discernible from other entities through their material support only, but by their core-concept, by the type of attached meanings and through a series of elements of their tangible identity. The finality of branding is not a gratuitous increase of the meanings existing in the world, but the transformation of branded entities in symbolic goods that might weigh more in buying decisions. The structure of brands is ultimately responsible for the complexity that the ontology of the commercial world has evolved into. *Secondly*, brands are the only entities created with the purpose of managing professional communication campaigns at the highest standards. In other words, brands are the only entities whose anatomy observes a fundamental architectural constraint: a consistent and coherent ability to communicate. A branded product that cannot support a professional advertising campaign with a major impact on a target audience is not, in fact, an authentic brand. It can be a technological accomplishment, an innovative work of art, an honest institution, but not a brand.

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[3] Even if luxury brands can be counterfeited, the above statement does not lose any of its strength. Despite possible personalisations, any luxury brand is a serial product.

2. Local mechanisms of generating social artefacts

Social artefacts are fundamentally different from any physical artefact or natural kind. John Searle argued for a formal, linguistic-intentional mechanism that might explain the conditions under which any social fact is possible: *X* passes for *Y* in context *C* (where X is a physical fact and Y a symbolic function of X). The passage from X to Y is linguistic because only through language can we make X symbolize something other than what it is through its physical-chemical properties. Furthermore, X can pass for Y only if it is collectively represented that Y passes for X. In the absence of the collective recognition of the new symbolic function assigned to X, Y cannot exist (Searle 1995, 31-126). The collective mechanism of the generation of social artefacts described by Searle is also valid for brands: a Volvo automobile, for instance, passes for the materialization of the idea of *Safety* in the context of automobile production and commerce, after the association of the name with the idea of safety was communicated and argued publicly through repeated advertising campaigns. Searle's theoretical approach, although it explains, in principle, the required possibility conditions of a social deed, has one major limitation: it identifies a mechanism through which we can explain the possibility of *all* social artefacts. From this point of view, there wouldn't be any difference between the way in which money comes to be recognized as money, and brands as brands. Nonetheless, between social artefacts such as governments, banks, marriage, brands etc. there are substantial differences both genetically and structurally. Without rejecting Searle's approach, I think it is necessary to ponder on local ways in which some social artefacts become what they are. Only thus will we understand the mechanisms at work behind the generation of social deeds, as well as their complexity and diversity.

In what follows I propose an argument based on an analogy: I will analyse the mechanism through which a physical fact comes to be considered a work of art, in the hope that I will be able to better clarify the complexity of the mechanism through which an industrial product can become a brand. I am convinced there are revealing similarities between the genesis of a work of art and the genesis of a brand. Both imply an innovation in a symbolical and conceptual realm, followed by the interpretation of a physical fact through the prism of this conceptual innovation. As some art theorists are right to believe that there is a conceptual-philosophical world of art of a superior degree of reality compared to the empirical work of art, I, too, believe in a quasi-

conceptual brandworld of a higher degree of reality than the mere branded product.

3. From Artworld to Brandworld

In a seminal text for the history of Western aesthetics, *The Artworld* (1964), Arthur Danto wondered what makes a random artefact or a figment of the physical world different from a work of art. Danto's question is justified since there are objects that pass for works of art that do not imply any skilled craftsmanship. From a physical point of view, there is no difference between Malevich's *Black Square* and a black square of the same size made with the same kind of paint by child at play on a canvas. However, if there is a difference, it is not intrinsic to the painted square. Malevich published a brochure, *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting* (1915), and a book, *The Non-Objective World. The Manifesto of Suprematism* (1927), in which he argued for art understood as pure emotion or feeling, devoid of any physical ornament: the phenomena of the objective, visible world are, in themselves, meaningless.

> "When, in the year 1913, in my desperate attempt to free art from the ballast of objectivity, I took refuge in the square form and exhibited a picture which consisted of nothing more than a black square on a white field, the critics and, along with them, the public sighed, «Everything which we loved is lost. We are in a desert... Before us is nothing but a black square on a white background!» (...) The square seemed incomprehensible and dangerous to the critics and the public... and this, of course, was to be expected. The ascent to the heights of non-objective art is arduous and painful... but it is nevertheless rewarding. The familiar recedes ever further and further into the background... The contours of the objective world fade more and more and so it goes, step by step, until finally the world «everything we loved and by which we have lived» becomes lost to sight. (...) But this desert is filled with the spirit of non-objective sensation which pervades everything. (...) This was no «empty square» which I had exhibited but rather the feeling of non-objectivity" (Malevich 1959, 28).

The suprematism proposed by Malevich is an attempt to rediscover art as pure feeling; at its origins, as an experience of the beautiful, art was suffocated in time by cunningly crafted things. Thus, Malevich's square is radically different from the one drawn by a child at play as it is surrounded by the aura of a new artistic theory through which it should be

regarded. *Black Square* the object is a work of art not through the objective data it provides for our senses when we look at it, but through the prism of the theory proposed by Malevich. The painting is a legitimate replacement of the artworld precisely because the painter performed a radical change on the aesthetic rules that now allow us to see that black square as charged with meanings.

Going back to Arthur Danto, the artist is not a mere craftsman, but, first and foremost, the architect of an artistic theory through which common things can be transfigured and elevated to work of art status. By building a theory, the artist not only establishes norms that allow him to separate art from non-art, but even creates the conditions that render the work of art possible (Danto 1964, 572). The concept or theory that precedes the actual making of the artwork is the essence of the artwork. "In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art" (LeWitt 1967, 79). The sum of concepts, aesthetic rules, the atmosphere exuded by an ideal or artistic creed, the theories that lead to crossroads or leaps in art history make up the artworld. To overcome the status of skilled craftsman, the artist must first enforce changes in this artworld. An artist's skill depends on his capacity to activate an eye of thought, an eye through whose lens a fragment of the physical world (more or less skilfully "polished") is assigned empirically unnoticeable properties. Eventually, „successful art changes our understanding of the conventions by altering our perceptions" (LeWitt 1999, 107). By providing an interpretation, by establishing new conventions and rules in the artworld, the artist manages to change the way we perceive an artefact.

The branding specialist achieves something similar: by building a philosophy materialized in a brandworld, he or she manages to transfigure an industrial product or service, with the result that an industrial artefact with no intrinsic meaning is perceived as something other than that something directly noticeable or deductible from its physical-chemical properties. The analogy between *The Artworld* and *The Brandworld* ends here. If, for Danto, the world of art is a world of all aesthetic rules and theories, each artist being called to enrich it, I understand by brandworld, first and foremost, the philosophical charge or concept that lends reality to *a certain brand*. But the world of a brand cannot be reduced to its concept, as neither can the diversity and complexity of an organism be reduced to the complexity of its DNA. A brandworld is a complex

heterogeneous discursive construct that essentially plays the part of the cognitive and sensory environment that leads to the changing of a way of perception. The elements that provide the anatomy of a brandworld can be divided into three categories: *content elements*, *structural elements* and *interpretation elements*. First of all, content elements are concerned with the layers of brand identity. There are two essential levels of brand identity: *purely cognitive identity* and *sensory identity*. Purely cognitive identity comprises the conceptual identity (the brand idea or philosophy) and narrative identity (the various brand variants imposed by successive advertising campaigns). The sensory identity of a brand comprises the visual, verbal, sonic, taste, smell and touch identity (Lindstrom 2005, 70-105). Secondly, the most general structural elements of a brandworld are *temporal coherence* (the elements of the brand identity have to endure unchanged, beyond an advertising campaign or other), *thematic coherence* (the fundamental narrative topics of the brandworld need to remain unaltered for as long as possible) *experiential coherence* (the quality of the consumer's experience in the brandworld must constantly be the same). Thirdly, the interpretation elements are concerned with the associations and brand image being shaped at the level of a certain target consumers' minds following the communication campaigns surrounding a brand. As a fictional world does not merge with the text of a book, but is shaped as a result of the interpretation effort made by a reader, the brandworld also comes to life by being accessed, experienced and inhabited by loyal consumers.

Conceptual identity is an *axis mundi* of sorts for the brandworld. The other levels of brand identity emanate from it and revolve around it. Narrative identity is that which endows the brandworld with meaning, transmuting it from an amorphous structure to a place filled with meaning, a place worthy of being visited and experienced. Narrative identity is not only an extension of conceptual identity, but a generic story, a generative narrative nucleus built by focusing on some revealing elements for the type of world in which a certain type of consumer desires to live. The brandworld is one in which certain wishes, aspirations or needs of a certain type of consumer are fulfilled. The narrative identity of the brand is the main element that assures the access to and experience of the brandworld. The lure of the brand is largely explained by the fact that the brandworld absorbs its target audience, determining it to think according to rules and feel at intensities that apply only inside the brandworld.

4. Possible worlds, fictional worlds, brandworlds

The analogy to the art world makes me think that there are reasons for acknowledging the existence of brandworlds. Henceforth, I will attempt to grasp to what extent we can use analytical explorations surrounding entities such as possible worlds and fictional worlds to understand brandworlds. Even though I will insist on the clear-cut distinction between a possible world and a brandworld, I believe that, in a certain sense, the brandworld is a possible world; furthermore, I believe that many brandworlds can be viewed as fictional worlds (particularly in the case of brands that make false promises to consumers). If this is the state of things, the formal anatomy of possible worlds and fictional worlds should betray something of the anatomy of brandworlds.

The current world consists of all there is and all that has ever been: ants, galaxies, governments, market economy, the history of the Roman empire, etc. Let the current world be W_1 at the moment t_1. In this case, we can imagine a future W_2 world at the moment t_2. The possible paths of evolution of W_1 at the moment t_1 are infinite in number; from that infinity of possibilities, at the moment t_2 only the ones that made W_2 possible were actualized. All the formal possibilities that could have been world W_2 at time t_2 that are not current are called possible worlds. Thus, a possible world is an *alternative* world to the current world. The objects that make up a possible world have certain properties and establish certain relations. An object can have different properties and can inhabit different worlds. According to Alvin Plantinga, any possible world is a possible state of affairs, but not every possible state of affairs is a possible world (Plantinga 1976, 145). For a state of affairs to become a possible world, it must be complete or maximal. A maximal state of affairs must embed the way in which all the objects of the world exist or will exist. Moreover, the classic idea of a possible world makes us think that objects that do not exist in the current world can exist in the possible world (Plantinga 1976, 142). Ontologically speaking, in the understanding of the entity called possible world a theoretical space has been carved, delineated by two opposite stances: *on the one hand*, *the modal realism* proposed and defended by David Lewis; on the other hand, the *constructivist and conceptualist* proposed and defended by Nicholas Rescher. From the viewpoint of modal realism, there are other, equally real possible worlds besides our own. There are no relations between our world and the other possible worlds; they are isolated: "there are no spatiotemporal relations at all between things that belong to different worlds. Nor does anything that

happens at one world cause anything to happen at another" (Lewis 1986, 2). A consequence of the fact that possible worlds are causally separated is that they cannot be conceived as our own creations. "But if worlds are causally isolated, nothing outside a world ever makes a world; and nothing inside makes the whole world, for that would be an impossible kind of self-causation. We make languges and concepts and descriptions and imaginary representations that apply to worlds. (...) But none of these things we make are the worlds themselves" (Lewis 1986, 3).

On the other hand, from the constructivist approach defended by Rescher, possible worlds are not real in themselves. The current world is the only real one, it enjoys existence in the true sense of the word. There are no effective unactualized possibilities. Possible worlds are built by human minds so that it can be said about them that they only exist in a secondary, subordinate way. Possible worlds exist as constructs of the intellect. There are no two existential compartments for worlds, one that embeds the current world and another, that embeds the possible worlds. "Of course, unactualized possibilities can be conceived, entertained, mooted, hypothesized, assumed, etc. In this mode they do, in a way, exist – or «subsist» if one prefers – not, of course, unqualifiedly in themselves, but in a *relativized* manner, as the objects of certain intellectual processes" (Rescher 1975, 196). Current states of affairs exist in themselves; non-violent possibilities are ontologically depended on the mind. In other words, possible worlds are ontologically subjective.

Critically speaking, if the modal realism approach appears to be guilty of accepting more entities than necessary to explain the current world, the constructivist approach seems to deny the autonomy of the possible worlds, transforming them in shadows of the mind. I do not plan, however, a critical assessment of the two theoretical stands, as this is not the purpose of the present paper. The issue I am trying to formulate is that of the extent to which the theories coined around the concept of possible world can lead to a better understanding of the brandworld as an ontologically acceptable entity. In a strong sense, the brandworld is not a possible world. *First of all*, the brandworld is not an alternative to the current world; for this to be true, it would have to be a possibility that relates to all states of affairs in the current world, which it is not; moreover, brands in themselves are states of affairs connected to the current world, not possible states of affairs. *Secondly*, the brandworld is not a maximal world, since from its evolution one cannot infer a possible state of the world as a whole. The brandworld is just a microworld that only contains certain states of affairs organized in such a way that the

benefit of the brand that makes the said world possible be highlighted. *Thirdly*, the brandworld is not a possible world in the strong sense of realism because it is the creation of certain individuals from the current world. If the brandworld were causally isolated, we would have great difficulty explaining the relations between elements that make up a brandworld and the individuals from the current world. Nevertheless, precisely because it is not causally isolated from the current world, precisely because the brandworld can have causal effects in the current world, organizations that specialize in the construction of brandworlds have appeared. The construction of brandworlds is one of the manifold ways in which the current world can be fashioned and the lives of individuals can be changed.

From a constructivist-conceptualist point of view, brandworlds are a subsisting species of possible worlds. Endowed with a kind of secondary reality, lacking the strength to be the alternatives of the current world, brandworlds are still ontologically distinct entities from the first order entities that make up the current world: elementary particles, rocks, clouds, stars, human beings etc. Undoubtedly, the constructivist perspective on possible worlds pushes us almost unwillingly to note certain similarities between brandworlds and fictional worlds[4]. Even if a fictional world is not a possible world in the above-mentioned sense (it is not an alternative to the real world and it is not a maximal world), it is still a possible microworld created by the human mind, as is the brandworld. Both brandworlds and fictional worlds borrow objects, features, relations, individuals, character traits from the real world. Even if in these worlds objects or features that do not exist in the real world can appear, according to the "minimal distance" principle that the construction of any fictional world should abide by (Ryan 1980, 406), there should be a partial overlap between the current and the possible created worlds. Thus the accessibility and recognisability of events within these possible worlds for the individuals of the current world are created (Eco 1991, 80). In other words, there needs to be a certain degree of similarity between the possible created worlds and the current world.

There are also three fundamental differences between a fictional world and a brandworld: *first of all*, the complexity and allure of a

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[4] The similarity between fictional worlds and brand worlds is a relative one. Toma Pavel deemed possible worlds a mere *distant* model for fictional worlds (Pavel 1986, 50); I believe that both possible and fictional worlds only function as distant models for brandworlds. Obviously, in the case of possible worlds the distance is longer, while in that of fictional worlds, the distance is shorter.

brandworld provide the brand with commercial weight; the complexity and allure of a fictional world provide an aesthetic weight and hermeneutic complexity to the text that makes it possible. *Secondly*, any fictional world is a discursively closed world, the occasional variations only being ensured by the interpretations put forth by readers. On the other hand, the brandworld is an open world, in which identity elements, brand invariables, narrative topics can be altered at a given point. *Thirdly,* fictional worlds can be, *in extremis*, impossible, contradictory or incoherent, while brand worlds must be, at all cost, possible, uncontradictory and coherent. An impossible or incoherent brandworld would have a zero capacity to be absorbed, through the proposed experience, by potential buyers; the tribe of a brand that would propose such a world would be a null set.

From what I have highlighted so far it follows that the "possible worlds theory places the «actual world» at the center of the hierarchy of worlds and «possible worlds» around it, that are said to be «accessible» to the actual world" (Wolf 2012, 17). Practically, the fictional worlds and the brand worlds (as created possible worlds) are gravitating around the actual world. The fundamental relationship between the actual world and the brandworld is, as in the case of the other possible worlds, *a relation of accessibility*. As already underscored, the accessibility relation between two worlds depends on their degree of similarity. From the current world, a brandworld must be logically accessible (the judgements of the individuals from the brandworld must observe the same rules of logic as those of individuals in the real world), causally accessible (causal relations between the things from the brandworld must be identical with the causal relations from the current world), epistemically accessible (the things known by individuals in the brandworld must also be known by the individuals of the current world), psychologically accessible (the feelings, values, motivations and wishes that animate the individuals of the brandworld must coincide with the feelings, values, motivations and wishes of individuals from the current world). As I will highlight in the next subchapter, any brandworld creation process is intentional and selective: the brandworld is only populated by certain individuals or certain things having certain properties, establishing certain relations. Consequently, the accessibility of the brandworld will be selective: only certain individuals of the current world can access a brandworld and fully experience it.

5. Discursive schematization and the genesis of a brandworld

Essentially, any brand can be understood as a heterogeneous discourse, one in which a central idea organizes verbal, visual, smell elements, etc. logically and narratively. The novelty entailed by this type of discourse is undoubtedly the fact that, from a mixture of heterogeneous and divergent elements a cohesive whole is forged. As a microworld generated by the effort of a creative team, the question about the mechanisms through which a rational mind or several interacting minds can generate a brandworld becomes legitimate. The symbolic mechanism proposed by Searle is one through which we can understand the formal possibility that proposed a brand. The analogy with the artworld highlights the essential role of the concept, of the heuristic strategy and of all compartments of the brand identity in shaping a brandworld as an autonomous entity. But considered a discourse that proposes a world structured in a particular way, the possibility of the brand must be compared to certain structuring rational operations that make it possible. All reasoning that makes a brand possible is expressed in natural language and the subjacent logic is undoubtedly what logicians call natural logic. If the idea of logic is connected to that of calculation in a general way, the idea of a natural logic must be tied to the generation of valid schematizations through the means of discourse. The argumentation within any type of discourse implies a set of schematizations, i.e. rational actions that result in the construction of a virtual microworld; the autonomy of this world derives from content inseparable from its shape, from a certain model of the targeted public and from certain coordinates of the context in which argumentative communication takes place.

As Jean-Blaise Grize has argued, discursive schematization presupposes the generation of a microworld through the means of a discourse, with the aim to achieve an essentialized representation of the current world at the level of the receiver's conscience. The generation of a discursive world means selecting certain objects, determining the objects by indicating their properties and the relations between them, as well as bestowing a certain degree of credibility based on the performed actions (Grize 1989, 195-199; Grize 1984, 154-163). According to the way in which these operations are carried out, the world of possible receivers will be different, adapted to the topic, purpose of the argument and the public to which the argument is destined. As Constantin Sălăvăstru emphasizes, any discursive schematization takes place under the sign of *subjectivity* and *intentionality*, as it represents an intentional act of the person

constructing it (Sălăvăstru 2003, 381). Moreover, discursive schematization interferes with the receiver by means of a double intentionality: *descriptive* and *attitudinal*. Descriptive intentionality captures in as much detail as possible the reality concerned by the topic around which the argument revolves, while the attitudinal signification underscores the speaker's attitude towards the things described, an attitude which he or she will, at some point, wish to pass on to the receiver, as well (Sălăvăstru 2003, 381).

If we take into account the logical operations identified by Jean-Blaise Grize as constituents of any discursive microworld and the double intentionality behind any discursive schematization, we can distinguish between several kinds of cognitive schematization:

a. *Axiological schematization* is the effort to select the value or values that the speaker feels impelled to defend and promote through the discourse he or she proposes; this type of schematization plays a normative role in the construction of a discourse, the speaker's attitudes and the objects selected in the discourse being dictated, in a way, by the values tacitly or explicitly embraced by him or her. The result of such a type of schematization is the construction of a «world of values» immanent to a discourse.

b. *Ontological schematization* is the logical-discursive effort through which a speaker selects things, individuals, features, as well as the relations relevant to the type of world representation necessary in order to construct an argument, the skeleton of the microworld put forth to the receiver. Ontological schematization is determined by the defended values, the topic of the argument, the finality of the argument, the type of the public, the degree of knowledge of the actual world that the speaker possesses, the type of representation that the speaker wants to create at the level of the receiving public. The result of an ontological schematization is a particular microworld, a world built progressively, a world with objects that can modify their properties and relations according to the speaker's intentions.

c. *Psychological schematization* concerns the action to select the speaker's attitude regarding the topic of the argument, as well as regarding the objects, features and relations established between them within the discursive world. Moreover, psychological schematization concerns the way in which the speaker understands and translates into discourse the wishes, needs, aspirations and priorities of the receiving public. The credibility of an argumentative sequence and, implicitly, of the microworld proposed through discourse is largely derived from the

addressee's ability to translate the receiving public's needs, wishes and beliefs into discourse, to perform minute psychological schematizations.

d. *Narrative schematizations*. Any discursive action, any construction of a microworld with discursive means must represent an effort to make heterogeneous discursive elements compatible. In other words, without a certain degree of coherence of the proposed world, a speaker's discourse is unintelligible and devoid of consequences at the level of the addressee. To ensure an acceptable level of coherence, the discourse must be organized under the guise of a «conceptual story» that observes two major principles: *the principle of textual coherence* (that embeds a transparent system of references and substitutions, the progressive introduction of the topic in the discourse, the avoidance of contradictions and the existence of sufficient elements for the receiver to understand the arguments or events presented according to the addressee's intentions) and *the principle of order* (for instance, according to Quintilian, an argumentative discourse must have several parts succeeding each other in a certain order: *exordium*, *narratio*, *partitio*, *confirmatio*, *refutatio*, *peroratio*).

If we envision the brand as a heterogeneous discursive structure, we can trace the way in which the four types of schematizations mentioned above manage to generate, logically speaking, a brandworld. Through *axiological schematization*, the creators of a brand choose the brand concept: the fundamental value that the brand defends, incarnates or with which it wishes to be associated, the values that will separate the proposed brandworld from the immediate reality and the reality of other brandworlds. At the same time, through associated values, the brandworld is endowed with a certain axiological standard and aspirational tone. According to the values it defends, a brandworld will not only be accessible and desirable, but will also manage to integrate a standard-world, a world according to which the brand's target public will judge the immediate reality, set up aspirations in life and on which it will model its actions. Through *ontological schematization*, branding specialists will select and determine those elements which make up the identity of a brand: name, slogan, logo, colour, specific sounds, brand style etc. as well as the graphic, rhetorical, design relations that will put together these elements of identity in a cohesive discourse. Moreover, they will select the mascot, the presenter, the spatial and temporal coordinates, landscapes, the revealing elements from the consumer's universe, the human type – which will all become the constant value of the brand throughout successive communication campaigns. Ontological

schematization ensures the brand costumes and props, as well as the stage on which the brandworld show will unfold; it provides not only the bone structure, but the theatricality of the brandworld, too. Through *psychological schematization* those traits with which the brand personality is endowed will be selected, the state of mind of the characters that star in brand commercials; also, the wishes and needs that consumers will have satisfied if they enter the brandworld. The result of this type of schematization is that the brandworld becomes a magical territory, a territory where the most refined desires can find uncomplicated fulfilment; the brandworld itself becomes a sophisticated ontological mechanism that specializes in the fulfilment of wishes or in quality experiences. The only thing left is for each consumer to receive assistance in fulfilling his or her wishes and decide which brandworld he will allow himself to be absorbed by. Finally, through *narrative schematization* a brand story will be constructed that will embed all the elements mentioned thus far and will provide the brandworld with a unitary, coherent and orderly quality. At the same time, the story will enliven and bring the brandworld to life, it will populate it with characters whose reason to be is to achieve the brand experience. By identifying with the characters of the brand story, consumers anticipate, live the brand experience with anticipation, making a serious option to visit and inhabit one or several brandworlds. Thus, built on discursive schematization insofar as they are microworlds, brands end up changing wishes, ways of satisfying needs, life plans, to contribute to the way in which the idea of life meaning or personal identity are forged. Yet brands are able to have these causal effects because they are real entities.

6. Brand realism: a critical assessment

In one of the few texts on the ontology of brands, *The Reality of Brands: Toward an Ontology of Marketing*, Wolfgang Grassl lists a few arguments that question the autonomy of brands, the existence of brands as ontologically significant entities and, by extension, the existence of brandworlds (Grassl 1999, 320-325). The arguments against "brand idealism"[5] are based on serious misunderstandings and omissions that can be easily dismantled and neutralised.

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[5] The phrase „brand idealism" is essentially wrong. What we are dealing with is, in fact, not an idealistic orientation that might oppose a realist one in the issue of brands, but a *realism of brands* that opposes a *realism of products*. In other words, we are facing an ontology of marketing that pleads for the recognition of *brands* as real entities that

The first argument: the language of marketing treats "brand" and "product" as interchangeable in very many contexts; consequently, the entities the two terms refer to would appear to belong to the same level of reality. Brands could be treated as, at most, branded products, in no way distinct, autonomous entities. To this argument we might reply with the following: a linguistic confusion or a lack of distinction between the uses of two terms must not and cannot be deemed a rational basis to support the lack of distinction between two entities. To be fair, there can be no brands without branded products, but most branded entities are material goods or services, while brands are symbolic goods. Brands and products are realities that belong to different levels of reality. The ontological difference between brands and mere products is often translatable in financial terms: an artefact's production price is sometimes as much as 10 or 20 times lower than its selling price. This difference cannot only be explained in the terms of market economy, of product supply and demand, taking into account the fact that brands from the same category of products are sold at much lower prices or are nor sold at all. The products address a need, the relations between them are quasi-causal. The brand is directed at the mind, it absorbs the mind in its own world, being the major premise for the reasoning behind buying decisions.

The second argument: in the case of many basic products, such as milk or bread, the decision to buy does not derive from the preference for a certain brand, although some of the purchased products are brands. Awareness of the competitive advantage represented by a brand seems to play quite a small part in buying decisions. To this argument one might reply that, for reasons that pertain to life preservation, the relation between commodities and needs demanding immediate satisfaction is quasi-causal. If we take into account the nature of this relation, we come to understand brand blindness in the case of the purchase of many commodities perfectly. I will make an analogy: a large part of the Earth's population lives in congested urban areas, with often polluted, unbreatheable air. This does not mean that each time the inhabitants of these cities inhale they should run to the closest mountain resort to breathe fresh air; it is more important to fulfil certain vital necessities than to fulfil them *in a particular way*. To this we may add that fact that many unbranded products are much cheaper and the buyer's involvement degree in the purchase is minimal. Besides the area of goods with a part to

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opposes a different ontology that considers products the only truly real entities in the space of production and commerce.

play in the fulfilment of vital needs, the brand universe makes its gravitational force felt in any buying decision.

The third argument: the "idealism" of brands cannot easily contain and explain the phenomenon of natural brands such as champagne, cognac brandy, prosciutto, Emmental cheese. In this case, the brand name would not be the result of a conscious effort to brand. Furthermore, the mere mention of the fabrication method or of the traditional processing of a product would be enough to sell a brand, regardless of the brand's verbal or visual identity. To this argument a short reply can be given: there are thousands of traditional methods, only shared by a small, local community. Why did they not become as well-known as the above-mentioned products? Ultimately, because they were not branded. If it is not consciously and coherently managed, a natural brand will be invisible to the global buyer community, in the same way as a lampless ship is invisible at night for those on the shore.

The fourth argument: products retain a value several times higher even when they are debranded. This would explain the market value of unlabelled Lacoste T-shirts or of a Rolex watch without Rolex inscribed on it. The phenomenon could be explained by the fact that the brand seeps into the product, that the brand cannot be reduced to a mere external sign, such as its name or label. Far from being an argument against brand realism, it is, in fact, a plea for the autonomous existence of brands, for the priority of the brandworld over the branded product. The debranded product is bought precisely because those who buy it know that it belongs to a certain brand and that the product in question signifies more than its empirically detectable properties.

The fifth argument: in many cases, a brand almost exclusively relies on product design. For instance, Swatch uses a certain design to single out a series of brand watches under a blanket name. The same phenomenon is encountered in the case of many car or electronic brands. To this argument we might reply that, most times, a product's design is previously conceived as an integral part of the brand's visual identity. In other words, first the design is thought out, in accordance with certain branding requirements, then engineers devise the technology behind the shape of the product. The recognition or the acquisition of a product because of its brand is perhaps one of the strongest arguments concerning the product's annexation by the brand and the transformation of the branded product into an inhabitant of the brandworld.

The sixth argument: It is wrong to believe that the way products are distinguished from one another is only accomplished via integrated

marketing communications, especially advertising. If the existence of a brand could only depend on advertising, the latter could be created from nothing, according to anyone's free will or desire. But it is clear that not every product can be transformed into a brand. Consumers are well aware of what Coca Cola is, for example, and could not be tricked through branding and advertising to accept something else instead of the "real thing". To this argument we might reply thusly: branding works in the case of good quality products and services, marking a difference within the same category. The poor quality of products and services cannot be compensated by branding strategy. Branding actions are not tricks or magic acts; as a church cannot survive through ritual if the churchgoers lack faith, a poor quality product cannot survive through branding and advertising solely. However, when within a product category a certain product is of the same quality as many others, its market success can only be explained by the fact that it has become the support of an successfully articulate brand and of well-conceived advertising campaigns surrounding the brand.

In the current economy the issue of obtaining superior technological products is solved, but the issue of some of these products' market success cannot be settled through embedded technologies. Success depends on the quality of the brand created from a quality product. On the other hand, the market success of brands such as Coca Cola, Evian or Nike is almost impossible to explain by resorting to the product's "real qualities". Removed from the brandworld surrounding them, these products would not be able to survive due to their so-called "real qualities". Accessing a brandworld provides thought with the glasses that transform a quality product (from the hundreds of products within a category) in a real buying option. Without the meanings and energy bestowed by branding, a product is akin to a soulless Pinocchio puppet.

7. Conclusions

Eliminative materialism posits the full identity between the human mind and the physicochemical processes of the brain. The mind as a separate entity is an illusion, the physicochemical processes – the only realities. It is not the connection between the former and the human mind that needs to be questioned, but reductionism as a philosophical system. If we equate the physicochemical processes in the brain with the mind, it would be almost impossible to explain a series of features belonging to the human mind such as *qualia*, intentionality, consciousness, mental

causality, understanding ability, etc. By analogy, if we do not accept the reality of brands, reducing them to mere branded products, we will not be able to explain a series of economical, social and behavioural phenomena, such as the notoriety of branded products, the way in which branded products are positioned in the minds of the consumers, the full reasons why a buying decision is made, the loyalty for branded products, the price of branded products, the experiential turn in contemporary economics, the budgets assigned to branding and advertising, the consumers' search for experiences at the expense of products, the role of branded luxury products in structuring life products etc. If brands did not have a causal power of their own, all these phenomena would be inexplicable. Yet the most important reality criterion for a presumed entity is the existence of causal effects that are impossible to explain without acknowledging the reality of the said entity. Strong brands fashion possible worlds with multiple causal effects on the current world. In a way similar to fictional worlds, brandworlds are accessible to target consumers: access to a brandworld ensures a brand experience, determines the qualitative change of a life and is a solid reason to repeat the act of buying. Beyond these, accessing a brandworld provides industrial artefacts with significations which do not derive from their physicochemical nature.

The current universe, that of the present world, is accompanied by a secondary one, comprising the worlds created by the imagination: fictional worlds and brandworlds. Although the main universe has ontological priority, the secondary universe contains entities and states of affairs that are not mirrored in the first one. These entities shape, enrich and bestow unsuspected meaning to the current things. Arthur Danto was convinced that "the artworld stands to the real world in something like the relationship in which the City of God stands to the Earthly City" (Danto 1964, 582). I am convinced that brandworlds stand in a similar type of relationship to branded products.

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