Irrony and post-irony in advertising

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1: Introduction

In *Notes on Metamodernism*, Robin van Der Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen attempt to delineate a postpostmodernism, what they call *metamodernism*.

In their view, the idea of postmodernism no longer presents an accurate view of the culture we live in. They argue that what is usually thought of as the defining features of postmodernism (pastiche, irony, cynicism) are increasingly being replaced with new forms of media, relations and ideas which are characterized by hope, post irony and neo-romanticism.

If metamodernism is primarily characterised by a shift away from irony and towards post-irony, we might expect advertising to reflect this fact. Advertising is interesting because consumer culture is the focus of much theorization on postmodernism, and advertising is at the center of that theorization because it is where consumer culture is created. In fact, it is impossible to speak of postmodernism (or a postmodern condition) without considering it in the context of consumer culture and “the logic of late capitalism.” To the theorists who wrote about these phenomena, they were (and are) intrinsically linked to each other and to the overarching conditions of modernity.

In order to contextualize the metamodern and write it into the greater theoretical history of modernity and postmodernity, I have chosen to focus on the relationship between on the one hand metamodern postirony and on the other hand consumer culture and aestheticization. I aim to show how metamodern advertising relies on metamodern tropes of hope and metaxis and how this differs from previous, postmodern forms of advertising.

In other words, my intention with this paper is two-fold:

One, I wish to contextualize the metamodern beyond it being an art movement and write it into the greater theoretical history of modernity and postmodernity, focusing on irony but including the history and theorectization of consumer culture. As such, I will attempt to consider “the metamodern” in the greater context of both postmodern studies.

In order to do so, I will contrast metamodernism with the by-now orthodox, view of late modernity as being postmodern, considering metamodernism in the context of Jameson’s stance on postmodernism, but also Gidden’s theories regarding the problem of reflexivity in late modern society.
Secondly, I wish to analyse advertising from a metamodern standpoint, as irony has often been a prominent feature of advertising. I aim to show how metamodern advertising relies on metamodern tropes of hope and metaxis and how this differs from previous, postmodern forms of advertising.

1.1: Problem statement

What is the function of irony in the ostrich and carlton draught commercials, and how do they compare to each other? To what extent are they metamodern, and does that effect the use of irony?

1.2 Method

In order to explore this question, I will start by outlining metamodernism as defined by Vermeulen & van Der Akker. In a sense, this is chronologically backwards, however, it serves to define the theoretical and thematic perspective of this paper going forwards. However, in order to avoid the discussion of irony becoming a mere abstract, I have chosen to outline a view of modernity following Anthony Gidden’s theory of “late modernity”, which I take to be largely synonymous with the postmodern. Finally, I discuss postmodern poetics, focusing on the role of irony and ontology.

I have structured this theoretical outline both along periods (metamodern, modernity and the postmodern), but have further attempted to my outline of these periods into two main thematic approaches: On the one hand the problem of irony and reflexivity and their relationship to the ontological dominant of postmodernism as well as consumer culture.

With these theoretical concepts established, I analyse two commercials: One, a beer commercial from 2004 which I will argue is “postmodern”, and a commercial from Samsung, which I will argue is metamodern. Both commercials are award-winning commercials at the 2017 Cannes Lions, and won 7 awards (Cannes Lions 2017).
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Although this is only one perspective on modernity out of numerous possible approaches to delineating modernity historically, philosophically, etc, I have chosen here to focus on the theme of doubt and certainty, following Giddens analysis of (late) modernity as essentially a condition of increasing reflexivity and doubt. Although this is a rather narrow perspective which ignores, for instance, the impact of technological advances during the enlightenment, increasing industrialization and urbanization in the West as well as the American and French revolutions, or even earlier developments such as the appearance of the printing press and the phenomena of globalization and colonialization, it is nevertheless necessary for the purposes of this assignment: Anything like a full, or even partial account of the development of modernity is essentially a history of Western philosophy.

Such a perspective also allows me to consider the various movements of the last 3-400 years as essentially different, evolving strategies with which to tackle the radical (and perhaps existential) doubt that Giddens argues is part and parcel with modernity. As such, it allows me to structure an outline of romanticism, modernism, postmodernism and metamodernism as essentially different formal and poetic strategies for dealing with the fundamental problem of reflexivity and irony.

1: I will be using Anthony Giddens’ approach to (late) modernity as essentially a condition humaine as a starting point. In his perspective, modernity is essentially a state of unresolvable scepticism towards knowledge, and the periods of modernism, romanticism, etc. represent different strategies and perspectives on this problem.

2: Therefore, I will consider the changing roles and definitions of irony from Romanticism onwards. Essentially, I will argue that the changing role(s) and definition(s) of irony reflect changing perspectives on reflexivity and contingency.

3: Finally, since I am analysing advertising, I give an account of postmodernist views on advertising and postmodern consumer culture as a “depthless culture” in order to contrast it with the metamodern commercial analysed in the final section.
1.3 Definitions

Before any discussion of postmodernism, it is customary to make a few notes on nomenclature, if for no other reason than the wide variety of ways in which “postmodern” is used: As such, in order to discuss modernity, modernism, postmodernism etc, it is necessary to make a few notes on nomenclature in order to avoid confusion.

Following De Mul (1990), I consider the terms modern, postmodern and metamodern from three angles: As historical concepts which distinguish different historical eras, as thematic concepts that “indicate the characteristics of philosophical, social and artistic movements that are presented as modern, respectively postmodern,” and finally I consider them as worldviews.

By this I mean simply that it is possible to talk of a modern era and a postmodern era, even if these are overlapping (and indeed, competing) perspectives. Following from that, stressing that “the postmodern” is also a thematic concept underscores that it is possible to speak of a given text as having a focus on the themes typically associated with postmodernism: It is ironic, it is sceptical of truth claims, etc. Finally, suggesting that there are modernist, postmodernist or metamodernist worldviews suggests that these thematic focuses are also, fundamentally, a question of different ontologies and different values.

Further, I wish to clarify exactly what is meant by modernism/modern/modernity and postmodernism/postmodern/postmodernity (and by extension, metamodernism/metamodern/metamodernity).

Simply put, I consider “modernity” to be the umbrella term for not just the modern and postmodern periods, but for the Enlightenment and Romantic periods as well: As such, I follow Giddens (1991) and Featherstone (1991) in considering modernity to be a period that arises with and as a consequence of the institution of science and the development of the empirical method.

Similarly, I consider postmodernity much like Giddens defines “late modernity” for the period following World War Two. Like Giddens, I prefer this term because the term “postmodern-
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“Modernity” suggests a radical break from modernity, “Yet the unifying features of modern institutions are just as central to modernity -- especially in the phase of high modernity -- as the disaggregating ones” (Giddens 1991, 27). Nevertheless, for the sake of clarity and consistency with other writers, I have attempted to use modernity and postmodernity throughout.

Further, there is the question of the relationship between postmodernity and postmodernism:

What I want to argue for here is an explicit linking of what Hutcheon calls “the slippage from postmodernity to postmodernism” – postmodernity used here in the sense of the period of radical doubt, but postmodernism here not in the sense of an artistic movement, a general condition or a philosophy, but in the sense of a general condition – but one which is constructed, in essence a cultural logic. Hutcheon describes this “slippage” in a criticism of Fredric Jameson’s theories of postmodernism as the cultural logic of capitalism:

The slippage from postmodernity to postmodernism is constant and deliberate in Jameson’s work: for him postmodernism is the ‘cultural logic of late capitalism.’ It replicates, reinforces, and intensifies the ‘deplorable and reprehensible’ (85) socio-economic effects of postmodernity. Perhaps. But I want to argue that it also critiques those effects, while never pretending to be able to operate outside them (Hutcheon 2002, 25).

Hutcheon criticizes Jameson for this slippage from postmodernity to postmodernism, and I feel like I must therefore defend my choice to do so:

While the two are no doubt inextricably related, I would want to argue for their separation in the context of discourse. The verbal similarity of the terms postmodernity and postmodernism signals their relationship overtly enough without either confusing the issue by using the same word to denote both or evading the issue by conflating the two in some sort of transparent causality. The relationship must be argued, not assumed by some verbal sleight of hand. My exhortation to keep the two separate is conditioned by my desire to show that critique is as important as complicity in the response of cultural postmodernism to the philosophical and socioeconomic
realities of postmodernity: postmodernism here is not so much what Jameson sees as a systemic form of capitalism as the name given to cultural practices which acknowledge their inevitable implication in capitalism, without relinquishing the power or will to intervene critically in it (ibid., 23).

As such, I want to make my assumptions explicit here: I regard modernity, the state of doubt, as a necessary, causal consequence of the rational, scientific project of the enlightenment and modernism, and late modernity or postmodernity as a state in which that doubt becomes increasingly relevant – a period in which tradition is sufficiently weakened that reflexivity becomes a major factor for knowledge, including knowledge of self (identity), and including knowledge of metanarratives. And it is this incredulity towards metanarratives which gives rise to postmodernism along the lines of reasoning that Lyotard proposed – that is, that postmodernism is a consequence of incredulity towards other isms. But if nothing else, postmodernism is the ideology (or ideologies) of a specific historical period, and an ideology which is characterized by “cultural practices which acknowledge their inevitable implication in capitalism, without relinquishing the power or will to intervene critically in it.”

I use “cultural practices” here to signify several things – first of all that I am speaking explicitly of a plurality of practices, including the production of literature, art and philosophy, and “low-cultural” forms of media such as fashion and advertising. But also the production of theories of the postmodern, most of which can to some extent be described as postmodernist themselves. Implicit in this definition is a certain collapse with regards as to which is the map and which is the territory of postmodern theories of postmodernism and postmodernism as the phenomenon which those theories attempt to describe: I discuss this further in chapter 3.

It is these cultural practices which can be thought of not merely as “postmodern” in a temporal or chronological sense, but as “postmodernist” in the sense of being “inextricably related” to postmodernity as incredulity towards metanarratives.

And to clarify further: This does not mean that postmodernism as a general zeitgeist is the only possible ism of postmodernity – for instance, this thesis is predicated upon metamodernism as a new ism under postmodernity, at least postmodernity as it has been defined here.

In this perspective, Romanticism, Modernism, Postmodernism and Metamodernism are best understood as reactions to the (late) modern condition, or perhaps as different attitudes, struc-
tures of feeling or strategies for dealing with one defining feature of this condition, namely the tension between trust and distrust, credulity and incredulity, between an overemphasis on contingency vs. a blind faith. In fact, these are the central themes of metamodernism, as I will discuss next.
2: Metamodernism

In their 2010 paper, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin Van Der Akker made an analysis of then-trends in the arts, architecture and philosophy.

In this analysis, postmodern irony, scepticism and pastiche were being abandoned in favour of, respectively, “an oscillation between irony and sincerity”, what they call “pragmatic idealism” and a resurgent focus on “aesth-ethical notions of reconstruction, myth and metaxis” (Van der Akker & Vermeulen 2010, 2).

As I will argue in section 3.3, these are strategies for dealing with the fundamental problems presented by modernity, namely trust and irony.

However, I will begin this paper by accounting for these concepts in order to delineate the thematic focus of this paper before moving on to the larger context of modernity and consumer culture.

2.1: Metamodern idealism and metaxis

Van Der Akker & Vermeulen define metamodernism as “characterized by the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment” (Van der Akker & Vermeulen 2010, 2).

Further, they use the term “meta” in a three-fold way: “For we contend that metamodernism should be situated epistemologically with (post) modernism, ontologically between (post) modernism, and historically beyond (post) modernism” (Van der Akker & Vermeulen 2010, 2).

In other words, they suggest that metamodernism shares the epistemological skepticism of postmodernism as it is usually understood, but argue that the ontology of metamodernism is “between” postmodernism and modernism, while finally suggesting that it is historically “beyond” postmodernism a fairly straightforward, chronological sense, albeit one that is shared with the metamodern subject as such.
Further, their distinction between epistemology and ontology is, in my reading, one that suggests a very particular conception of ontology as a private, psychological *phenomenon* rather than suggesting a metaphysical, objective reality. That is, they suggest that people live in a world which they must treat as ontologically real, but which they cannot epistemologically justify as such. For this reason, they argue that what defines metamodernism is *metaxis*, a state of in-betweenness: “Both the metamodern epistemology (as if) and its ontology (between) should thus be conceived of as a “both-neither” dynamic. They are each at once modern and postmodern and neither of them” (Van der Akker & Vermeulen 2010, 6).

This both/neither dynamic is central to metamodernism and the state of *metaxis* which they argue is central to understanding it. With reference to Eric Voegelin, they describe this state as a state of in-betweenness, using the metaphor of a donkey chasing a carrot:

Metamodernism moves for the sake of moving, attempts in spite of its inevitable failure; it seeks forever for a truth that it never expects to find. If you will forgive us for the banality of the metaphor for a moment, the metamodern thus willfully adopts a kind of donkey-and-carrot double-bind. Like a donkey it chases a carrot that it never manages to eat because the carrot is always just beyond its reach. But precisely because it never manages to eat the carrot, it never ends its chase, setting foot in moral realms the modern donkey (having eaten its carrot elsewhere) will never encounter, entering political domains the postmodern donkey (having abandoned the chase) will never come across (Van der Akker & Vermeulen 2010, 5).

Further, they argue that “metaxis intends the extent to which we are at once both here and there and nowhere” (Van der Akker & Vermeulen 2010, 6). They quote Voegelin:

Existence has the structure of the In-Between, of the Platonic metaxy, and if anything is constant in the history of mankind it is the language of tension between life and death, immortality and mortality, perfection and imperfection, time and timelessness, between order and disorder, truth and untruth, sense and senselessness of existence; between amor Dei and amor sui, l’a’me ouverte and l’ame close; (Voegelin cited in Van Der Akker & Vermeulen 2010, 6).
Although Voegelin uses the term to describe the general human condition from an existentialist standpoint, Vermeulen & Van Der Akker use it explicitly to refer to “a metaphor for a cultural sensibility that is particular to the metamodern discourse. The metamodern is constituted by the tension, no, the double-bind, of a modern desire for sense and a postmodern doubt about the sense of it all” (ibid.).

This double-bind is resolved through a distinction they make between on the one hand “modern enthusiasm” and on the other “postmodern scepticism.” It is this distinction I will turn to next:

Vermeulen & Van der Akker identify enthusiasm and skepticism as modern and postmodern with reference to Jos De Mul:

These positions can most appropriately be summarized, perhaps, by Jos de Mul’s distinction between postmodern irony (encompassing nihilism, sarcasm, and the distrust and deconstruction of grand narratives, the singular and the truth) and modern enthusiasm (encompassing everything from utopism to the unconditional belief in Reason) (Van der Akker & Vermeulen 2010, 4).

As such, they conceptualize metamodernism as a sort of synthesis between enthusiasm and irony, and identify these positions with modernism and postmodernism respectively.

This oscillation is in fact a form of (Romantic) irony, what I will argue in the discussion, 4.3, is best understood as postirony, but for now I wish to focus on the oscillation between “naïvete and knowingness,”:

[…] if, simplistically put, the modern outlook vis-à-vis idealism and ideals could be characterized as fanatic and/or naïve, and the postmodern mindset as apathetic and/or skeptic, the current generation’s attitude – for it is, and very much so, an attitude tied to a generation – can be conceived of as a kind of informed naivety, a pragmatic idealism (ibid., 5).
They tie this oscillation explicitly to a neo-romanticism in the arts, and argue that neo-romanticism arises out of the gap between epistemology and ontology, leading to a return to Romantic notions of the sublime:

It is from this hesitation also that the Romantic inclination toward the tragic, the sublime, and the uncanny stem, aesthetic categories lingering between projection and perception, form and the unformable, coherence and chaos, corruption and innocence (ibid., 8).

In other words, Vermeulen & Van Der Akker argue that neo-romanticism is a natural consequence of the inherent contrasts of modernity. In a sense, the epistemological scepticism of postmodernism persists in the metamodern, but as a challenge to be overcome, one which is “difficult to bear”:

But it is not only our (post)modern culture that is ambiguous. Like beauty, ambiguity is in the eye of the beholder. (Post)modern human beings themselves are characterized by a fundamental ambiguity in their understanding of the world and themselves. What distinguishes human life in (post)modern culture from modern and premodern life is that we have become conscious of the eternal contradiction between human finitude and the desire for eternity, which for many centuries has been concealed by a metaphysical hope that this desire can be satisfied. It is a consciousness that is extremely difficult to bear (De Mul 1999, 236).

As such, their concept of metamodernism is heavily indebted to Jos De Mul’s analysis of what he calls “(post)modernism”. I will quote De Mul extensively here, as his analysis is fundamental to understanding metamodernism:
What hereby becomes clear is that Romantic irony is not merely a stylistic method, but rather that it forms an ontology, that is, a view of the most elementary characteristics of reality (Furst, 1984, 225 ff.). The irony-evoking realization of the unachievability of the aspiration for absolute truths and values is based upon the comprehension of the fundamental changeability of reality (see 1.5) The Romantic's irony "is the instrument for registering the obdurate paradoxicality of a universe in eternal flux.... the divergence between traditional and romantic irony is thus as much a matter of ontology and epistemology rather than literary technique" (Furst, 1984, 229) Ontologically comprehended irony is, as Jankélevitch expressed it, "an expression of the transcendental subjectivism" (une ivresse de la subjectivité transcendentale) that considers man to be the basis of absolute truth (Jankélevitch, 1964, 17) (De Mul 1999, 10).

The ontology formed by Romantic irony, then, is the ontology of metamodernism, bringing together the epistemological problem of the "unachievability of the aspiration for absolute truth" and an ontologically justified pragmatism which "takes man to be the basis of absolute truth."

Nevertheless, unachievable aspirations remain just that – unachievable. The function of irony is in this analysis two-fold – one, to draw attention to the unachievability of the absolute truth, but also to create distance from that realization:

But, at the same time, irony embodies the capacity that people have to reflect upon their impotence, to distance themselves from it and thus to, to a certain extent, to rise above it. Romantic irony makes it possible to live with the knowledge that everything is changeable, and this transcendent character is what differentiates Romantic irony from sarcasm, making it a weapon against the nihilism that announces its presence when transcendental subjectivism is undermined (ibid.).

In a sense, this is a paradox – acknowledging the impossibility of one’s aspirations through irony also entails rising above it.

But for now, I wish to discuss the particular mechanism that Vermeulen & Van der Akker propose as defining for metamodernism, namely performatism, a term originating with Raoul Eshelmann.
2.2 Performatism

In his 2002 article, Eshelman made the case for a conception of postpostmodernism which stresses manipulation as a central theme of movies and architecture. Specifically, Eshelman used the movie *Amelie* as a model of performatism, and creates a small litmus test for postmodernism based on his own conception of postmodernism as having to do with the disappearance of the subject, the displacement of the real by the virtual, irony and metaphysical skepticism. Eshelman further argues that based on these criteria, Amelie is not a postmodern movie:

1. 1) There is no “disappearance of the subject”: In Amelie, the titular character’s “mode of subjectivity” in fact turns out to be the dominant force of the film.

2. 2) The displacement of the real by the virtual is a “tie”: “Setting people up to make them happy is a kind of virtual, constructed activity, whereas the result, happiness, is quite real to the people involved and actually changes their lives."

3. 3) The ironic metapoision: Although the movie does feature irony (or what Hutcheon calls ironic markers, see section XXX), the subjects of the movie (Amelie and the other characters) are taken seriously: “The movie has a comic, pseudo-documentary tone, but it certainly takes Amélie seriously enough to want to make us identify with what she's doing.”

4. 4) Extreme metaphysical skepticism. There is no such skepticism in Amelie, which doesn’t challenge, for instance, the idea of love central to the plot (abbreviated from Performatism 2002).

Although Eshelman does not make a more precise formulation of postmodernism, these four points certainly are in general agreement with the distinction between modern enthusiasm and postmodern skepticism, and like Vermeulen and Van Der Akker, Eshelman sees the central change in metamodernism as being related to new attitudes towards irony and contingency:
[...] performatism does not pretend to create authenticity or to experience things directly.

As we've seen in the case of Amélie, emotional states of being (happiness, love, whatever) are set up or constructed; there is always some sort of intermediary involved.

[...] Needless to say, postmodernists consider performatism humbug. This is because they're only in one very limited kind of thing, namely the ironic knowledge that being is conditional and contingent.

Performatism disarms this attitude by demonstrating from the very beginning that knowledge isn't the most important part of human experience (Performatism 2002).

I think it is useful to consider the distinction Vermeulen & Van Der Akker makes between ontology and epistemology. Performatism can be regarded as a strategy for resolving the “double-bind” of living with “the metamodern epistemology (as if) and its ontology (between).”

This is particularly clear when Eshelman speaks of “knowledge not being the most important part of human experience” (Performatism 2002): He is explicitly arguing that performatism privileges ontology over epistemology: Being in love is a “real thing” to the people in love, even if they harbour ironic reservations regarding love – for instance as love being a historical product, a product of our biology, hormones and neurons etc., or simply love being a product of Amelie from Montmartre “setting us up” in both senses of that phrase.

Nevertheless, it is hard (if not impossible) for a modern subject not to harbour such reservations. Because as I will argue in chapter 3, modernity is to a large extent defined by doubt, and risk. For now, however, I want to discuss Romantic Irony as a philosophical and historical concept:
2.3 Romantic irony

In this section, I wish to define Romantic irony historically and consider it in the framework of doubt and trust which will be outlined below in section 3.3. I intend to do so by way of the concept of contingency as a way to bridge the gap between the irony of the romantics and the irony of the postmodernists and metamodernists:

In order to do this, I want to make the argument that what Anne K. Mellor (1980) calls Schlegel’s incomprehensibility “philosophical irony” is the same thing as what the philosopher Richard Rorty (1989) calls contingency: Both deal with irony as a limitation on language and knowledge. Further, both are expressions of what Giddens calls doubt.

Philosophical irony, this inevitable and all-important consciousness of the limitations of human knowledge and of human language, is thus the necessary prerequisite and counterforce to love and creative imagination. It criticizes and thus negates one's excessive commitment to the fictions of one's own mind, thereby enabling one to sustain contact with reality (Mellor 1980, 11).

Philosophical irony, then is a “consciousness of the limitations of human knowledge and of human language”. Further, Mellor argues that “Philosophical irony is grounded on the denial of any absolute order in natural or human events.” (ibid., 7).

This is fundamentally due to a problem of language: The romantics themselves considered language to be of equal importance: Consider that Schlegel spoke of “a real language” in his defense of irony:

I want to focus attention on the greatest thinkers of every age have divined (only very darkly, to be sure) until Kant discovered the table of categories and there was light in the spirit of man: I mean by this a real language, so that we can stop rummaging about for words and pay attention to the power and source of all activity” (Schlegel 1971, 260).
This conception of “rummaging about for words” was a consequence of Kant’s influence on Schlegel’s thinking, as Mellor writes:

Our perceptions of the infinite must therefore be but partial and in that sense false. "One's poetry is limited, just because it is one's own," insists Schlegel (DP, 54). Insofar as we attempt to structure the chaos of becoming into comprehensible systems, we are confined within the Kantian categories or deep structures of the phenomenal world. This awareness of the limitations of the self is what Schlegel meant by philosophical "irony" or the "critical faculty" (a term he derived from Kant's Critiques). A skeptical awareness of the limitations of one's knowledge is necessary, Schlegel felt, to detach imagination from an excessive commitment to its own finite creations. Irony must "toll" the "forlorn" poet back from illusions of perfection to his "sole self" (Mellor 1980, 10).

In other words, language is flawed because language deals with phenomena rather than noumena, and in referring to the “table of categories,” this is what Schlegel means. And this brings Schlegel to a concept similar to Rorty’s “final vocabulary” (Rorty 1989, 73) – “incomprehensibility”. This is because it implies that all systems of language (whether artistic, philosophical, political) are simply different ways to impose order on something that cannot be understood. As Mellor writes:

Romantic irony is both a philosophical conception of the universe and an artistic program. Ontologically, it sees the world as fundamentally chaotic. No order, no far goal of time, ordained by God or right reason, determines the progression of human or natural events. This chaos is abundantly fertile, always throwing up new forms, new creations. But insofar as these forms are static and finite, they are inevitably overwhelmed by and reabsorbed into the process of life. To borrow the terms used by modern physics, we might think of this chaos as pure energy. This energy flows in "force-fields" that to our crude vision appear as material objects but that are more precisely understood as only momentary conjunctions of differently charged forces.
And the motion of these forces is ultimately unpredictable: universal chaos has no specifiable direction, no telos, no comprehensible pattern or purpose (ibid., 4).

This, however, is a positive conception of the world, since it means that humans are able to create their own systems and theories. As Schlegel writes:

But is incomprehension really something so unmitigatedly contemptible and evil? Methinks the salvation of families and nations rests upon it. If I am not wholly deceived, then states and systems, the most artificial productions of man, are often so artificial that one simply can’t admire the wisdom of their creators enough. Only an incredibly minute quantity of it suffices: As long as its truth and purity remain inviolate and no blasphemous rationality dares approach its sacred confines. Yes, even man’s most precious possession, his own inner happiness, depends in the last analysis, as anybody can easily verify, on some such point of strength that must be left in the dark, but that nonetheless shores up and supports the whole burden and would crumble the moment one subjected it to rational analysis. Verily, it would fare badly with you if, as you demand, the whole world were ever to become comprehensible in earnest. And isn’t this entire, unending world constructed by the understanding out of incomprehensibility or chaos? (Schlegel 1971, 268).

In other words, “states and systems” – that is, social organisations and scientific and philosophical theories – might be false, but “one simply can’t admire the wisdom of their creators enough.” But simultaneously, these artificial constructs rely on “incomprehensibility” – concepts that would “crumble the moment one subjected it to rational analysis.”

The role of the poet, therefore, becomes balancing their (limited) perception and awareness of this real chaos with the constructed states and systems of mankind, since it is impossible to express the real, noumena through language, which is “confined within […] the phenomenal world”: 
Our perceptions of the infinite must therefore be but partial and in that sense false. "One's poetry is limited, just because it is one's own," insists Schlegel (DP, 54). Insofar as we attempt to structure the chaos of becoming into comprehensible systems, we are confined within the Kantian categories or deep structures of the phenomenal world. This awareness of the limitations of the self is what Schlegel meant by philosophical "irony" or the "critical faculty" (a term he derived from Kant's Critiques). A skeptical awareness of the limitations of one's knowledge is necessary, Schlegel felt, to detach imagination from an excessive commitment to its own finite creations. Irony must "toll" the "forlorn" poet back from illusions of perfection to his "sole self" (Mellor 1980, 10).

In other words, we should not delude ourselves into thinking that our ideas about the world are final or real, no matter how useful and perfect they might seem, whether discussing love, scientific or philosophical theories or even happiness or democracy. And therefore, we should not express ourselves as if these ideas were final and true, but should instead acknowledge that they are, in a sense, fabrications:

This ironic hovering of the artist, this self-restraint, manifests itself in the work of art as what Schlegel called "transcendental buffoonery" (L, 42). This phrase has been mocked and dismissed," but it deserves to be taken seriously. Schlegel meant that the work of art must reveal the presence of an authorial consciousness that is simultaneously affirming and mocking its own creation: "There are ancient and modern poems that are pervaded by the divine breath of irony throughout and informed by a truly transcendental buffoonery. Internally: the mood that surveys everything and rises infinitely above all limitations, even above its own art, virtue, or genius; externally, in its execution: the mimic style of an averagely gifted Italian buffo" (L, 42). We have already seen that by "transcendental" Schlegel refers to a poetry that hovers between the real and the ideal, between the chaos of becoming and the order of being (A, 238). But outwardly, the work of art should create the same impression as that created by the buffo or harlequin figure in commedia dell'arte plays, a dramatic character who both controls the plot and mocks the play (ibid., 17).
I want to include Mellor’s summary of Romantic irony here before making a few comments on it:

Romantic irony, then, is a mode of consciousness or a way of thinking about the world that finds a corresponding literary mode. The artist who perceives the universe as an infinitely abundant chaos; who sees his own consciousness as simultaneously limited and involved in a process of growth or becoming; who therefore enthusiastically engages in the difficult but exhilarating balancing between self-creation and self-destruction; and who then articulates this experience in a form that simultaneously creates and de-creates itself is producing the literary mode that Schlegel called romantic irony. As a literary mode, romantic irony characteristically includes certain elements: a philosophical conception of the universe as becoming, as an infinitely abundant chaos; a literary structure that reflects both this chaos or process of becoming and the systems that men impose upon it; and a language that draws attention to its own limitations (ibid., 24-25).

This also means that “This authorial presence may, but need not, take the form of a deliberate destruction of the dramatic illusion”, although this is a definition of Romantic irony that is often used (EG, McHale 1989, 17)
3. Modernity and the postmodern

In this section, I will attempt to account for the historical development and status of irony in a historical perspective. As a starting point, I will use Giddens’ formulation of modernity as essentially the period in history in which irony and contingency become intractably linked to human experience, thought, identity and life.

3.1 Modernity and doubt

I will begin this section with a discussion of Anthony Gidden’s definition of modernity. Giddens’ definition of modernity is, in a sense, the era in which irony becomes a pervasive part of life:

Modernity is a post-traditional order, but not one in which the sureties of tradition and habit have been replaced by the certitude of rational knowledge. Doubt, a pervasive feature of modern critical reason, permeates into everyday life as well as philosophical consciousness, and forms a general existential dimension of the contemporary social world. Modernity institutionalises the principle of radical doubt and insists that all knowledge takes the form of hypotheses: claims which may very well be true, but which are in principle always open to revision and may have at some point to be abandoned. Systems of accumulated expertise -- which form important disembedding influences -- represent multiple sources of authority, frequently internally contested and divergent in their implications. In the settings of what I call 'high' or 'late' modernity -- our present-day world -- the self, like the broader institutional contexts in which it exists, has to be reflexively made. Yet this task has to be accomplished amid a puzzling diversity of options and possibilities (Giddens 1991, 2-3).

As such, modernity is defined against a supposed traditional order. To point out that this is a construction is, perhaps, banal, but it is also an important point that is rarely explicitly ad-
dressed: By “traditional”, Giddens seems to mean orders where actions and behaviour are justified with reference to tradition. But this can be either a state of ignorance or a more or less deliberate, social construction: In this sense, a “traditional order” implies either an order in which authority and hierarchy dominates, or it can be a state of ignorance: In a sense, the institutions of modernity (science in particular, but also democratic institutions) serve to cast doubt upon the things they speak of just as much as they serve to create and define them.

This is apparent from the way he stresses “social and natural scientific knowledge” as both being subject to reflexivity or doubt and to the “systems of accumulated expertise”: In Giddens’ perspective, modernity is defined by its “integral relation” to “radical doubt”, and postmodernism (which is what I largely take his term “late modernity” to mean, although Giddens himself reserves the term for Baudrillard’s theories of the hyperreal) arises as a natural consequence of the project of modernity:

In respect both of social and natural scientific knowledge, the reflexivity of modernity turns out to confound the expectations of Enlightenment thought -- although it is the very product of that thought. The original progenitors of modern science and philosophy believed themselves to be preparing the way for securely founded knowledge of the social and natural worlds: the claims of reason were due to overcome the dogmas of tradition, offering a sense of certitude in place of the arbitrary character of habit and custom. But the reflexivity of modernity actually undermines the certainty of knowledge, even in the core domains of natural science. Science depends, not on the inductive accumulation of proofs, but on the methodological principle of doubt. No matter how cherished, and apparently well established, a given scientific tenet might be, it is open to revision -- or might have to be discarded altogether -- in the light of new ideas or findings. The integral relation between modernity and radical doubt is an issue which, once exposed to view, is not only disturbing to philosophers but is existentially troubling for ordinary individuals (Giddens 1991, 21).

This is a description which explicitly ties modernity to the creation of science as an institution during the Enlightenment, and explicitly ties that institution to Descartes and his method of radical doubt. It is “disturbing to philosophers” and “existentially troubling for ordinary individuals”, and it extends even to the realms of our social lives and our self-understanding:
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Even when modern institutions create certainty and knowledge (what Giddens terms “expert knowledge”), these are not just undermined by the radical doubt of the scientific method as such, but also by the consistent annexation of new areas of life – those that were previously traditional or commonsensical: Whatever shared assumptions the people of, say, the 1930s had about psychology, for instance, have been overturned almost completely today. And to Giddens, this means that even our selves and self-identities are subject to the same mechanisms of radical doubt:

In the post-traditional order of modernity, and against the backdrop of new forms of mediated experience, self-identity becomes a reflexively organised endeavour. The reflexive project of the self, which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives, takes place in the context of multiple choice as filtered through abstract systems. In modern social life, the notion of lifestyle takes on a particular significance. The more tradition loses its hold, and the more daily life is reconstituted in terms of the dialectical interplay of the local and the global, the more individuals are forced to negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options. Of course, there are standardising influences too -- most notably, in the form of commodification, since capitalistic production and distribution form core components of modernity's institutions. Yet because of the 'openness' of social life today, the pluralisation of contexts of action and the diversity of 'authorities', lifestyle choice is increasingly important in the constitution of self-identity and daily activity. Reflexively organised life-planning, which normally presumes consideration of risks as filtered through contact with expert knowledge, becomes a central feature of the structuring of self-identity (Giddens 1991, 5).

Specifically, I want to argue for advertising’s role in creating the social ontologies of modern subjects by way of consumerism – that is, that advertising is one of the major ‘authorities’ that influence our lifestyle choices: This is because “lifestyles” become important categories in postmodernism. Giddens puts this succinctly:
In modern social life, the notion of lifestyle takes on a particular significance. The more tradition loses its hold, and the more daily life is reconstituted in terms of the dialectical interplay of the local and the global, the more individuals are forced to negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options. Of course, there are standardising influences too -- most notably, in the form of commodification, since capitalistic production and distribution form core components of modernity's institutions. Yet because of the 'openness' of social life today, the pluralisation of contexts of action and the diversity of 'authorities', lifestyle choice is increasingly important in the constitution of self-identity and daily activity (Giddens 1991, 5).

In other words, lifestyles are what enables us to constitute self-identity and daily activity. And lifestyles are defined largely by consumption, “the possession of desired goods”:

Advertisers orient themselves to sociological classifications of consumer categories and at the same time foster specific consumption 'packages'. To a greater or lesser degree, the project of the self becomes translated into one of the possession of desired goods and the pursuit of artificially framed styles of life. The consequences of this situation have often been noted. The consumption of ever-novel goods becomes in some part a substitute for the genuine development of self; appearance replaces essence as the visible signs of successful consumption come actually to outweigh the use-values of the goods and services in question themselves (Giddens 1991, 198).

Finally, mass media, including advertising, is central to shaping which goods are desired or not:

The commodifying of consumption, it should be made clear, like other phenomena discussed earlier, is not just a matter of the reordering of existing behaviour patterns or spheres of life. Rather, consumption under the domination of mass markets is essentially a novel phenomenon, which participates directly in processes of the continuous reshaping of the conditions of day-to-day life. Mediated experience is centrally
involved here. The mass media routinely present modes of life to which, it is implied, everyone should aspire; the lifestyles of the affluent are, in one form or another, made open to view and portrayed as worthy of emulation. More important, however, and more subtle, is the impact of the narratives the media convey. Here there is not necessarily the suggestion of a lifestyle to be aspired to; instead, stories are developed in such a way as to create narrative coherence with which the reader or viewer can identify (ibid., 199-200).

3.2 Postmodernism and modernity

In this section, I want to discuss postmodernism as the logical conclusion of Giddens’ theories of modernity, but also bringing in viewpoints that focus on postmodernism as being tied closely to the rise of global capitalism – in part because Giddens himself saw “late modernity” as such, but also in order to bring in other perspective which is necessary in order to understand advertising, namely that of consumer culture.

In this chapter, I will therefore attempt to account the relationship between irony and consumer culture in the postmodern. In order to do this, I have divided the section into two parts:

One part, accounting for postmodernism as doubt and irony and starting with Giddens formulation and expanding upon it in order to discuss what is doubted from a historical standpoint. And this is the second part: Postmodernism as the emergence of, and a critical response to, a consumer culture. By doing so, I hope to avoid one common problem with regards to discussions of the postmodern: Theorising he postmodern is always a somewhat problematic undertaking due to the nature of postmodern theories – As Hutcheon argues, “the postmodern is not so much a concept as a problematic”:

Many a theorist has noted the problems of saying anything enlightening about postmodernism without acknowledging the perspective from which it is said, a perspective that will inevitably be limited, if only because it will come from within the postmodern. The postmodern is seemingly not so much a concept as a problematic: ‘a
complex of heterogeneous but interrelated questions which will not be silenced by any spuriously unitary answer’ (Burgin 1986a: 163–4). The political and the artistic are not separable in this problematic (Hutcheon 2002, 15).

In the framework of doubt, the problem is that acknowledging these doubts is also to undermine one’s own theories and positions – from this perspective, a modernist thinker, researcher, or academic who acknowledges or takes seriously the paradoxical nature of the modernist project ceases to be a modernist and becomes a postmodernist. And in that same sense, theories of the postmodern become postmodern theories. And it is in this sense that we can talk of “postmodernism”, an artistic and intellectual movement which is not so much a coherent philosophy as it is a particular viewpoint:

Umberto Eco has written that he considers postmodern ‘the orientation of anyone who has learned the lesson of Foucault, i.e., that power is not something unitary that exists outside us’ […] He might well have added to this, as others have, the lessons learned from Derrida about textuality and deferral, or from Vattimo and Lyotard about intellectual mastery and its limits. In other words, it is difficult to the politics of postmodernism separate the ‘de-doxifying’ impulse of postmodern art and culture from the deconstructing impulse of what we have labelled poststructuralist theory. A symptom of this inseparability can be seen in the way in which postmodern artists and critics speak about their ‘discourses’ by which they mean to signal the inescapably political contexts in which they speak and work (Hutcheon 2002, 3-4).

And this is why irony is emblematic of postmodernism: It is not possible to speak of discourse except through discourse, and this is exactly what postmodernism is sceptical of: “In the broadest of terms, [theories labelled as postmodern] all share a view of discourse as problematic and of ordering systems as suspect (and as humanly constructed).” (ibid, 23). And irony embodies this inherent contradiction through its ability to be inherently contradictive.

And since my interest here is mostly in this broad irony, I do not intend to discuss EG Foucault’s notion of power or the post-structuralist theories of difference and deferral with the
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depth necessary to discuss them at all: I am more interested here in broadly theorising the postmodern than in postmodern theories.

However, in order to do so it is necessary to outline a basic sketch of postmodern thought because, as Hutcheon also writes, postmodern art, theory and culture is intertwined and influenced each other:

There are other kinds of border tension in the postmodern too: the ones created by the transgression of the boundaries between genres, between disciplines or discourses, between high and mass culture, and most problematically, perhaps, between practice and theory. While there is arguably never any practice without theory, an overtly theoretical component has become a notable aspect of postmodern art, displayed within the works themselves as well as in the artists’ statements about their work. The postmodern artist is no longer the inarticulate, silent, alienated creator of the romantic/modernist tradition. [...] There is little doubt that a certain kind of theory has supported and even created a certain kind of art and that the academy, art institutions, and the publishing industry have, in part, constructed postmodernism (Hutcheon 2002, 18).

Although Hutcheon is commenting explicitly on high art, this is also true of “low” art in general, as postmodernism is (or was) the worldview of the class of what Bordieu (1984) calls “the new cultural intermediaries”, “those in media, design, fashion, advertising, and ‘para’ intellectual information occupations, whose job entail performing services and the production, marketing and dissemination of symbolic goods.” (Featherstone 1991, 19).

3.3 Irony and reflexive doubt

Following from the previous chapter, I want to clarify what Giddens saw as the main difference between “late modernity” and “modernity” as such. Mainly, Giddens saw the mechanism of doubt encompassing increasingly larger areas of life – and especially the notion of self-identity and our social relationships.
Even everyday “reality” – the ontology of a “stable external world” is reliant on trust:

Trust in others, in the early life of the infant and, in chronic fashion, in the activities of the adult, is at the origin of the experience of a stable external world and a coherent sense of self-identity. It is ‘faith’ in the reliability and integrity of others which is at stake here. Trust in others begins in the context of the individual confidence – confidence in the caretaking figures. But it both precedes an awareness of those figures as ‘persons’ and later forms a generalised component of the inter-subjective nature of social life. Trust, interpersonal relations and a conviction of the ‘reality’ of things go hand in hand in the social settings of adult life (Giddens 1991, 51-52).

And in fact, trust is a central feature of Gidden’s conception of modernity, an “inoculation” or “protective cocoon” against “potential threats and dangers”:

In circumstances of uncertainty and multiple choice, the notions of trust and risk have particular application. Trust, I argue, is a crucial generic phenomenon of personality development as well as having distinctive and specific relevance to a world of disembedding mechanisms and abstract systems. In its generic manifestations, trust is directly linked to achieving an early sense of ontological security. Trust established between an infant and its caretakers provides an ‘inoculation’ which screens off potential threats and dangers that even the most mundane activities of day-to-day life contain. Trust in this sense is basic to a ‘protective cocoon’ which stands guard over the self in its dealings with everyday reality. It ‘brackets out’ potential occurrences which, were the individual seriously to contemplate them, would produce a paralysis of the will, or feelings of engulfment. In its more specific guise, trust is a medium of interaction with the abstract systems which both empty day-to-day life of its traditional content and set up globalising influences. Trust here generates that ‘leap into faith’ which practical engagement demands (ibid., 3).
Giddens uses the term “trust” in a psychological, Eriksonian sense, that is, as something that is “a crucial generic phenomenon of personality development”, “established between infant and caretaker”, but furthermore attaches this psychological concept to a philosophical one – Kierkegaard’s “leap of faith”. And further, this “leap of faith” is part of the inoculation against the dangers of modernity – not just in the sense of risks and physical harm, but also ones which “would produce a paralysis of the will or engulf them” – philosophical dangers, in other words:

The responses of the other are necessary to the sustaining of an ‘observable/accountable’ world, and yet there is no point at which they can be absolutely relied upon. Social reproduction unfolds with none of the causal determination characteristic of the physical world, but as an always contingent feature of the knowledgeable use of convention. The social world, moreover, should not be understood as a multiplicity of situations in which ‘ego’ faces ‘alter’, but one in which each person is equally implicated in the active process of organising predictable social interaction. The orderliness of day-to-day life is a miraculous occurrence, but it is not one that stems from any sort of outside intervention; it is brought about as a continuous achievement on the part of everyday actors in an entirely routine way. That orderliness is solid and constant; yet the slightest glance of one person towards another, inflexion of the voice, changing facial expression or gestures of the body may threaten it (ibid., 53).

To Giddens, late modernity or postmodernism was the culmination of this process of increasing reflexivity, and doubt.

In this, he seems inspired by Lyotard’s formulation of postmodernism. To Lyotard, this problem was a problem of “legitimation”, the creation of justifications for actions and institutions in modernity. In the context of science and doubt, for instance, he wrote:

Science has always been in conflict with narratives. Judged by the yardstick of science, the majority of them prove to be fables. But to the extent that science does not restrict itself to stating useful regularities and seeks the truth, it is obliged to legitmate the rules of its own game. It then produces a discourse of legitimiation with re-
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spect to its own status, a discourse called philosophy. I will use the term *modern* to
designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this
kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such a as the dialectics of
Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working sub-
ject, or the creation of wealth (Lyotard 1979, xxiii).

In contrast to the modern, he defined postmodern as the incredulity towards these grand nar-
ratives, and saw this as a consequence of scientific and philosophical progress:

Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives.
This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress
in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitima-
tion corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the uni-
versity institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its
functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal (ibid., xxiv).

To Lyotard, the purpose of metanarratives is to create justifications, to *legitimate* certain insti-
tutions, actions and concepts. And all postmodern institutions (understood broadly, from con-
crete legal entities, such as the state or marriage, or to abstractions such as “science” or
“friendship”) rely on such metanarratives:

[...] if a metanarrative implying a philosophy of history is used to legitimate
knowledge, questions are raised concerning the validity of the institutions governing
the social bond: these must be legitimated as well. Thus justice is consigned to the
grand narrative in the same way as truth (ibid., xxiv).

For this reason, Lyotard argued that in the absence of other narratives, institutions and social
bonds become increasingly subject to “an unquestioning acceptance of the instrumentalisa-
tion of knowledge in most highly developed societies” (ibid., 18).
I want to draw attention here to the fact that metanarratives are not quite the same as narratives. On a psychological level, narratives are the stories we tell ourselves in order to structure and make sense of our lives: They are what define meaning to us.

In the next chapter, I want to argue that this line of reasoning cannot be separated from the politics of postmodernism, namely criticism of consumer culture and it’s the ontological scepticism that defines postmodernism.

### 3.4 Postmodernist culture

In this chapter I want to discuss how reflexive, radical doubt is expressed through irony and extends to become an ontological as much as a reflexive or epistemological issue.

McHale argues for a conception of postmodernism which is, at its cores, defined by a preoccupation with ontology. However, I want here to comment on his definition of ontology. McHale essentially defines ontology in terms of worlds:

That is, postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions like the ones Dick Higgins calls “post-cognitive”: “Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?” Other typical postmodernist questions bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world which it projects, for instance: What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?; How is a projected world structured? And so on (McHale 1989, 10).

To McHale, this question is very literal: Much of his books revolves around, for instance, fictional cities, the influence of science fiction on postmodernist fiction, “zones” etc.

However, this is my opinion a too-narrow definition of ontology if we wish to discuss postmodernism beyond the narrow confines of high literature, and even in that context it seems
too restrictive, causing McHale, for instance, to categorize Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* as “late-modern” instead of postmodern as such. Similarly, Nicolas Frangipane (2016) argues that “While the mode of the novel is certainly epistemological, it ends on a note of such deep ontological uncertainty (are we in a world where the Tristero exists?) that I think that by McHale’s own measure it is postmodernist.”

Frangipane further mentions several critics who have characterized it similarly, before concluding “As a starting point, it is fairly safe to call The Crying of Lot 49 postmodern” (2016).

This is because epistemology and ontology are not as neatly separated as McHale pretends (or rather, must pretend for the sake of his argument), and the bar he sets for ontological skepticism is simply too high, admitting almost only science fiction and certain works of high literature. But the ontological scepticism of postmodernism is rarely as overt, often involving, for instance, conspiracy theories.

Such conspiracies usually involve shifts in ontology, rather than simply epistemology: The question is rarely *who* is behind a given conspiracy, but rather *if* there is a conspiracy at all. The conspiracy, in that sense, is incidental, serving a narrative role similar to that of the robots from *The Matrix*: They enable the inevitable ontological shift from a “false” world to a “real” one that strips away the illusions of the false reality. It is an attempt, in Fredric Jameson’s words, to “think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system”:

> The technology of contemporary society is therefore mesmerizing and fascinating not so much in its own right but because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself. […] Yet conspiracy theory (and its garish narrative manifestations) must be seen as a degraded attempt—through the figuration of advanced technology—to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system. It is in terms of that enormous and threatening, yet only dimly perceivable, other reality of economic and social institutions that, in my opinion, the postmodern sublime can alone be adequately theorized (Jameson 1991, 38).

How then to define “ontology” in a way that lets us define postmodernism at large? For although there is merit in defining postmodernism in terms of being a (loose, parallel arrived-at)
artistic movement or a poetics which revolves around such a narrow definition of ontology (as McHale explicitly does), it becomes problematic when trying to apply such a strict metric to postmodernism (or metamodernism) as a whole. Instead, I wish to argue that a better understanding of ontology is in the sense in which both Hutcheon and Giddens use the term, namely ontology as a personal world, a life-world. Or better yet: Think of ontologies as being multifaceted and pluralistic – each of us having a social ontology, relating to persons and our social lives and life-worlds, yes, but also, political ontologies, encompassing, for instance, our belief in and assumptions about the institutions of modernity, and, yes, ontologies proper, relating to our beliefs about what is or is not real in a relatively basic sense regarding physical reality.

In such a definition, it is easier to see how McHale’s definition of postmodernism relates to EG Lyotard’s “incredulity towards metanarratives” – incredulity towards metanarrative being a breakdown of the “old” ontologies of politics, an expression of the kind of “deep ontological uncertainty” that Frangipane and Pynchon describe – but also an uncertainty that is deeply intertwined with a set of political concerns regarding power and capitalism.

And this intertwining of ontological scepticism and political scepticism is also present in postmodern theories of the postmodern, and it is those that I want to turn to next:

3.5 Postmodernism and consumer culture

In this chapter, I want to make explicit how postmodernism is related to consumer culture, and the role of advertising therein.

Specifically, I want to argue for advertising’s role in creating the social ontologies of modern subjects by way of consumerism – that is, that advertising is one of the major factors that determine the meaning of the clothes we wear, our social status, etcetera. In short, advertising creates the basis of our social ontology.

This is because “lifestyles” become categories in postmodernism. Giddens puts this succinctly:
In modern social life, the notion of lifestyle takes on a particular significance. The more tradition loses its hold, and the more daily life is reconstituted in terms of the dialectical interplay of the local and the global, the more individuals are forced to negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options. Of course, there are standardising influences too -- most notably, in the form of commodification, since capitalistic production and distribution form core components of modernity's institutions. Yet because of the 'openness' of social life today, the pluralisation of contexts of action and the diversity of 'authorities', lifestyle choice is increasingly important in the constitution of self-identity and daily activity (Giddens 1991, 5).

In other words, lifestyles are what enables us to constitute self-identity and daily activity. And lifestyles are defined largely by consumption, “the possession of desired goods”:

Advertisers orient themselves to sociological classifications of consumer categories and at the same time foster specific consumption 'packages'. To a greater or lesser degree, the project of the self becomes translated into one of the possession of desired goods and the pursuit of artificially framed styles of life. The consequences of this situation have often been noted. The consumption of ever-novel goods becomes in some part a substitute for the genuine development of self; appearance replaces essence as the visible signs of successful consumption come actually to outweigh the use-values of the goods and services in question themselves (Giddens 1991, 198).

Finally, mass media, including advertising, is central to shaping which goods are desired or not:

The commodifying of consumption, it should be made clear, like other phenomena discussed earlier, is not just a matter of the reordering of existing behaviour patterns or spheres of life. Rather, consumption under the domination of mass markets is essentially a novel phenomenon, which participates directly in processes of the continuous reshaping of the conditions of day-to-day life. Mediated experience is centrally
involved here. The mass media routinely present modes of life to which, it is implied, everyone should aspire; the lifestyles of the affluent are, in one form or another, made open to view and portrayed as worthy of emulation. More important, however, and more subtle, is the impact of the narratives the media convey. Here there is not necessarily the suggestion of a lifestyle to be aspired to; instead, stories are developed in such a way as to create narrative coherence with which the reader or viewer can identify (ibid., 199-200).

3.6 Consumer culture as aestheticization

I want to discuss what Mike Featherstone calls *aestheticization*, which he considers a characteristic of postmodernism in general:

If we examine definitions of postmodernism we find an emphasis upon the effacement of the boundary between art and everyday life, the collapse of the distinction between high art and mass/popular culture, a general stylistic promiscuity and playful mixing of codes. These general features of postmodern theories which stress the equalization and levelling out of symbolic hierarchies, antifoundationalism and a general impulse towards cultural declassification, can also be related to what are held to be the characteristic postmodern experiences (Featherstone 1991, 65).

In the context of this thesis, I rake anti-foundationalism to mean the reflexive doubt and philosophical irony discussed in section 3.3 – that is, reflexive doubt leads to “a general impulse towards cultural declassification”.

This is particularly true for advertising:

The autonomy of the signifier, though, for example, the manipulation of signs in the media and advertising, means that signs are able to float free from objects and are available for use in a multiplicity of associative relations. Baudrillard’s semiological
development of commodity logic, entails some idealistic deflection of Marx’s theory and movement from materialist emphasis to a cultural emphasis[...]. This becomes more noticeable in Baudrillard’s [...] later writings where the emphasis shifts from production to reproduction, to the endless reduplication of signs, images and simulations through the media which effaces the distinction between the image and reality. Hence the consumer society becomes essentially cultural as social life becomes deregulated and social relationships become more variable and less structured by stable norms. The overproduction of signs and reproduction of images and simulations leads to a loss of stable meaning, and an aestheticization of reality in which the masses become fascinated by the endless flow of bizarre juxtapositions which takes the viewer beyond stable sense This is the postmodern, “depthless culture” of which Jameson speaks. (Featherstone 1991, 15 emphasis mine).

And it is to this aestheticization which I will turn next: The way in which postmodernism, particularly advertising, makes the cultural and aesthetic functions of commodities the most salient ones under postmodernism. Further, I wish to discuss how this perspective can be considered as an aspect of the general ontological skepticism as discussed by McHale.

This means that the cultural codes and norms which are used to construct identities through consumption become weakened: To take a simple example, it is no longer entirely possible to consider your identity as a middle-class man entirely secure simply because you wear a suit or drink the appropriate red-wine, because there is now a general doubt as to what you should “appropriately” wear or eat. Tradition is no longer quite enough to justify your choice. As Baudrillard puts it, tradition is a very certain, but also very brutal social order:

There is no such thing as fashion in a society of cast and rank, since one is assigned a place irrevocably, and so class mobility is non-existent. An interdiction protects the signs and assures them a total clarity; each sign then refers unequivocally to a status. Likewise no counterfeit is possible with the ceremony-unless as black magic and sacrilege, and it is thus that any confusion of signs is punished: as grave infraction of the order of things. If we are starting to dream again, today especially, of a world of sure signs, of a strong "symbolic order," make no mistake about it: this order has existed
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and it was that of a ferocious hierarchy, since transparency and cruelty for signs go together (Baudrillard 1983, 84).

And so, in the absence of a “ferocious hierarchy”, norms are weakened: What then of the “transparency of signs”? As Featherstone points out, the mere absence of tradition is not in itself enough to predict the breakdown of norms:

We also need to consider those pressures which could act towards the deformation of habitus, the locus of taste and classificatory choices. It may be that there are different modes of identity, and habitus formation and deformation emerging which make the significance of taste and lifestyle choice more blurred – if not throughout the social structure, at least within certain sectors, for instance the young and fractions of the middle class. We have also to consider that the much-talked-about cultural ferment and disorder, often labelled postmodernism, may not be the result of a total absence of controls, a genuine disorder, but merely point to a more deeply embedded integrative principle. Hence there may be ‘rules of disorder’ which act to permit more easily controlled swings – between order and disorder, status consciousness and the play of fantasy and desire, emotional control and de-control. Instrumental calculation and hedonism – which were formerly threatening to the imperative to uphold a consistent identity structure and deny transgressions (Featherstone 1991, 20-21).

One major factor in “ordering disorder” is capitalism, especially advertising:

In this view, the consumer society is defined by the “commercial manipulation of images through advertising the media and the displays, performances and spectacles of the urbanized fabric of daily life therefore entails a constant reworking of desires through images.” (ibid., 67-68).

When speaking of images in this way, Featherstone is relying on Baudrillard’s and Jameson’s analyses of culture. Baudrillard’s analysis in particular relies on the idea of signs and images: He speaks explicitly of postmodern culture as a culture of simulation:
So it is with simulation, insofar as it is opposed to representation. The latter starts from the principle that the sign and the real are equivalent (even if this equivalence is utopian, it is a fundamental axiom). Conversely, simulation starts from the utopia of this principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of the sign US value, from the sign as reversion and death sentence of every reference. Whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum. This would be the successive phases of the image:
- it is the reflection of a basic reality
- it masks and perverts a basic reality
- it masks the absence of a basic reality
- it bears no relation to any reality
(Baudrillard 1983, 11)

In a sense, Baudrillard’s description of postmodernism can be understood as an attack on the idea of metamodernism – he explicitly describes the “as-if” logic of postmodernism as “phony” and “an absurd paradox” in a description of reality television:

More interesting is the phantasm of filming the Louds as if TV wasn’t there. The producer’s trump card was to say: “They lived as if we weren’t there”. An absurd, paradoxical formula—neither true, nor false: but utopian. The “as if we weren’t there” is equivalent to “as if you were there”. It is this utopia, this paradox that fascinated 20 million viewers, much more than the “perverse” pleasure of prying. In this “truth” experiment, it is neither a question of secrecy nor of perversion, but of a kind of thrill of the real, or of an aesthetics of the hyperreal, a thrill of vertiginous and phony exactitude, a thrill of alienation and of magnification, of distortion in scale, of excessive transparency all at the same time. The joy in an excess of meaning, when the bar of the sign slips below the regular water line of meaning: the non-signifier is elevated by the camera angle. Here the real can be seen to have never existed (but “as if you were there”), without the distance which produces perspective space and our depth vision (but “more true than nature”). Joy in the microscopic simulation which transforms the
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real into the hyperreal. (This is also a little like what happens in porno, where fascination is more metaphysical than sexual) (ibid, 50-51).

And it is this attitude towards the contingent, to utopianism etc which I am identifying with postmodernism as a whole rather than with postmodernity as such. But further, I want to stress how this conception is a form of ontological scepticism where reality disappears into an entirely mediated reality of signs – signs which are manipulated by the influences of capital, rather than by any social order.

To Jameson, this meant that culture as a whole became “depthless”:

But there are some other significant differences between the highmodernist and the postmodernist moment, [...] on which we must now very briefly dwell. The first and most evident is the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense, perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms to which we will have occasion to return in a number of other contexts (Jameson 1991, 9).

By depthless, he meant in part ahistorical, but also populist:

I have mentioned the populist aspect of the rhetorical defense of postmodernism against the elite (and Utopian) austerities of the great architectural modernisms: it is generally affirmed, in other words, that these newer buildings are popular works, on the one hand, and that they respect the vernacular of the American city fabric, on the other; that is to say, they no longer attempt, as did the masterworks and monuments of high modernism, to insert a different, a distinct, an elevated, a new Utopian language into the tawdry and commercial sign system of the surrounding city, but rather they seek to speak that very language, using its lexicon and syntax as that has been emblematically “learned from Las Vegas” (ibid., 39).
4. Irony

If metamodernism is defined by a particular form of irony, post-irony, then it begs the question: What is postirony, and how is it separate from mere irony? What are its formal features?

In order to answer this question, I wish to discuss several different forms of irony: Discursive irony—on the one hand, what can be understood as the ironies of everyday speech, ranging from sarcastic remarks delivered with air quotes to ironic works of art, e.g., the band Radiohead’s *Fitter Happier* (or their oeuvre in general). Additionally, this will serve as a synchronic account of irony, focusing on the formal aspect of irony, even if that form is considered in the larger context of discourse understood as a social activity.

In addition, since ironies only make sense in the social, political and philosophical (etc) contexts in which they are made, I wish to discuss irony as a psychological, philosophical and artistic concept, attempting here to delineate different historical perspectives and attitudes towards irony, starting with the notion of Romantic irony.

4.1 Discursive irony

Hutcheon defines irony discursively, that is, irony takes place between people and in their interpretations of “utterances”:

The attributing of irony to a text or utterance is a complex intentional act on the part of the interpreter, one that has both semantic and evaluative dimensions, in addition to the possible inferring of ironist intent (from either the text or statements by the ironist). This study argues that irony happens as part of a communicative process; it is not a static rhetorical tool to be deployed, but itself comes into being in the relations between meanings, but also between people and utterances and, sometimes, between intentions and interpretations (Hutcheon 2005, 13).
This is, in other words, an account of irony as being inextricably a social phenomenon, and in fact Hutcheon argues that “it is because of its very foregrounding of the politics of human agency in this way that irony has become an important strategy of oppositional rhetoric” (ibid., 11).

In fact, much of Hutcheon’s thought circles around exactly the issue of how irony works in context, although her focus is explicitly on both the social aspects thereof, but also the politics of irony – the semantics of irony cannot be separated from the context of ironic utterances because context is exactly what irony evokes:

To discuss the semantics of irony, however, is inevitably to address a set of complex issues not only centering around the concept of plural meaning, but also involving things like the conditioning role of context and the attitudes and expectations of both ironist and interpreter. In short, the topic of this chapter—how irony “means”—is inescapably related to those that precede and follow it (ibid., 55).

And since irony always requires the invocation of context to ‘get’, Hutcheon argues that the meaning of irony is always complex, that irony is, in fact and in effect, always contextualising:

What I want to call the “ironic” meaning is inclusive and relational: the said and the unsaid coexist for the interpreter, and each has meaning in relation to the other because they literally “interact” […] to create the real “ironic” meaning. The “ironic” meaning is not, then, simply the unsaid meaning, and the unsaid is not always a simple inversion or opposite of the said: […] it is always different—other than and more than the said. This is why irony cannot be trusted […] it undermines stated meaning by removing the semantic security of “one signifier : one signified” and by revealing the complex inclusive, relational and differential nature of ironic meaning-making. If you will pardon the inelegant terms, irony can only “complexify”; it can never “disambiguate,” and the frustration this elicits is among the many reasons why it is diffi-
cult to treat the semantics of irony separately from its syntactics or pragmatics, [...] its circumstances (textual and contextual) or its conditions of use and reception (ibid., 12-13).

In other words, irony isn’t “a simple inversion or the opposite of the said”, but is instead “inclusive and relational”. The relational aspect is (relatively) straightforward: Irony depends on shared social, contexts, is in fact dependent on social and discursive communities.

Hutcheon herself focuses largely on the politics of such discursive communities (Who is and who is not included in in-groups and out-groups by irony, as well as the ways in which

This chapter expands on my earlier contention that, in ironic discourse, the whole communicative process is not only “altered and distorted” but also made possible by those different worlds to which each of us differently belongs and which form the basis of the expectations, assumptions, and preconceptions that we bring to the complex processing of discourse, of language in use. Irony rarely involves a simple decoding of a single inverted message; as the last chapter argued, it is more often a semantically complex process of relating, differentiating, and combining said and unsaid meanings - and doing so with some evaluative edge. It is also, however, a culturally shaped process. No theorist of irony would dispute the existence of a special relationship in ironic discourse between the ironist and the interpreter; but for most, it is irony itself that is said to create that relationship. I want to turn that around here, and argue instead that it is the community that comes first and that, in fact, enables the irony to happen (ibid., 85).

To explain the idea of inclusive meaning, Hutcheon uses the metaphor of the image that can be read either as a rabbit or a duck:

One of the ways I’ve tried to think about the inclusivity of ironic meaning has been through a number of suggestive images. Like most (by definition, reductive) attempts
to model a complex phenomenon, these analogies are not perfect. They each need supplementing in different ways, but they may prove useful none the less. One such image is the well-known example […] of the figure that can be interpreted as either a duck or a rabbit, depending on whether you see a bird’s bill or a long pair of ears in the extended shape issuing from a central mass. While Gombrich says our eyes can’t experience both readings at the same time (1969:5), I would suggest that, when it comes to the ducks and rabbits of ironic meaning, our minds almost can. In interpreting irony, we can and do oscillate very rapidly between the said and the unsaid (ibid., 56).

This is a model of irony that stresses the inclusive aspect: The image of the duck/rabbit is not simply a picture of a duck or a rabbit, but a picture of both. Similarly, ironic statements are more than the sum of their parts: A major part of irony is in the contrast between the spoken and unspoken, rather than being mere antiphrasis. Hutcheon calls this irony’s “edge”, and I will return to it later.
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Another important aspect of the analogy of the duck/rabbit is that there is no intrinsic relationship between ducks and rabbit – that we see either a duck or rabbit is a question of the careful construction of the image. Similarly, irony is relational in that it constructs the relations that are brought together or contrasted: “This inclusive model need not have built into it the restrictions of the standard semantic notion of irony as direct inversion—that is, as the simple opposite or contrary to be substituted for the literal meaning. Ducks are not the opposite of rabbits; they are simply other, different” (Ibid., 57-58).

If irony is not defined by inversion, how is the “ironic” meaning arrived at? Hutcheon argues that it is understood in context, and that the context is defined by what she calls meta-ironic markers. A simple example of such markers include quotation marks, air quotes, or deadpan deliveries. In addition to signalling ironies, they have a structuring function which

[Does] not directly lead to a “reconstruction” of a latent and opposite or even “true” meaning, as many theories suggest, they simply act to make available, that is, actually to structure a ground in which become possible both the relational, inclusive and differential semantics and also that evaluative edge that characterize ironic meaning (ibid., 148).

Hutcheon lists 5 different meta-ironic markers: Changes of register, exaggeration or understatement, contradiction or incongruity, literalization or simplification and finally repetition or echoic mention (ibid., 149-150).

But whatever the markers of irony, Hutcheon argues that irony has an affective, evaluative “edge” – that is, her conception of irony is largely negative in the sense of seeing irony as a distancing, critical form of discourse. As such, Hutcheon lists 9 different “functions” of irony, here presented from the smallest (reinforcing) to the greatest (aggregative) “affective charge”, that is, their emotional impact. While she notes that there are positive and negative evaluations of these functions of irony, these largely boil down to different perspectives on irony as a negative discourse. In other words, there are, for instance, negative and positive evaluations of irony’s distancing or oppositional functions. As I will argue in section XXX, this is a perspective which ignores the metamodern and Romantic perspective on irony as a constructive form, and this is why I include these functions here – to provide a relatively concise vocabu-
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lary with which to discuss the functions of irony both in my analysis of advertising and in my discussion of post-irony.

The functions of irony are:

- **Reinforcing**, the “perhaps least problematic form” in which “irony is used to underline a point”. Viewed positively, this adds emphasis and precision of attitude, but more negatively viewed it is simply decorative – a clever flourish.

- **Complicating**, which adds complexity and ambiguity, although also a level of imprecision.

- **Ludic**, which is playful, adding humour, but can also be seen as trivializing or even irresponsible.

- **Distancing**, which suggests non-committal or indifference, but also new perspectives and even “a refusal to be pinned down.”

- **Self-protective**, in which irony is a kind of defense mechanism: Self-deprecation, “a way of signalling their reluctant modesty, their self-positioning [...] their self-doubts and perhaps even their rejection need to presume or assume superiority.” EG: A man who stumbles and calls himself a dancer. On the other hand, this can also be seen as arrogance or an indirect form of self-promotion. Further, it can be a shield against criticism: “you can always protect yourself and argue (from an intentionalist perspective) that you were only being ironic.

- **Provisional**, which is “undermining any firm or fixed stand,” which can be seen as evasive, or even hypocritical or duplicitous. On the other hand, it can also be seen as “an undogmatic alternative to authoritative statements”, “an admission we cannot be sure.”

- **Oppositional**, which is “the function of irony that has specifically been called “counter-discursive” in its ability to contest dominant habits of mind and expression,” and the evaluation of this function of irony depends largely upon one’s attitudes to the discourse being countered: Hutcheon describes this function of irony as transgressive, insulting, offensive and subversive: “For those positioned within a dominant ideology, such a contesting might be seen as abusive or threatening; for those marginalized and working to undo that dominance, it might be subversive or transgressive in the newer, positive senses that those words have taken on in recent writing about gender, race, class, and sexuality”
Assailing, which has “the sharpest edge”: “The negativized rhetoric of disapproval that circulates around this assailing function of irony is one of cutting, derisive, destructive attack or sometimes of a bitterness that may suggest no desire to correct but simply a need to register contempt and scorn.”

Aggregative, which is irony’s ability to create in-groups and out-groups based on who “gets” the use of irony. By Hutcheon’s admission, it is “somewhat outside” the system of the other functions of irony, in that it discusses the social use of irony, rather than its rhetorical purpose.

(List abbreviated from Hutcheon 2005).

4.3 Theoretical discussion: Post irony

So, what is the metamodern form of irony?

If irony is defined by the “edge” that Hutcheon argues is implicit in all irony, then metamodern irony is not irony at all. But I want to argue here that Hutcheon’s construction is somewhat limited – and in fact, she agrees:

Unlike metaphor or allegory, which demand similar supplementing of meaning, irony has an evaluative edge and manages to provoke emotional responses in those who “get” it and those who don’t, as well as in its targets and in what some people call its “victims.” This is where the politics of irony get heated. That affective dimension of irony’s edge is the starting point of this study; it is also its (deliberate) limitation (Hutcheon 2005, 2).

Hutcheon defends her choice by arguing that she is attempting to define and analyse irony as a political, discursive strategy:
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In short, this study does not treat irony as a keystone of poetics, a paradigm of criticism, a mode of consciousness or existence that raises questions about the self and the nature of knowledge, a philosophical stance vis-à-vis the universe, an informing principle of personality, or a way of life. Its aims and focus are much more modest: to try to understand how and why irony is used and understood as a discursive practice or strategy, and to begin to study the consequences of both its comprehension and its misfiring (ibid., 3).

From a historical standpoint, Hutcheon’s conception of irony strikes me as an exceedingly postmodern one, focusing on discursive strategies (with its implications of politics and power) (see section 3.2), and focusing on irony’s ability to problematize, to undermine and to criticize. And to be certain, it is a definition which is well-suited to analysing postmodern ironies.

But even in defining irony as a discursive practice or strategy which has an evaluative, affective edge, I think Hutcheon hobbles her analysis by excluding emotions such as hope, faith or nostalgia. And these emotions can be as political as the negative, evaluative backhands of postmodern irony: Consider that Van Der Akker & Vermeulen start their essay by referencing Barack Obama’s slogan, “Yes we can!” (in contrast to Clinton’s remarkably more ironic “It’s the economy, stupid”) or even the famous “HOPE” poster in all its ambiguity—are we talking a symbol or representation of hope, or is hope an imperative, a necessity, even a commandment? And does hope not always include the kind of paradoxical, ironic relationship that is best understood as a kind of metaxis, the knowing dissimulation of acting “as if”?

Although I find Hutcheon’s analysis and model of irony to be both comprehensive and insightful on its own terms, it lacks explanatory power when faced with this form of irony, even if it is both discursive and affective.

I want to argue here that this reflects a change in how discourse and contingency are evaluated, because as Hutcheon defines irony, the use of irony is, ultimately, to label your own statement as discursive in much the same way that Hutcheon describes the term: “A symptom of [the inseperability of postmodern theories and postmodern politics] can be seen in the way in which postmodern artists and critics speak about their ‘discourses’ by which they mean to signal the inescapably political contexts in which they speak and work” (Hutcheon 2002, 4).
In a postmodern context, labelling something as “discourse” is to attach to it a stigma, to expose it as being contingent, historically determined and therefore vulnerable to powerful influences – capitalism, patriarchy or, in fiction, outright conspiracies.

But as I argued in section 2.3, in metamodernism there is a return to the romantic vision of the contingent as being liberating on the model of romantic irony, since the antifoundationalism of EG Rorty’s “final vocabulary” means that we essentially become able to decide on our own final vocabularies in contrast to, for instance, Baudrillard’s scepticism towards such vocabularies as vulnerable to the exploitation of power (see section 3.2).

I want to argue here that postirony, as a form of irony in general, is not best understood in contrast to enthusiasm, emotion or intimacy, but is instead better understood as enthusiasm through irony/postirony. That is, much as irony in Hutcheon’s terms can be understood to have a distancing function or an assailing function, it can also be said to have the opposite function – a sympathetic function or a constructive function, for instance.

This is because irony is, somewhat obviously, a double-edged sword, operating through ambiguity and opposition (though these oppositions are structured and open, see the previous section): Irony is, in Hutcheon’s term, operating through a both/either logic, preserving the meaning of both said and unsaid. And this means that romantic irony does not have to be understood as “a worldview”, “mode of consciousness” or anything as far-reaching as that, but simply as the mirror twin of the “assailing, “oppositional” or “distancing” functions of irony. Romantic irony can be understood in that way, of course, but then so can regular irony, and arguably this is what the metamodernists do in contrasting irony with sincerity or enthusiasm.

I want now to turn to a specific example of this contrast, namely the “quirky” style of cinema: It is referenced widely by Van Der Akker and Vermeulen in the Notes on Metamodernism, especially as seen in Notes on Quirky.

Perhaps predictably, something clearly underlying all these descriptions – whether postironic or post-pop, braiding or ‘New Sincerity’ – is the spectre of a buzzword whose ubiquity over the last few decades has rivalled that of quirky itself: postmodernism. Specifically, there seems to be a desire here to stress the ways in which these films appear to reflect a structure of feeling that is somehow ‘beyond postmodern’
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[…] it is worth pointing out that the tenor of the arguments in fact share something with the considerably more old-fashioned concept of ‘romantic irony’ developed by German Romanticism, a project described by Schlegel – in a phrase that could just as easily apply to the quirky – as ‘the eternal oscillation of enthusiasm and irony’ (De Mul, 1999:10) […] and it would seem to be one that could well offer useful ways forward in our examination as a tone, and, perhaps, as a contemporary structure of feeling. (MacDowell 2010, 14).

Quirky is not understood by either MacDowell or Van Der Akker and Vermeulen to be neoromanticist as such, and as such it serves as an excellent example for how romantic irony can be understood outside an explicitly neoromanticist context: I want to examine how MacDowell argues for self-awareness as an essential part of quirky cinema:

Other than their neatness, one of the most striking aspects of these kinds of shots is their apparent ‘self-consciousness’. This is brought out in part simply through the act of having characters look out towards the camera – not because this necessarily breaks an imaginary ‘fourth wall’, but because it is a convention unavoidably associated with styles of presentation (soliloquies, musical performances, speeches, newsreading, portraiture, etc.) involving an acknowledgement of the audience. The effect is to imply that these characters are facing this way for us. A rhetoric of ‘self-consciousness’ is also created through the fact that such overtly studied and meticulous compositions – sometimes, as in The Royal Tenenbaums, symmetrical virtually to a matter of millimetres – cannot help but encourage us to notice that they have been constructed especially for the camera (and for precisely this angle), thus forthrightly asking us to appreciate their staged and artificial nature (MacDowell 2010, 6).

MacDowell argues that it “does indeed court a degree of aesthetic ‘distance’” (ibid., 7), but in fact ends up arguing that the “dampening” effect of such overt stylization (and other forms of self-consciousness in movies, EG characters discussing how their situations resemble cliché movie lines) becomes a way for movies to create a “different” tonal register: “a tonal register that we find constructed in various ways and to varying degrees throughout the quirky: the
tension between an ironic or ‘detached’ perspective being combined with a sincere emotional engagement that is not to any significant degree lessened – only made different – by such irony and detachment” (ibid., 12). He further clarifies: “Ultimately, all these elements help construct what is perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of the quirky: a tone that exists on a knife-edge of judgement and empathy, detachment and engagement, irony and sincerity” (ibid., 13).

I want to argue here that this in fact reveals that irony, in fact, can cut both ways in a way that is not theorised by Hutcheon (or, indeed, by MacDowell himself): Irony is exactly what helps construct the emotional engagement that MacDowell describes, and it is exactly because of irony that we find ourselves sympathising with, for instance, Amelie of Montmartre. I want to argue that the “distancing” function of irony in fact becomes an “empathetic” or “sympathic” function because of the inherent self-awareness and reflexivity of irony.

In the case of Amelie, for instance, we might laugh at those who are being manipulated as fools – until we come to recognise that we, too are being manipulated, and then come to sympathise with them.

And this is why postirony is a form of romantic irony: Romantic irony, by blurring the ontological boundaries between fiction and reality, by “breaking the fourth wall” ever so subtly, makes us aware of being on both ends of “irony’s edge”, and so the edge disappears. But Romantic irony does not have to be tied to Romantic notions of philosophical irony or the infinite to achieve this effect – it works perfectly fine as a discourse which is self-aware and open about its own status as discourse – not just ironic, but doubly so.

And this is why it is also postirony: Much as metamodernism is a postpostmodernism which takes postmodernism as its ground and works from there (towards some unseen horizon, and much as postmodernism works from modernism), postirony follows from postmodern irony: Whether that irony is the philosophical irony of Romanticism or merely the regular irony of normal discourse is, in a sense irrelevant.

In my analysis, I will attempt to show how this works in practice.
5. Analyses

5.1: The Carlton Draught commercial

The commercial starts with a shot of a man in a yellow gown pointing towards out over a large plain, towards the horizon. There are mountains in the background. The man has his back is turned, but he turns his head towards the camera as the camera moves towards him: His mouth is wide open and he is singing a loud, sustained note – it sounds like others are also singing. We then get a shot of the man from the other side, and it becomes clear that he was looking at a large choir of men and women, all dressed in the same type of yellow gown, all singing. The camera moves away from them, and they stop their song. In the next shot, we see that there are many of these choir-singers – possibly hundreds. Some, at the left, are wearing white. They all start walking forward, and non-diegetic music starts playing – the tune is *O Fortuna*, by Carl Orff. We see them walking across the plain, right to left, while singing: “It’s a big ad. Very big ad” to the tune of *O Fortuna*. As the choir sings “Very big ad,” we see a group of people dressed in similar gowns, except these are red and they are walking left-to-right. We get a shot from above, and it is clear that there are thousands of people in yellow. They sing: “It’s a big ad we’re in.” As they sing “in,” the camera shows men and women in red walking in a line towards the camera – they have the appearance of filling the horizon. The next shot is an aerial view of the men and women from the first group, and it is clear that they were wearing yellow because they are, in fact, part of a large formation of people dressed so as to resemble a glass of beer – specifically, a glass with the Carlton Draught logo on it. The next two shots shows the two groups continuing to walk towards each other while singing “It’s a big ad. My God it’s big!”

As they sing “big,” we see that the second group is also walking in a formation, and resemble a crude drawing of a face. We get another shot of the first group walking left, while singing “Can’t believe how big it is!” – a man is riding a horse in front of the group. He is wearing a yellow robe as well, and carrying a small, triangular, red flag or banner on a pole. The horse itself is wearing red headgear and a strip of cloth across its breast reminiscent of medieval caparisons. The horse is turning dramatically to the left as the wind blows the banner, and we see some dramatic cuts of the men and women starting to run towards each other. We get a shot of the horse from the side, riding in full gallop. They are singing: “It’s a big ad! For Carlton Draught!” As they sing “draught,” we get a shot of the men and women in yellow
trying to cross a regular, rural wire fence – some are falling, some are failing to squeeze through the wires and are being squeezed by the crowd behind them. The effect here is humorous, especially as they continue to sing: “It’s just so freak…ing HUGE!” As they sing “HUGE!”, and then in another aerial shot, we see that some of the people in the second formation are running towards the others, now in a formation resembling a drawing of a hand.

We then get a quick shot of the formation resembling a beer while the chorus sings “It’s a big ad!”, and then a wide shot of the “man” and “beer” closing on each other. They sing “Expensive ad!” and we get an over-the-shoulder shot of the men in yellow running towards the men in red – this gives a sense of scale. We then get a shot from above, and see that the “man” is drinking the “beer”: The people in red are parting, and the people in yellow are running through the “mouth” being formed. The people in yellow are jumping around and waving their arms – the effect is a parody of ballet, as most of the men are slightly stumbling or making odd gestures. As they run, the choir sings: “This ad better sell som bloooooooooody beer!” with “bloody” stretched out. The camera then shows an overview of the entire crowd, and it is clear that the “man” is drinking the “beer”, which is now swirling around in his “belly”. As the tune ends, the camera sweeps through the crowd: The men are all facing in the same direction, and holding up glasses of Carlton Draught. The camera focuses on one of those glasses, the logo clearly visible. Their slogan appears at the bottom: “Made from Beer.”

5.2 Irony in the Carlton Draught commercial

There several aspects of irony in the Carlton Draught commercial that can be called post-modern:

First, there is the way the commercial satirizes high culture and positions itself as opposed to this. To begin with, the chorus itself consistently draws attention to the fact that the commercial is, in fact, “a big ad,” “expensive” and “freaking huge”. This somewhat banal theme is ironic in the context of Carl Orff’s O Fortuna, itself a grandiose piece of classical music based on a medieval poem. It should be noted here that O Fortuna is a popular piece of classical music to the extent that it can be considered a cliché, especially in the context of movies, advertising and movie trailers due to the direct, grandiose and “epic” emotional tone of
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the piece – and for this reason, it is often used for ironic, comedic effect, such as in this commercial.

And of course, the ad itself is very big, and on one level, this is ironic simply in the sense of being self-aware. But it is also ironic on another level: The men stumble as they attempt to cross the fence, their “dance” is silly, and instead of graceful dancers, most of them are middle-aged men of normal build. A large part of this is what Hutcheon calls the “ludic” element of irony – it is simply fun and silly to have middle-aged men stumbling around in a field while wearing gowns, and the sheer size of it all is made fun of both in the chorus, but also in the way the men run into each other while attempting to cross the fence simply due to their numbers. This is a bit of prosaic, practical “reality” strategically included to puncture the ostensibly majestic style of the commercial.

Of course, this more prosaic reality is also a deliberate construction and its inclusion deliberate precisely because it undermines the seriousness with which the advertising is otherwise presented due to the use of O Fortuna, the majestic background and the rider on a horse. Similarly, the use of colloquialisms such as “freaking huge” and “bloody” create a contrast between poshness and a working-class mentality.

This theme is further solidified with the final slogan of the advertising – “Made from Beer.” The sheer banality of the slogan suggests a contrast to other, possible slogans – for instance, “pure spring water”, “the finest ingredients” or any number of similar slogans that highlight the supposed quality of the contents of the beer.

**Ontological scepticism and self-awareness**

But furthermore, by ironising the high cultural elements in the way it does, the commercial also draws attention to the fact that these elements are stylized constructions, that they would not work “in real life” – in other words, it exhibits an ontological scepticism by constructing a world and then undermining this world by including elements that underscore the fact that the world is constructed.

Similarly, it calls attention to the fact that it is constructed by calling itself an ad and pointing out that its intention is to sell beer.
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This is reflects a postmodern scepticism towards commercial manipulation, but is of course ironic here – the ad is, of course, meant to sell beer. As such it cannot be interpreted ironically in the sense of “meaning the opposite of the said.”

Nor does it make sense to consider the commercial post-ironic in the sense that I outlined in my theoretical discussion: The purpose of the irony here I not to acknowledge the contingent, constructed nature of the commercial in order to affirm it. I would rather argue that the commercial is to be understood as a critical parody of advertising in general, a parody which attempts to position itself in contrast to advertising, especially over-elaborate advertising: It is ironic

I argue this in spite of the celebratory tone of the commercial, which could be interpreted revelling in its status as contingent. However, I think this celebratory feeling is to be considered a precursor (though not necessarily chronological so much as logical) of the metamodern metaxis. But the commercial itself is rather critical of the contingent and “fake”, and in fact attempts to position the beer in opposition to this:

This becomes apparent from the commercial’s attitude towards high culture and advertising described above: Where the Ostrich commercial’s music, emotional manipulation and ending guide us to a postironic position of metaxis and in-betweenness, as we will see later, there are no such markers of sincerity here. Instead, the commercial’s emotional tone is one of irreverence and parody, and so the ontological status of the advertising is to be taken as an attack on advertising in general. It is a parody of advertising, and advertising in general is what is (supposedly) fake. This is Hutcheon’s assailing function of irony: As such, the contingent nature of the commercial itself stands in contrast to a supposed, real reality, one which the viewer is arguably meant to identify with: In this sense, the commercial is postmodern in the sense of being incredulous towards metanarratives of beauty or high culture – or advertising.

From a Baudrillardian standpoint, the commercial therefore is analogous to the “fake” Disneyland in that it reinforces the notions it attempts to assail - it is a “third-order simulation” (Baudrillard, p 25): By satirizing other advertising and standing in contrast to it, it can conceal the fact that it itself is no more real than they are: “Beer made from beer” is no less a manipulation, is no more real, than “beer made from the finest hops” or ballet itself.

And this is the major difference between postmodern irony and metamodern irony: The latter acknowledges its own contingent nature, and in fact celebrates it as liberating whereas the former pretends at being real. And this is why the Carlton Draught commercial is not
“postironic”, but rather “ironic”: Although it is self-referential, it is not self-aware, and so the irony retains its “edge.”

5.3 The Ostrich commercial

The Ostrich advert starts with a panoramic shot of a savannah, with sparse trees and mountains in the background. It cuts to a flock of ostriches foraging, and then focuses on a particular ostrich which appears to focus on something off-screen. We then get a shot of the ostrich approaching a house in the distance. In the next shot, the ostrich stands in front of a porch with a table and some chairs on it. On the table lies plates, trays and cups – the leftovers of a meal, and also a pair of Samsung Virtual Reality goggles. The ostrich appears to examine the table somewhat quizzically, and snaps at some of the scraps on the table. By accident, the ostrich puts its head in the goggles, and we get a brief shot of its feet as it stumbles backwards. We then get a shot of the ostrich standing still, doing a slow double-take as it sees what the goggles have to offer.

We then get a soaring shot of the clouds, the camera gliding through them in smooth flight as Elton John’s “Rocket Man” plays. The clouds are bathed in beautiful sunset colours, blue and pink, while a notification at the top of the frame says “FLIGHT SIMULATOR”. A compass is in the upper right corner, and bars on the left and right parts of the screen appear to display something – it is not entirely clear what, but perhaps altitude or speed.

The next shot shows the ostrich cocking its head, mimicking the motions of the camera through the clouds. A brief cut shows the clouds again, before returning to a shot of the ostrich, this time only its face from below, with the sky above it. It lets out a small sound, a sort of coo, in apparent wonder, accompanied by a dolly zoom: The sky appears to grow larger.

In the next shot, we see the ostrich from behind, and see how the wind moves through its feathers (accompanied by a subtle wind sound effect). It spreads its wings, although its head still appears to be staring around in amazement. We then get a shot of the ostrich running along the savannah, with the goggles still on. It jumps while running, and its wings are spread – it is clearly attempting to fly, although of course ostriches are flightless birds. Elton John’s song is still playing: “And I’m gonna be high as a kite by then,” while the ostrich runs,
jumps, wings spread, past a flock of other ostriches, which appear to look at it and make ei-
ther a laughing or simply puzzled sound. Other ostriches scatter as the ostrich runs through
the flock, as the lyrics of the song go “it’s lonely out in space”. We then get a shot of the os-
trich running, making a large leap and falling in a tumble. But as the music starts to pick up,
we see the the ostrich standing alone, its head bowed in apparent dejection, its wings only
slightly spread, its goggles still on. It makes a sad cooing noise again. In another cut, we see
the same ostrich, now at night, standing still and spreading its wings, ducking its head as if in
real flight. The music begins to pick up, and then it cuts to the ostrich’s face, backlit by the
rising sun, its goggles off. It looks determined. We see it cock its head, and then a shot of its
feet as it moves them into what is, apparently, a ready position. It gulps, with an audible gulp-
ing sound. It then begins to run, and we see it in a panorama shot as it runs across the frame.
We see it flap its wings and lower its head, and then cut to a shot of its feet as it takes flight.
We see the other ostriches look up at it, and then get a high-angle shot of the flock of ostrich-
es running – in front of them is the shadow outline of the flying ostrich. Finally, there is a
running shot of the ground, and text appears on the screen: “We make what can’t be made” -
then we see the shadow of the ostrich again, flying towards the horizon – but as the camera
pans up towards the sky, the ostrich cannot be seen. Text again: “So you do what can’t be
done”. Finally, the picture fades to black and “#DoWhatYouCant” appears on the screen for
seven seconds before being replaced with “Samsung” in a stylized font.

5.4 Irony in the ostrich commercial

If we are to analyse the ontological poetics of the ostrich commercial, it is clear that it differs
from the Carlton Draught commercial in at least one, critical aspect: It is not self-referential.
Where the Carlton Draught ad made fun of grandiose advertising, the Ostrich commercial
does not. But it is not without irony: In fact, several aspects of the advertising appear ironic:

5.4 Ironic tension and metamodernist themes in the ostrich commercial

First, the presentation of the bird itself: from the outset, it is presented quite ambiguously,
with both human and animal characteristics: On one hand, it is framed as (literally) a vision-
ary – first in seeing the house, and then when it has the courage to approach it alone, without
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the rest of the flock of ostriches. This in itself suggests a theme of cowardice vs. courage, ostriches being famously prone to cowardice and literally putting their heads in the sand – even if that is a myth. And although the theme of courage is maintained throughout, it is also consistently undermined:

For at the same time, the ostrich is a ludicrous figure, both at the basic, visual level of being an ostrich, but also in the way that it is interested in the food on the table (rather than the VR goggles) and the way it literally stumbles into the goggles and gets its head caught. There is also something inherently funny in the image of an ostrich running around with goggles on, and it is the exact kind of low-brow slapstick humour that stands in stark contrast to the visuals of the VR simulator.

This contrast is reinforced by the song that plays over the commercial: It is both peaceful and melancholic: In the initial appearance of the song, timed with the ostrich seeing the virtual reality simulation for the first time, the song comes off as peaceful, even serene. But when it continues, it becomes increasingly melancholic, especially since the shots and actions in the commercial seem to mirror the lyrics: The ostrich is jumping and being stared at while Elton John sings that he’s “going to be high as a kite”, and, when the other ostriches move away from the ostrich as it runs towards them, “it’s lonely out in space.”

And these connections between the non-diegetic song and the diegetic actions of the commercial sets up multiple other themes in the commercial – the associations with drugs (high as a kite), suggesting some kind of ecstasy, a “high” that is only slightly undermined by the absurdity of the ostrich attempting to fly.

Further, there is the theme of loneliness introduced by the song as well, especially as it is reinforced by the other ostriches moving away from the one wearing the VR goggles. This loneliness gives the ostrich something of the air of a Byronic hero, daring to follows his (literally) impossible dreams and visions in spite of the cost thereof. Although, again, the ostrich is still an ostrich, and a funny one at that.

All of this creates ambiguity and ironic tension.

The clumsiness and stumbles of the ostrich can be thought of as an ironic marker:

Although humour is not always ironic, and irony not always humorous, it here serves to create the exact kind of ambiguity that “structures a ground” (Hutcheon 2005, 148) for an ironic interpretation. But while I wrote of “contrasts” between the music and the plot of the com-
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mercial, it would perhaps have been more appropriate to speak of incongruities, especially in light of the fact that both the music and the plot are highly ambiguous and multifaceted.

But in contrast to the Carlton Draught advertising, it is hard to detect anything like cynicism in the commercial, although the plot itself practically invites it – a clumsy ostrich trying to fly? And in fact, it is of course possible to read the commercial this way: A “postmodernist” reading of the commercial could stress the irony of advertisers literally selling the impossible, portraying their consumers as stupid and naïve, or even think of the commercial as being “ironic” in the sense that it ironic that a clumsy bird would achieve its dreams compared to the others.

However, I think that neither of these readings are particularly strong. And in fact, I would argue that the music of the commercial guides us to a different kind of irony – metamodern irony, post-irony.

The music is somewhat ambiguous in itself, with its themes of loneliness and departure in the face of great endeavours, but as far as the actual tone and melody of the song, it is hopeful and melancholy. And this makes it difficult to read the situation “ironically” in the postmodern sense – we are instead being manipulated in the performatist sense.

That is, the acknowledgement of the futility of the ostrich’s endeavour is not meant to invite what Hutcheon calls the evaluative edge of irony. There is no distancing effect in the irony of this commercial – rather, the irony here pulls us in another direction: closer to the subject of the ostrich.

Here, I want to draw a parallel to Raoul Eshelmann’s reading of Amelie, and his point that “emotional states are set up or constructed” as a feature of metamodernism: This is the exact kind of manipulation that is happening in this commercial – especially in terms of the music, but also in terms of the presentation of the ostrich itself. The music guides our interpretation of the ostrich’s actions and demeanour, and forces us to be sympathetic to the ostrich when it falls over, when it coos or when it gives up.

5.5 Metaxis in the ostrich advertising

I wish to start here with the observation that the Ostrich commercial reenacts, almost exactly, the final words of Notes on Metamodernism: “For indeed, that is the “destiny” of the metamodern wo/man: to pursue a horizon that is forever receding” (p. 12)
And this is exactly what the final shot in the commercial shows us: The shadow of the ostrich moving towards the horizon.

Although the use of this motif is incidental, there are other aspects of the commercial that seem to point to an ontology of metaxis in the commercial. First and foremost the final sequence in which the ostrich flies for the first time: The commercial never actually shows the entire ostrich in flight – when it takes off, we only see the lower parts of its body – the feet and parts of the wing. And in the next shot, we only ever see a shadow on the ground.

This can be seen as a form of metamodern oscillation, of “gravity pulling it back from irony”: By treating the flight of the ostrich differently than during the rest of the commercial, it “pulls it back” from irony.

And further, this is literally the creation of an atopos, “at once a place and not a place, a territory without boundaries, a position without parameters“. The ostrich does not “really” fly in the commercial – instead, we see its shadow flying towards the horizon. This is an example of romantic irony in the sense of transcendental “buffoonery”, that “hovers between the real and the ideal” (Mellor 1980, 17) – almost quite literally in fact. The commercial calls attention to its own artificiality and contingency, but it does so subtly. The postmodern view would be to say that it “undermines” its own ontology, but I think it makes better sense to argue that, given the post-ironic feeling of the commercial, romantic becomes not a way to undermine our shared ontology (or the ontology of the ostrich’s “fictional world”), but a way to affirm it, in much the same way that the irony of the ostrich commercial is not distancing, but creates greater intimacy.

And finally, this element is closely tied to my final argument here, namely that the romantic irony of the commercial becomes a defence of consumer culture as it exists today. And it is to this matter I turn in the next section:

5.6 Consumer culture and irony in the ostrich commercial

The ostrich commercial ends with the words “We make what can’t be made – so you do what can’t be done”.
As I argued in section 6.1, the use of irony in the commercial actually pulls us closer to the ostrich as a subject, and this is both reinforced here, since the ostrich is the one who has done “what can’t be done”, but then the commercial and the story of the ostrich also becomes a model of consumption – the story of the ostrich is therefore the struggle of us as individuals, and we are made to identify with its hopes and dreams. And in the commercial, the hopes and dreams of the ostrich are achieved through consumption.

That advertising tries to sell us products by associating them with our hopes and dreams is, of course, trivial, but the point here is that the commercial here addresses one of the central points of postmodern, critical theory of advertising, the “reworking of desires through images.”

However, it does not do so though the same sort of irony as the Carlton Draught commercial does, that is, by directing attention to the mercantile nature of the commercial through parody. Instead, consumption becomes part and parcel of an attempt to affirm or construct an everyday, social ontology, a way to overcome the inherent doubt of modernity.
6. Conclusion

To summarise: The Carlton Draught commercial uses irony in order to oppose high culture: It uses irony’s edge to satirize other commercials in order to ironically present itself as a “better” option closer to reality. The use of irony is almost entirely negative here, used to assail notions of high culture and advertising in general. However, the commercial does not draw attention to its own irony or the contingency of its presentation.

The Ostrich commercial, on the other hand, is self-referential about its own contingency: It uses romantic irony/postirony to create its emotional effect: The background music and the actions of the ostrich often combine meaningfully, and the bird is portrayed as both tragically lonely and ecstatically visionary. In this way the ostrich commercial creates a structure of metaxis in which the impossibility of the bird’s aspirations is acknowledged through irony: This form of irony creates an emphatic effect in which the ostrich seems sympathetic rather than pathetic or distanced effect. Further, the ostrich can be viewed as a consumer, who tries to accomplish his/her hopes and dreams. In this way the ostrich commercial can be read as a defence for consumer culture in that it affirms the notion that our social ontology/ies can be constructed through consumerism – in fact, that consumption is a central part of the ontology being constructed.
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