

John Miller Ich (36/175/74)



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Approach and Method

For this series of sixteen photographs, I selected one hundred-one personals ads from a recent issue of Karlsruhe's lifestyle newspaper, *Sperrmüll*. Next I graphed the entries. Then I superimposed this graph over pictures of indoor and outdoor spaces. Along with this, I superimposed individual ads over the photos, a different one each time.

Sperrmüll publishes personals in four distinct categories: "Men Seeking Women," "Women Seeking Men," "Men Seeking Men" and "Women Seeking Women." The heterosexual categories are decidedly the largest group and more men take out ads than women. I ignored the quasi-personal ads that appeared under headings like "Freizeit," "Wiedersehen," "WG biete/suchen," "Frauen," "Unterhaltung," and "Tanz."

The owners and staff of the Meyer Rieger Galerie shot all the photos but one. I asked them to photograph different sites: the Supreme Court, a bar, secluded spots in a park, a construction zone, a church, abandoned or peripheral areas, a bedroom, a living room, a kitchen and a café.

By combining graphs, personals ads and photographs, I wanted to contrast symbolic social space (the realm of social hierarchy) with representations of concrete physical space (defined by architecture, urban land allocation and social use). If the photographs, embedded in a familiar mode of realism, seem straightforward, the graphing process is denaturalizing to some extent.

Graphing

I contend that personals ads inadvertently reconstitute prevailing social hierarchies under the aegis of free subjectivity or liberated sexuality. (Of course, this is not all they do.) Graphing – even simply the decision to graph independent of any data – makes the repressive potential of personals ads immediately more obvious. My involvement with this material is like that of an armchair sociologist. My graphs are clearly inspired by the work of Pierre Bourdieu.

I plotted the data from *Sperrmüll* according to two seemingly universal criteria: age and rhetoric. Combined in a personals column, these can work like pincers on the individual subject. If aging is an experience of devaluation, then rhetoric mandates, among other things, the cheerful

acceptance of this as an objective fact. Thus, I assigned these to x and y axes to depict the social organization of their respective fields.

To represent the data, I numbered each ad according to its order of appearance in *Sperrmüll*. Only numbers appear on the graph itself. In previous works, readerviewers could check a number to read any of the ads. Here, they can read only one ad and note its position against otherwise unknown positions.

"Self"- Categorization

Personals ads signify more than just a novel style of courtship. People who take them out feel obliged to represent who they are. In so doing they inadvertently – and inevitably – reify who they are or who they think they are, although this, of course, is only one facet of a complex and often contradictory exchange. On closer examination, what first purports to be an expression of inner subjectivity shows itself to be a reflection of an external social order. This is the problematic of identity construction.

Classified ads necessarily concern classification. Before examining the ads in *Sperrmüll*, I previously worked with ads from New York City's *Village Voice* and Cologne's *Stadt Revue* on separate occasions. In the *Village Voice* i) the myth of race, ii) gender as a binary system, iii) career as a sign of social class and iv) the stigmas of old age, drugs and disease (with AIDS the disease of greatest concern) all inflect the notion of identity. As such, they demarcate points where advertiser and prospective mate negotiate their respective social rankings. In *Sperrmüll* and the *Stadt Revue*, the principle of hierarchy seems much less invidious; race, career, disease and drug addiction barely register at all. Nonetheless, age and gender figure prominently in the ads from all three publications.

Ultimately, the relative homogeneity of *Sperrmüll* and the *Stadt Revue* suggests, not an absence of repression versus the *Voice*, but repression in a more discursive form.¹ Instead of taking an overtly hierarchical expression, it retrenches in the a priori, namely rhetorical conventions and seemingly natural categories. In this regard, gender may be the most naturalized category – and therefore the most pernicious. As Bourdieu himself put it, masculine sociodicy "legitimizes a relationship of domination by embedding it in a biological nature that is itself a naturalized social construction."² This yields the "social artefacts"

- 1 This discursiveness could reflect a more homogeneous social composition in Karlsruhe or Cologne versus New York, but it might just as well simply reflect one publication's advertising policy versus that of another.
- 2 Pierre Bourdieu, trans. Richard Nice, *"A Magnified Image,"* *Masculine Domination* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p.23.
- 3 In contrast, in the *Village Voice* project I used only the advertisers' criteria.

of the manly man and womanly woman. In tandem with this, the specialized advertising vernacular of the personals ad presents itself as a kind of transparent expression. Nonetheless it remains a marketing device because it serves a distinct function, governed by an economic logic.

Accordingly, this vernacular or rhetoric assumes a symbolic relation to the political economy as a whole. Because it purports to express people's most intimate and ardent desires, it is paradigmatic. It helps legislate the recognizability of desire within a market construct. This, of course, is true of all personals ads, but, in the absence of more overt material, it is especially true of *Sperrmüll*.

Fatalism and Fun

By correlating rhetoric with age, I combined two different kinds of data. The graph's x-axis runs from *wörtlich* to *allegorisch*. The y-axis runs from seventeen to sixty-five, a forty-eight-year span. If we can take age at face value (even when deduced from other information), rhetoric is a matter of interpretation.

Rather than actively inventing a rhetorical stance, advertisers may find that their rhetoric chooses them and that they experience it as an innate discourse. Even so, it swings between literal and allegorical poles. On one hand, literalism stresses the facts of life as a life of facts, affirming the seeming immutability of social relations. On the other, allegory implies fate and predestination, a fixed future where the advertiser should find an appropriate place, ideally the storybook ending. Despite this, fate remains a mysterious agent that promises change. One can only properly meet one's fate through self-realization. Together, the literal and the allegorical triangulate a mainstream ideology of contemporary life. This is not the punitive, Old Testament ethos one might expect, but an ethos of sober fun and pleasure. One lives happily ever after, provided a conventional standard of happiness will suffice. Many variables, including my comprehension of a second language or even my mood, affected how I interpreted the rhetoric any given ad at any given time. If an advertiser states that he or she seeks happiness, for instance, I take this to be a literal assertion. What happiness itself may represent, however, is illusive, if not ineffable. Even familiar colloquialisms, such as "schwarzer Humor" or "vielschichtige Frau," admit explicitly allegorical elements. Because language, structured by metaphor and metonymy,

is never completely literal, it intrinsically pushes in the direction of "another story." To be "completely literal," then, demands the stiltedness of legalistic or authoritarian diction. So, I grouped literal ads within a much narrower tolerance than allegorical ones. One final complication: age itself counts as a basic component of literal rhetoric, so an element of literalism intrudes upon the format of the graph from the outset. Despite such ambiguities, the way in which age, height and weight confront fairytales, fables and proverbs remains clear enough. Compared with rhetoric, aging seems to be a non prejudicial category. No one can avoid it. Most ads usually state it outright.³ Even so, a hegemonic youth culture disavows and devalues aging. The traditional assumption that wisdom and experience come with age loses credence as a result. People enter the singles market acutely aware of their limited shelf life. (Coincidentally, artists face the art market with a similar apprehensions.) Placing a personals ad registers an awareness of lost opportunities; one must "seize the time." Although the vast majority of personals advertisers fall between thirty-five and forty-five, a large number claim to look or feel younger than their actual age. Yet people younger than thirty-five do not yet feel compelled to take out such ads. After forty-five they feel it is too late. That leaves about a ten-year span in which one would typically take out an ad.

The Space of the Market: Real and Imaginary

Public and private space interpenetrate in the personals ad. The mediation between the newspaper-as-public-forum and the interior life of the individual advertiser manifests itself not only in content, but also in stylization, special jargon, abbreviations, etc. Here, anonymity is the precondition of exposing oneself to an unknown public, real or phantasmatic. Thus, to imagine that this collection of ads exposes social realities not otherwise apparent may be tempting. Nevertheless, the prospect of "self"-representation does involve an Althusserian aspect of ideology: not an indisputably accurate representation of concrete means and relations of production (or reproduction), but an imaginary relation to those means and relations. Exactly who can grasp such an underlying "reality" may be beside the point; here, what counts is the threshold where fantasy and reality promise to meet.

4 Walter Benjamin, "Fate and Character," *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1978), p. 304.

5 In this regard, Theodor Adorno cites Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leits, *Movies: A Psychological Study* (Glencoe: Ill.: The Free Press, 1950), p. 21 in „The Stars Down to Earth“, *Gesammelte Schriften 9.2* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1975), p. 65.

6 Robert Kurz, "Hysterical Populism: the Confusion of Bourgeois Sentiment and the Hunt for Scapegoats," p. 24.

Logically, advertising seems to offer the most effective solution to the otherwise arbitrary – and often frustrating – process of finding a suitable partner. The market, of course, introduces an anti-romantic factor into this equation. With it, sexual fulfillment literally enters an arena of competing goods and services, a mercantile heterotopia. The very idea of advertising for a mate is predicated on an aggregate of historical factors and assumptions: a critical, i.e., cosmopolitan, mass of advertisers and readers, exchange extended to sexuality (or was it always so?), the relative equality (thus, exchangeability) of partners and competitors, the ability to construe mating as a form of consumption or leisure activity and a concomitant rationalization of sexuality itself. In a perfect, utopian market, the advertiser would choose from a sea of respondents, having only to decide which would make the best match. Conversely, romantic literature chalks love up to fate, which convention commonly attributes to one's character.

A Look Into the Future

According to Walter Benjamin, "Fate and character are commonly regarded as causally connected, character being the cause of fate."⁴ Taken to extremes, this suggests a reduction of the external world to internal subjectivity. Such a belief might result from urban experience – compensating for the degree of anonymity and displacement the city regularly exacts on its inhabitants. Also arising from the urban milieu is what Benjamin called "love at last sight." In this chance scenario, a person falls in love with someone he or she will never see again. Curiously, this encounter reduces internal subjectivity to the happenstance conditions of the external world. A whole category of ads (*Wiedersehen*) – not exactly personals – responds to this situation: "You, a red-haired woman on the U7. Me, the man in the grey shirt who lit your cigarette . . ." Belief in fate expresses itself through reference to fairy tales, fables and proverbs. The fairytale especially is closely bound to German cultural history. The most obvious source is, of course, the Brothers Grimm who recorded and codified what had previously been an oral, folktale tradition. They also recorded and codified the German language in its most authoritative official dictionary. While empirical information (age, height, weight) counterbalances the fatalistic tendency and seemingly confirms the reality of the person behind the advertisement, it also corresponds to the systematization of

knowledge and data that the Grimms advanced. Typically, advertisers weave the two opposite kinds of description into a quasi-love poem.

We know neither fate nor character as things-in-themselves. Thus, these elements resist systematization. We apprehend them instead through signs. Here, the romantic/speculative process begins. We see signs of character in someone's body or face. Of course, print ads are limited to written description, an impoverished portrait at best. To compensate, advertisers project their corporeal nature onto forms of consumption. Commodities come to stand in for the body itself. Via a paradoxical "social relation between things" readers can thus more vividly imagine what the advertisers are like.

The body of the personals advertiser is the body in leisure. Most ads concentrate on preferences in special food or drink, fashion, sports or musical taste. All these demarcate – with greater or lesser degrees of awareness – the advertiser's social positioning. None of the ads, however, acknowledge this positioning as prescriptive. Instead, every choice offers an opportunity for gratification. Thus, all conform to a "fun morality": You've gotta have fun (whether you like it or not). None of the *Sperrmüll* ads diverged from this norm. Writing in 1953, Theodor Adorno had already recognized fun morality's implications for sex practices: "Sexuality itself is being desexualized, as it were, by becoming "fun," a sort of hygiene. It loses not only its more threatening and ego-alien impact, but also its intensity, its 'flavor.'"⁵ He compared this tendency with Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* where "... orgies deteriorated into social functions, while the adage most frequently uttered by the inhabitants of his negative utopia reads 'everybody is happy nowadays.'" Today, however, orgies remain vastly more the exception than the rule, lying on some imagined horizon of complete sexual liberation. It is more the market than human sexuality that has been desublimated. Robert Kurz targets the New Left as an unwitting instrument of this change: "[Even t]he slogan of 'sexual liberation' used by the student movements of the 60s, whose protagonists were not able to overcome the prevailing social forms, has only led to a sexualization of the media and advertising, while the actual sex life of the commodity-consuming individual is more miserable than ever before."⁶ More specifically, until the arrival of Internet personals, city lifestyle magazines, the residue of the 1960s' underground press, played a key role in converting formerly alternative sexualities into new market demo-

graphics. The emergence of personals columns in these papers' classified ads sections helped make their consumerist legitimization more comprehensible.

A Map of Itself

Does the photograph thus fall out of the totalizing logic of the graph? In a way, yes. Here, the degree of surplus information that any camera yields automatically suggests the irreducibility of what Lacan calls the Real, that which can not be sublimated. The resistance to sublimation also implies a resistance to representation and to valuation. Nonetheless, the kinds of sites inventoried by the sixteen photos indicates a social topography. Viewers can deduce the function of any given space from the syntax of familiar components: a chair, a path, a glass or a window. Yet this sense of things and spaces differs from any complete knowledge of a given space which demands – what? – occupying it physically, knowing it absolutely in itself, a detailed onsite analysis, historical research? ... If the failure of any map of itself is its lack of abstraction, despite its promises to the contrary, the photograph can not be slighted here. The General Economy of the Personals Ad: Truth in Advertising to conclude that an absolute logic of commodification governs personals ads misses the concreteness of what the ads transact. The goal is murkier than, say, the sale of a manufactured good. There, once a buyer makes a purchase, unless it is defective and covered by a warranty he or she is stuck with it. The purchase, in turn, may be something consumed all at once or over a long period. Personals ads, however, sharply contradict all these terms. Personals ads target consumers as individual prospects, not as a collective. The exchangeability of sex partners, moreover, cannot further the free market goal of creating surplus value through totally unfettered commerce. (Legitimated styles of courtship, however, may require surplus consumption.) Ordinarily, the point of most personals ads is just to make one "sale." After that, their purpose is exhausted. Second, the "buyer's" situation matches that of the advertiser, who is also the "product." Since both are seeking mates, the positions could easily be reversed. In fact, the "product," so to speak, might even reject the "buyer." Many other questions confound the commodity model as well: Whose labor power is expropriated? Where is the profit motive? At what point is the transaction complete? And so on. Of course, here, the terms "buyer" and

"product" sound hyperbolic. They designate people, not things. Mostly, the only money that changes hands is between the advertiser and Sperrmüll. Yet when libidinal economy meets commodity fetishism, the problem of values becomes acute. Under the restrictive economy of capitalism (a logic of pure acquisition) people and things seemingly trade places. To this extent, personals ads expose generalized contradictions faced by all. Conversely, Georges Bataille's notion of a general economy, based on the circulation – not accumulation – of goods, demands that intangibles such as happiness or fulfillment be accounted for as well. Is it asking too much that capitalist political economy include a happiness index? When an individual takes out a personals ad, she or he projects an idealized persona – inadvertently or not. This, too, is a utopian dimension. A degree of pragmatism might temper the optimizing tendency: the need to appear real, the need to lay a credible foundation for an encounter, the need to appear honest, etc. The (ritualistic) admission of flaws, if any, takes place against an internalized consensus, namely what they presume is acceptable to an imagined mainstream: "I may be a foot fetishist, but I am still slim and attractive" or "I may be heavy but I'm not difficult" (punning on schwer and schwerig). No one should ever have to write his own personals ad. Conversely, the ever-elusive relationship becomes an absolute yardstick of success. Perhaps the most naively utopian aspect of the personals is their promise of a totally legible market in which perfect partners can easily find each other. Their most unthinkable prospect is that some people may be better off alone ... whether they like it or not.

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