Tickling tensions: Gazing into the parallax gap of the multicultural imaginary

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Abstract
This article explores why cultural branding – ideo-affective market communication addressing intense political tensions – paradoxically seems to lead to political inertia rather than political mobilization. I critically analyse advertising addressing political tensions related to race, ethnicity and immigration, but instead of only following the traced-out trajectory of postcolonial theory, I use the lens of Žižek’s radicalized Lacanian psychoanalysis and treat the therapeutic visuality in cultural branding as ideological fantasies of the market’s multicultural imaginary. Through critical visual methodologies, I situate four ‘multicultural’ commercials in their culture- and idea historical contexts, and juxtapose a postcolonial with a Žižekian reading for each of them. I come to argue that the market’s multicultural imaginary (unconsciously) serves important ideological functions in sustaining the political status quo not foremost because it placates anxiety, but because it doesn’t. Tapping into previous discussions in critical marketing on fetishistic disavowal and inversion, I offer yet another explanation. The political inertia following from ideo-affective dimensions of cultural branding does not primarily come from therapeutic sedation, but from the opposite, namely the parallax object’s upholding of gruesome tension and suspense; a fetishistic tickling. This article ends by critiquing the compulsory use of postcolonial theory in research on racial and ethnic relations. From the Žižekian reading, it appears that the postcolonial gaze is now a punishing agency like any dominant ideology, where the social inequality of global capitalism is deemed a more bearable alternative than the traumatic horror of visible racism, which, subsequently, closes the circuit from radical politics.

Keywords
Advertising, cultural branding, ethnonationalism, fantasies, ideology, Lacan, multiculturalism, neoliberalism, postcolonialism, Žižek

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You look at what’s happening last night in Sweden. Sweden! Who would believe this? Sweden! They took in large numbers. They’re having problems like they never thought possible.

Donald Trump, President of the United States, 17th of February 2017

When Trump made this statement about Sweden at a rally in Melbourne, Florida, no one was more baffled than Swedes themselves (Chan, 2017). What did happen in Sweden last night? Nobody knew. Had the Swedish chef in The Muppet show choked on a Turkish meatball? Had the Abba members proselytized to Islam? The social media went bananas mocking and speculating about the non-articulated, where even a former Swedish prime minister asked on Twitter ‘What has he been smoking?’ No matter its oddity, the event can be seen as symptom of a contemporary culture war taking place in the global mediascape and circulating around borders, immigration, ethnicities and racial relations (Becker, 2019; Krastev and Holmes, 2019). Here, like an inverted phoenix from the ashes, Sweden has emerged as a ‘failure of multiculturalism’ and a valuable ‘news commodity’ inside the racialized spatial imaginary in transnational networks of far-right media production (Titley, 2019: 1010). As a ‘betrayal of a particularly mythic white, European nation’ Sweden is ‘constructed as a site of overlapping racial, sexualised and civilizational “revenge fantasies”’ (Titley, 2019: 1014), and thus, makes up the perfect spatial myth for Trump to gain traction to his general from-riches-to-rags narrative about the West.

To the point of this article. A few years prior to Trump’s utterance, influential consumer brands had begun to leverage on the domestic debate in Sweden about the state’s immigration policies (Arvidsson, 2019; Samuelsson, 2016; Winberg, 2019). Already going on in traditional and social media (Askanius and Mylonas, 2015), this heated political conflict was further inflamed during the refugee wave in 2015, when Sweden accepted more refugees per capita than any other European country (Kryžanowski, 2018). Brands active at the Swedish market began to target the liberal share of the consumer market by addressing and framing the ideological conflict as one about ‘multiculturalism’ in their various actions and representations (Ulver and Laurell, 2020). In academic branding vernacular one could say that the brands used the opportunity to mobilize a sort of Holtian cultural branding strategy which is a market-mediated attempt to make brands iconic by offering a narrative ‘solution’ through ideological consolation and salvation during societal unrest (Holt, 2003, 2004, 2006; Holt and Cameron, 2010). Such ideo-affective market communication addressing intense political tensions, in this case related to race, ethnicity and immigration, is the topic of this article.

In the critical marketing fraction adjacent to (or inside of) the consumer culture theory (CCT) ideoscapes, research on visual culture and advertising as powerful cultural and ideological influences on ethnic, racial and multicultural relations follows a clear trajectory of postcolonial theory. Generally concerned with continuously urgent themes such as racialized otherness and the discriminatory consequences thereof, research elaborates on how race and ethnicity categories in advertising are used in stereotyping and racializing ways. Among other things, it uncovers dehumanizing and discriminatory representations (Borgerson and Schroeder, 2002; Hu et al., 2013; Olivotti, 2016; Peñaloza, 2018; Stern, 1999), racializing strategies and non-White accommodation of whiteness (Burton, 2002; 2009a, 2009b; Grier et al., 2019), reproduction of neocolonial relations (Harrison et al., 2015; Touzani et al., 2016) and commodification of skin (Borgerson and Schroeder, 2018; Crockett, 2008). It is common in this body of research to point academics and marketing practitioners not only in the direction of a proper numerical proportion of ethnic/racial identities but also towards a more ethically reflected designation of role statuses and the
representation thereof. However, although there are some rare exceptions that bring up broader ideological messages about racial and ethnic equality represented in advertising (Burton, 2002; Crockett, 2008; Peñaloza, 2018), the critique in general is relatively short of references to the specific societal models regarding ethnic and racial relations and the offered ‘solutions’ to the ideological and cultural tensions surrounding them. This is important, not least because cultural branding has been shown to lead to political inertia in its capacity to assuage anxiety and thereby distract consumers’ attention in a non-political direction (Humphreys and Thomson, 2014).

Therefore, this article aims to explore the affective dimensions of advertising that make larger, ideological claims about society in general, and the multicultural society in particular. As mentioned earlier, such advertising will here be treated as (part of) a cultural branding strategy, through which companies offer consumers a culture–historical, and history-of-ideas-informed therapeutic ‘solution’ to sociocultural contradictions and anxieties through their overall branded communication (Holt, 2004, 2006). But, to emphasize the ideo-affective dimensions, in this article I will make use of Žižek’s (2004) conceptualization of ideology and his Lacanian psychoanalysis (Žižek, 2007) and treat the therapeutic visuality in cultural branding as ideological fantasies of the market’s multicultural imaginary. This approach to market texts dovetails with an ongoing conversation in critical marketing that uses psychoanalytical theory to debate the ideological functioning of the market, marketing and consumer culture (Bradshaw and Zwick, 2016; Campbell and Deane, 2019; Carrington et al., 2016; Cluley and Dunne, 2012; Cronin and Fitchett, 2020). By unpacking marketing fantasies about the multicultural, one should better understand what ideologies are at work in these market texts and their role in (not) producing political inertia (Humphreys and Thompson, 2014) as well as in (not) solving the unrest emerging from sociocultural contradictions and conflicts.

More specifically, I will explore the multiplicity of, and tensions in-between, ideologies in high-profile, filmed advertising on the theme of multiculturalism by disclosing how subject positions and subjectivities are produced and idealized in these commercials. In contrast to, and in concert with, Humphreys and Thompson’s (2014) argument that cultural branding can contribute to political inertia in that it contains ideological critiques and quells anxieties, I will come to argue that the market’s multicultural imaginary (unconsciously) serves important ideological functions in sustaining the political status quo not because it placates anxiety, but because it does not – a statement I will elaborate upon later.

In the following sections, I will briefly unfold the main theoretical concepts with which I engage in this article. Beginning with Žižek’s psychoanalytical intersection of ideology and visual representations, I then proceed to the contested concept of multiculturalism and CCT’s previous engagement with the multicultural theme in advertising. This is followed by an overview of the critical visual analysis approach and other methodological considerations, before I enter into the findings and discussion.

**Žižek’s ideological functioning of the visual**

To understand visual culture according to its ideo-affective functioning, there are, according to Gillian Rose (2016) – famous for her critical visual methodology – few theories as enabling as psychoanalysis. Here, Žižek’s seminal essay (2004) and book (2008b) *The Sublime Object of Ideology* from 1989 offers, to the font of Lacanian psychoanalytical theory, a succinct journey through some of the grand critical conceptualizations of ideology (e.g. Marx’s and Althusser’s). Accordingly, through visual representations, we construct phantasmatic (unreal, illusory, spectral)
films and imagery, to elaborate on our unconscious fantasies, guilts, and to enfold a void. In Žižek’s words, “Reality” is a fantasy-construction which enables us to mask the Real of our desire (Žižek, 2004: 22), and ideology is not an illusion but a

... fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our ‘reality’ itself: an ‘illusion’ which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real, impossible kernel (conceptualized by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe as ‘antagonism’: a traumatic social division which cannot be symbolized). The function of ideology is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offer us the social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic, real kernel.

There is always, according to Žižek’s reading of Lacan, ‘a hard kernel, a leftover which persists and cannot be reduced to a universal play of illusory mirroring’. Although we try to approach the kernel through visual representations, the only point at which we can approach this hard kernel of the Real closely is the dream, which is the specific ‘text’ that visual culture, in general, and films, in particular, often aim to replicate (Žižek, 2007). Still, when venturing too close to the phantasmatic kernel of one’s being, Lacan’s apathesis, a self-obliteration of the subject, occurs (Žižek, 2007: 55), and we ‘wake up’.

To understand the relationship between ideology and subjectivities, one must first understand that agencies are not ‘innate’, but produced by culture, language and unconscious desires. According to Žižek (2007), Lacan distinguished between Freud’s three terms for agency in the following way: (1) ideal ego (Idealich) as the idealized self-image of the subject (how I would like to be seen by others), (2) ego-ideal (Ich-Ideal) as the ‘agency whose gaze I try to impress with my ego image, the big Other who watches over me and impels me to give my best, the ideal I try to follow and actualize’ and (3) superego (Überich), as the same agency but in ‘its vengeful, sadistic and punishing’ form and the insatiable agency ‘in whose eyes I am all the more guilty, the more I try to suppress my “sinful” strivings and meet its demands’ (Žižek, 2007: 80). In turn, the structuring principle of these agencies is Lacan’s triad of Imaginary-Symbolic-Real. The ideal-ego is imaginary, hence the ‘small other’ and the ‘idealized mirror-image of my ego’ (but also; ‘the cobweb of the Imaginary (illusions, misinterpretations) which distorts what we perceive’ (Žižek, 2007: 65). The Ego-Ideal on the other hand is symbolic and is the point of my symbolic identification, ‘the point in the big Other from which I observe (and judge) myself’. Finally, the superego, with its excessive feeling of guilt, is real, bombarding me with ‘impossible demands and then mocking my botched attempts to meet them’. Following from this is that the superego is an anti-ethical agency unlike the Ego-Ideal, which is the benevolent agency that leads me to ‘moral growth and maturity’ (Žižek, 2007: 81). Crucial here is that Lacan adds a fourth agency to Freud’s three; the law of desire, which is forced by the Ego-Ideal to be betrayed as it violates the reasonability of the socio-symbolic order it teaches. Hence, the guilt we experience under superego pressure is not illusory but actual – “the only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one’s desire” and superego pressure demonstrates that we effectively are guilty of betraying our desire’ (Žižek, 2007: 57). Therefore, in order not to encounter the Real, reality itself serves as an escape, because what we experience as ‘reality’ is structured by fantasy where fantasy functions as the screen protecting us from the overwhelming ‘raw Real’ and, by doing so, ends in an ideological deadlock.

In previous critical marketing studies on ideological deadlocks, we have learnt that the market assimilates its own resistance through commodity narcissism (Cluley and Dunne, 2012), fetishistic disavowal (Bradshaw and Zwick, 2016; Carrington et al., 2016) and fetishistic inversion (Cronin
and Fitchett, 2020). These are all mechanisms for businesses and consumers to proceed with ecological destruction ‘as if they were unenlightened’ (Cluley and Dunne, 2012: 251) or as if they don’t care even if they know (Bradshaw and Zwick, 2016). But what about less abstract fears than the ones revolving around capitalism’s relation to the environment, earth and climate, aren’t they harder to fetishize and disavow? To explore this, I aim to inquire into the market’s phantasmatic structures of racial and ethnic relations and unpack fantasies at work in advertising that embodies the market’s multicultural imaginary. Using a view of shifting critical perspectives – one postcolonial and one more Žižekian – this article asks what unbearable truths the marketing fantasies of the multicultural imaginary are trying to shield (us) from and what fantasies are at work to shelter us from the ‘absolute objective state of things’ (Žižek, 2009: 19).

But before proceeding with these questions, I will briefly elaborate upon what I call the multicultural imaginary.

The multicultural imaginary

To highlight contemporary ideologies embracing social relations based on race and ethnicities, peaking as a topic in academic globalization studies in the 1990s, the concept of multiculturalism has attracted much attention both in academia and in political everyday life and is both ontologically and inherently controversial. In brief, thinkers to the left have not been in consensus (Colombo, 2015). Within postcolonial studies, scholars criticized the multicultural discourse for either offering a universalist or particularist (Bhabha, 1994) societal model of racial and ethnic relations. These models are said to only offer ‘exotica of difference’ where hybridity is glossed over in favour of a sort of fetishization of differences but not of similarities (Hall, 1991: 55). However, over the years, influential social, and partly market, liberal proponents of multiculturalism (e.g. Kymlicka, 1995, 2013) have kept on insisting that idealized hybridity can be reached through identity-political policies and specific group rights, if both their citizen status and market status are attended to. This liberal stance, in turn, has gained opposition among the radical left. But not necessarily in favour of the postcolonial. For example, Žižek (1997, 2017) has, in this specific context, acquired a highly controversial reputation by turning against the ‘liberal left’, which he asserts also populates the field of postcolonial studies, as he sees them as concentrating too much on victimizing the Other instead of revolutionizing social structures.

Also turning against the ‘liberal left’ but from an ethnonationalist direction, during the last decade, the theme of multiculturalism has seen a revival in public discourse as a hotbed for political tension in media and everyday culture. What had previously been popularly seen as a largely positive vision for contemporary, globalized societies, has now begun to be heavily debated in the light of increased immigration from middle-eastern, Muslim countries. As outlets for ethnonationalist aggression, far-right media was, as we saw earlier, very active in creating discursive punching bags out of spatialities with social-liberal multicultural policies, which in itself fertilized a polarized culture war circulating around the very term ‘multiculturalism’ (Lentin and Titley, 2011). As a result, while many scholars have deemed theories of multiculturalism to be outdated old hats from the 1990s – for instance Stuart Hall who looked back at ‘the days of multiculturalism’ (Hall, 2017: 211) – in other spheres the term and idea of multiculturalism has indeed had a revival in the shape of malign and benevolent fantasies in public debates (Titley, 2019), in consumer counter culture (Ulver and Laurell, 2020) and in marketing practice (Veresiu and Giesler, 2018). Hence, the briefly outlined but central perspectives on multiculturalism above – the postcolonialist, the (neo)liberal, the Žižekian and the ethnonationalist – make up important pillars in the collective
consciousness and public debate about what a multicultural society ‘is’ and ‘should be’. This is what I call the *multicultural imaginary*.

In CCT, ethnic, racial and multicultural relations have been treated predominantly through a postcolonial lens, where most of these have looked at consumer acculturation and how minority ethnicities manage to withstand the majority culture’s dominance in their consumption practices or experiences (Askegaard et al., 2005; Chytkova, 2011; Hu et al., 2013; Jafari and Goulding, 2008; Mehta and Belk, 1991; Peñaloza, 1994; Üstüner and Holt, 2007; Wallendorf and Reilly, 1983). But other acculturating actors have also been researched. For example, marketers (Harrison et al., 2015; Jamal, 2003; Olivotti, 2016; Peñaloza and Gilly, 1999; Peñaloza, 2018; Touzani et al., 2016), and local majority consumers (Luedicke, 2015; Sobh et al., 2013) who co-produce new, more or less problematic, ethnicity-related symbolic boundaries in society. Moreover, Veresiu and Giesler (2018) used both postcolonial theory, Kymlicka’s (neo)liberal multiculturalism and Foucault’s governmentality, to understand how a whole market system of institutional actors together shapes ethnic consumer subjects – a process they call market-mediated *multiculturation*.

As the market-mediated multiculturation medium of this study is advertising, we should quickly browse through some of the CCT research on ethnic, racial and multicultural relations in precisely advertising. Situating ‘the multicultural’ in, at that time, current trends in advertising, Stern (1999: 3) reviewed the vast marketing literature exploring negative stereotyping and invisibility of racial minority groups. She concluded that the societal implications of this are ‘profound’ and have a ‘detrimental effect on minority youth’ as it makes them feel unconnected to society. To address such implications, Burton (2002) introduced a *critical multicultural marketing theory* and argued for the use of critical theory in multicultural marketing research, to make researchers and practitioners more attentive to unintended racializing advertising strategies. Burton (2009a, 2009b) later situated this call in the intersection of critical race theory and whiteness theory, each with its own target group but both inspired by the Frankfurt school. Using critical race theory, Borgerson and Schroeder (2002, 2018) found that ‘exotic Other’ representations ‘potentially undermine the full human status of represented groups and individuals of represented groups and individuals’ (Borgerson and Schroeder, 2002: 571), which is also what Olivotti (2016) learnt in her semiotic analysis of a Hong Kong insurance company’s advertisement, as it perpetuated the reigning idea of mainland, dark-skinned women workers in Hong Kong as the racialized Other. And, looking at skin through the lenses of Franz Fanon’s (2008) *epidermal schema* and Homi Bhabha’s (1994) *representational fetishization*, Borgerson and Schroeder (2018) observed how the depiction of black and white skin next to each other invites comparison and emphasizes ‘difference’ reducing the models into their skin colour alone and ‘invoking the spectre of miscegenation as a way to generate interest and perhaps tension in the ad’ (Borgerson and Schroeder, 2018: 125). With such a spectre of miscegenation, Harrison et al. (2015) found that racial signifiers are used by advertisers as ‘cultural currency’ through a mythologization of mixed-raced bodies as the new beauty standard. They saw this as representing a ‘racial bridge, physically and culturally tailored to ameliorate perceived racial divides’ (Harrison et al. (2015: 503) – hence, difference – and were critical about the advertisements’ lack of mundane consumption practices, the obscuring of processes that bring about multiracial bodies and that the advertisements in their sample were devoid of sociopolitical context.

Partly differing from the critique of ‘difference’ outlined above, Crockett (2008) demonstrated, in his research on ‘blackness’, that a majority of the television commercials he analysed did address equal similarity. Referring to Holt’s cultural branding strategy, the themes of similarity were repeated ‘with such astounding repetition that they appear to serve a broad ideological
function rather than merely a corporate one’, a function that ‘represents a symbolic break with the past, and an affirmation of contemporary mass-market ideology that welcomes all, meeting the needs of each in accordance with his or her ability to pay’ (Crockett, 2008: 262), hence a capitalist, meritocratic kind of equality (Bjöörk, 2020; Sandel, 2020). Crockett writes that, on the one hand, this advertising legitimizes blackness among viewers by helping the viewer to contextualize blackness representation but, on the other hand, it never depicts racial inequality and downplays any role the mass market might have in creating social problems.

In that context of creating social problems, and in line with the polarized ‘culture war’ in the introduction of this article, Peñaloza (2018) adopts a fresh perspective. She problematizes the societal risks of polarized conflict provoked by ‘ethnic marketing’ when (White) majority groups are gradually decentred and destabilized in society at large, as well as in visual representations. She claims that the advancement of multicultural ideals is inevitably followed by resistant backlashes and proposes a ‘dialogical approach’ where advertisers attune ‘their perspectives and operations in accord with the understanding that ethnic marketing practice is intricately interwoven with social relations’ (Peñaloza (2018: 278). In this article, I take a circuitous interest in the resistant backlashes alluded to by Peñaloza, by engaging with the ideological tensions inherent in such marketing, an engagement that previous literature is surprisingly shy of. In this way, I look at what I see as typical examples of Holt’s (2006) cultural branding (albeit only the advertising bits of it) but, instead of treating cultural branding ‘as an institutional perspective’ (Humphreys and Thompson, 2014), I choose to treat it, or rather its principles, as a radicalized psychoanalytical perspective.

Next, I account for the methodological considerations taken to explore the intricate web of ideological conflicts and idealized subjectivities in the market’s multicultural imaginary.

**Critical visual analysis**

To explore the ideological fantasies of the market’s multicultural imaginary in analytical practice, I make use of Gillian Rose’s (2016) ‘critical visual methodologies’ that provide useful instructions on how to use Lacanian psychoanalysis, which typically lends itself to postcolonial analyses as well, when watching filmed material. I have then added a Žižekian gaze, informed by Žižek’s own literature, upon that.

Following Rose (2016: 172–176), I try to unlock how these filmed advertisements tutor us into particular kinds of subjectivity, in which particular ways they subject the spectator, what the field of interrelations between subject and other people or objects are, how identification with the idealized subject is encouraged, what varying idealized subject positions they present and, hence, what sort of ideological fantasies and positions they address. In practice, this is done by watching the advertisements extremely carefully, transcribing their formal chronology and then watching them over and over again while shifting between various analytical perspectives to make visible the aforementioned analytical aims. For example, one looks for distances and/or relationalities in-between adversaries and points of view to discern identification and subjection (Mulvey, 1989), visual absences (lack) that the spectator is invited to fill in (e.g. through puns and puzzles and visual substitutions to articulate repressed desires seductively as we otherwise would reject them) (Silverman, 1996: 2), equivalences between characters (entry points for fantasied identification) (Cowie, 1990) and Otherness to uncover meanings of desire, guilt and fear (Hall, 1999). In this way, I hope to immerse into the affective space between ideological positions.
Film selection

As alluded to in the introduction, the empirical studies were conducted in Sweden, a particularly interesting context in relation to ideological tensions revolving around immigration and multiculturalism. According to critical race researchers, over the course of the 20th century, Sweden radically shifted from being ‘the international epicentre of scientific racism to becoming a global pioneer and beacon for antiracist politics colour-blindness’ (Hübnette and Lundström, 2014: 425). This shift took place predominantly from the mid-1970s onwards and was institutionalized through anti-racist rhetoric, multicultural policies and open immigration politics. However, especially since 2012, the anti-immigration party Sverigedemokraterna have gained in popularity, as has the far-right in general (Wodak et al., 2013), and the polarized debates about racism and anti-racism in social media have intensified in line with the ‘discursive construction of scapegoats and loadstars’ (Askanius and Mylonas, 2015). Furthermore, emerging in the far-right social mediascape, a persistent narrative had it that marketers produced massively disproportionate amounts of multicultural marketing to placate the feminized state and its ‘pathologically woke’ citizens (Ulver and Laurell, 2020). All in all, this makes Sweden an apt case through which to study such advertising.

In line with Rose’s (2016) urge for qualitative researchers of advertising material to be meticulous in the selection procedure but without losing the qualitative advantages, significant time and effort was spent in making a purpose-driven selection of advertisements. The communication agencies of Sweden’s 10 largest (and hence highest profile in terms of budget and reach) ad-buyers (brands) between 2008 and 2017 – the identified period when the most drastic changes took place in the politicocultural landscape in terms of the rise of the populist right in Sweden – were contacted and kindly requested to list, send and/or link to each of these brands’ commercials during that time period. This resulted in 676 films. These were coded by four master students (instructed by a trained postdoc researcher) according to a checklist informed by Taylor and Stern’s (1997) analytical frame of ‘White’/‘Non-White’ actors. To use the categories of White and Non-White to identify people of colour is commonly accepted in critical race and critical whiteness research for the external assignment of observed race and ethnicity (Roth, 2016), as racial discrimination is considered to be grounded in exactly the centring of dominant White identities as default (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Burton, 2009a, 2009b; Weinberger and Crockett, 2018) and the subordination of and constructed difference to the non-white skin (Borgerson and Schroeder, 2018).

As the empirical objective was to explore idealized subjectivities in the market’s multicultural imaginary, I was interested in films that had been coded as overall positive towards the ‘multicultural’ society as a whole. For the coders ‘multicultural’ was operationalized as an ‘overall experience of diversity and multiplicity of ethnicity/race in the commercial’, and they were also asked to state, based on their own subjective experience, if they perceived that this multiculturalism had been represented as something positive (e.g. harmonic integration where differences are seen as good) or negative (e.g. problematic segregation where differences are portrayed as sources of conflict). Apart from that, the films were required to demonstrate a ‘multicultural Sweden’ and, intentionally or unintentionally, convey a positive feeling related to this. This resulted in 86 films (with visible quantitative increase in 2014 and 2016), which I looked through and roughly thematized iteratively and hermeneutically in conversation with ideas about multiculturalism as exemplified previously – universalist, particularist and/or hybridity models – working somewhat as cultural branding ‘solutions’ to cultural conflicts at the time. I ended up with four spots (see Online Appendix 1 for URLs) that stood out as particularly interesting and representative of cultural branding in relation to the temporal cultural context of conflict.
Analytical procedure

In line with the, in reality messy, part-to-whole and whole-to-part process of hermeneutic analysis (Thompson, 1997; Thompson et al., 1994), in this third and final round, each ‘text’ was first analysed alone and then relative to the others. I started by transcribing each film in detail down to every cut (see each film transcription in Online Appendix 2). I then started using Rose’s (2016) psychoanalytical toolbox by looking at each of the four films many times in a row, to get an overview, and simultaneously taking notes. As I wanted to treat cultural branding as a radicalized psychoanalytical perspective by using Žižek, I was challenged to invert and turn around what I had spontaneously seen in the spectacular external and instead try to see what I did not see at first glance (Žižek, 2008a), this time in relation to Žižek’s Lacanian functioning of ideology (Žižek, 2007). Here the ‘obvious’ psychoanalytical interpretation of the ‘spectacular external’ is typically seen as the supporting ideology and not the spectacular external itself. As the ‘obvious’ CCT interpretation of racial and ethnic relations in advertising emerges through the postcolonial lens, I started with that and then ‘added’ the Žižekian.

As I am, myself, immersed in the Swedish historical, political, cultural–historical and market context within which these commercials were released, I have first tried to provide the non-immersed reader with some context of context (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011) for each of these commercials, sometimes by referring to academic or grey literature, and sometimes by illustrating with searches from the media analysis tool Retriever. This should not be treated as some ‘evidence’ or quantitative attempt to prove something, but rather as a way to provide background details to the general cultural branding context. To figuratively address the temporal process of tension, I use the metaphor of the wave as an allusion to the ‘refugee wave’ in popular speech.

Surfing on waves of conflict

In this analysis section, I will first briefly muse about the main narratives of each spot and the politicocultural contexts they are launched within. Second, I will approach the spots by way of the ‘obvious’ postcolonialist concepts. And third, I will switch spectator position in line with a more unexpected Žižekian gaze(s) to unpack the fiction’s unique embedding of the discernible Real.

Gravity waves before the crest

‘Volvo XC70 feat. Zlatan – Made By Sweden’ is launched in 25 January 2014 and deserves a longer, ‘context of context’ (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011) introduction than the other three spots I analyse in this article. One reason is the iconicity, at least in Sweden, of the soccer star in the commercial’s leading role – Zlatan Ibrahimovic – whose status is multifaceted and intersected by national stories of success, immigration, segregation, (anti-) racism and betrayal. A second reason is its cultural and economic resonance (the film was claimed to have increased Volvo Car’s sales by 50% overnight (Byttner, 2014)). The third reason is, of course, its content, but also its name ‘Volvo XC70 feat. Zlatan – Made By Sweden’, which in itself can be interpreted as a cultural branding provocation. Last but not least, 2014 is the year when the immigration-resisting party Sverigedemokraterna really begins to gain unprecedented traction in the Swedish political landscape and takes the (social) liberal elite by surprise. Later that year they become the third most popular party in the Swedish general election with 13% of the votes (in the general election 2018 they get 18%). ‘Immigrant volumes’, xenophobia, nationalism, racism, ‘culture-relativism’, ‘culture-Marxism’, segregation, ‘political correctness’, ‘narrow opinion corridors’ and rising crime
are topics increasingly used as derogative terms by one or the other side in polarized, public debates in Sweden at this time (Askanius and Mylonias, 2015). Seen in that political context, Volvo’s choice of Zlatan as their poster boy in this flagship commercial with conspicuous nationalist undertexts is unlikely to have been just another ‘who-is-our-biggest-international-star’ pick. Rather, the choice of Zlatan and his storyline readily addressed the intensifying cultural contradictions and societal tensions at that specific time.

In his auto-biography, as a son of immigrants from the Balkan who lived in the infamous housing projects of Malmö’s Rosengård, Zlatan was always a ‘blatte’ (a derogatory expression used to racify Non-White persons) in the eyes of Swedes and himself, and as such he had to work ‘five times as hard’ as the normative idea of a White Swede (Ibrahimović and Lagercrantz, 2011). Zlatan began the nationally acclaimed part of his soccer career 1999 at Malmö Football Club but by the time the Volvo commercial was released, he had already conquered some of the best teams in Europe. Since then, he has played in the United States and made a celebrated comeback to Europe but has also had to see the acclaimed, massive, bronze statue of himself in his hometown Malmö brutally vandalized – allegedly investigated as a racist hate crime (Herkel, 2019; Stroemberg, 2019) – when he decided in 2019 to invest in the Stockholm football club, Hammarby, and not in his original team, Malmö Football Club. This had obviously not taken place in 2014, but the reactions tell us something about his former status at that time, as a sort of local Malmö ‘property’ which upon the slightest ‘betrayal’ could be sacrificed on racist grounds. When his stardom took global dimensions the image of him as a Swedish success story prevailed over the racist slurs, but then reappeared in association with the Hammarby investment. All in all, there has always been a clearly racial-ethnic dimension about Zlatan’s iconic status in Sweden, a dimension which is necessarily present (upon gaze) in the Volvo commercial.

To the sounds of, at times, suspenseful beats typical of a violent thriller and, at times, Zlatan’s voice reading the Swedish anthem with his immigrant Balkan accent, we follow what seems to be Zlatan’s iteratively melancholic and intense mental struggles. In brief, from panoramic, intimate and voyeuristic angles, we shadow Zlatan at a ‘real’ level as he drives his white Volvo XC70 fast through snow white, lonely, cold, open, icy, harsh, Northern Swedish landscapes. He stops sometimes, at night, to make up fires, exercise his muscles and rest in huts. At dawn, he dives into icy lakes and, dressed in a Swedish military white sniper uniform, hunts an almighty red stag through the dark woods with a sniper scope-equipped rifle. But we are also invited to two ‘unreal’ levels. One which is visualized through grainy television screen snippets of himself in hyper critical moments in the Swedish national football team and one which is visualized through daydreams about his lovesome life with his (White) wife and (White) children waiting for him at their home. The commercial ends first with the copy ‘Made by Sweden’ and lastly the Volvo logo (see Online Appendix 2 for all details).

Through a postcolonial lens, we are clearly witnessing a transcendence from the very particularist to the very universalist model of multiculturalism, subjected to a colonializing rite of passage in Zlatan’s becoming a Swede. In this transcendence, he is a Swedish national team treasure and, yet, at the same time, the Other who, in nationalist fantasies, must be taken in, be introduced, be welcomed, to be allowed full entry. This commercial performs such a ritual of entry. The cold, white, dark, vast and harsh landscape scenes are emotionally, erotically and symbolically heated by Zlatan’s warm, massive, hard body and by the orange fire in the beginning. Through a hut’s small window as an entry point of fantasized identification, I, the presumed White Swedish spectator, am to be intrigued by, even fear the Other’s body in its heavily tattooed, mobilizing and violently potent form but, at the same time ‘idealize, and, so, [] identify with bodies we would
otherwise repudiate’ (Silverman, 1996: 2). Thus, I am to desire (to be) this body, so to allow its entry.

Furthermore, a postcolonial reading of Zlatan’s mere being in the advertising would disclose a commodification of multicultural difference, a difference to be consumed: ‘differences that cannot be assimilated into the nation or body through the process of consumption have no value’ (Ahmed, 2011: 40). Here the daydreaming of his hyperSwedish wife, Helena Seger, and their blonde children can be read as ethno-nationalist fantasies of White dominance (Lundström and Teitelbaum, 2017) and of Swedish hegemonic Whiteness (Hubinette and Lundström, 2014) in particular. There, contemporary aesthetic standards that privilege ‘Nordic beauty’ can be traced back at least to the early modern period and the cult of the Nordic with its central place within Sweden’s national imaginary (Schough, 2008) in which white is to be kept white and pure due to its supremacy. That way, Zlatan’s blonde children help him ‘pass’ as White (Ahmed, 2011). At the same time, the very fact that they (against popular laws of nature) are blond demonstrates an ethno-nationalist fantasy where the White dominates the Non-White. Because, in postcolonial critique with a Lacanian Gaze, where the dominated is ‘striated by inherent failure’ (Rose, 2016: 170), the representation of Zlatan dreaming and longing for his blonde wife can indeed be seen as a representation of lack of and, hence, a desire for Whiteness. Therefore, he must first break through the thick ice layer of a lake, to (almost) become Swedish.

But he is still incomplete, lacking, castrated (Silverman, 1996). To gain visual mastery in the disorientating spaces he must kill something – more precisely a gigantic red stag – before he can return Home as a ‘White’ Swede. In that, we are situated in an erotic intimacy with mother nature, whom the Non-White subject conquers, provides for, and protects. Just as there is a White wife object – that is, represented as ‘mute, only half-seen’ (Modleski, 2016: 79) – whom he conquers and protects, a fatherly intimacy with White children whom he provides for and protects, there is this animal whom he saves from himself. Is he that animal? Does it symbolize Sweden? Through the scene where we can’t see who is chasing whom, and through the scene with the sniperscope, we are positioned iteratively as the Swedish animal and the Swedish ‘immigrant’. From a critical postcolonialist perspective, the Other has now (under threat) paid his due, completed his rites of passage, and thereby passed as White (Ahmed, 2011). He is finally steeped in Swedish institutionalized mythology and can fully integrate with Swedish society.

Now, shifting our perspective to a Žižekian position we are subjectified to quite different processes. What is this story really about, if not Sweden’s Oedipal, desperate cry for a father figure because the whole nation turned into a castrated bunch of feminized sissies? So much for ‘Made by Sweden;’ ‘Made by Zlatan’ would be the proper name for this spot. In Žižek’s (2008a: xii) readings of Stephen Spielberg’s many movies, he finds a common motif to be ‘the true impasse of paternal authority’ and ‘the (biological) father’s growing reluctance to accept the symbolic mandate “father”’ much in opposition to the big Other manifested in the Swedish ‘involved father’ (Molander et al., 2019). Thus, as in Jurassic Park, where the distanced father must travel to the wild nature with his children to resolve their tensions, here Zlatan must do the same with Sweden (the Volvo). He doesn’t need a Volvo, much less Sweden, as a Phallic metonym; the Volvo needs him. In the spatial context of amplified prudent White, and really, dead-boring Nordics, Zlatan’s body is a powerful disruption, the objet petit a – ‘a gap in the center of the symbolic order’ (Žižek, 2010: 8) – and the purest of desire. But he is also the paternal figure who, like Schindler in Schindler’s List towards the ‘infantilized’ Jews (Žižek, 2008a: xiii), gradually discovers his paternal duty towards, sure, his deserted children, but most of all, the Swedes. The Volvo is like the magic dinosaur bone to the father in Jurassic Park, or like ET to the little boy deserted by his father.
in *ET*, a ‘vanishing mediator’ who provides a new father. It is the tiny object-stain that explodes into the film’s phantasmatic universe of nature’s destructive fury, which merely ‘materializes the rage of the paternal superego’ (Žižek, 2008a: xiii).

What makes this *becoming* possible is Zlatan’s intimate relationship with his Volvo car. In a techoptian, neoliberal fantasy, this fast, strong, machine, raging through the snow, fills the gap, the void in the symbolic order. Bridging incomplete isolation and imagined community and embodying a neoliberal fantasy of Market omnipotence (Dean, 2014; Harvey, 2005; Kymlicka, 2013), the Volvo is the commodity fetish that ‘offer[s] us the social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic, real kernel’ (Žižek, 2004: 722). Judged by the visual absences (where is Rosengård?) and taboos (is Zlatan really a Swede?) that the narrative content of the film lurks around, and taking into consideration the political context of Europe in 2014, the impossible kernel and traumatic social division which ‘cannot be symbolized’ (Žižek, 2004: 722) is (of course) immigration, the ‘multicultural’. The Market, however, can be symbolized by the Volvo, the vanishing mediator, and offers escape from the trauma, any trauma in fact.

From this perspective where the external spectacular is only its metaphoric extension and the Oedipal level is what the story is ‘really about’, traditional racism does not make up the film’s immanent ideology, as it necessarily does in the postcolonial reading previously. Rather, while alpha male Zlatan rediscovers himself as a caring father, Sweden regains the respect of the world and it could not be done without this better ontological version of Man. Yet, does this hailing of the Non-White Other as visualized mandatory for hybrid completion and repair for the original sin of colonialism not disclose a big Other that trumps the paternal superego? Or rather, is the paternal not the big Other while the postcolonial punishing gaze is the internalized superego? I will return to this question as we go along with the remaining commercials and the discussion.

*Crest of the wave*

Almost exactly 2 years after ‘Made by Sweden’, on 21st January 2016, Volvo launches their more than 4-minute-long commercial ‘Volvo-Made by People’. At this time, Sweden has undergone a national political crisis due to the sudden and massive refugee wave from Syria, Afghanistan and North Africa during the autumn of 2015; 163,000 people have applied for asylum in only 3 months, Sweden has closed its border with Denmark, ministers have cried on live television, and the public debate about how to handle the ‘refugee crisis’ (in citation marks because even the term itself is heavily debated; whose crisis is this really? That of the welfare state or that of the refugees fleeing from war?) is extremely heated. The Volvo commercial does not address this breech but, given its high quality and length, it was very likely produced long before the wave of refugees came to Sweden. Yet, it is conspicuously representative of a ‘multicultural diversity’ discourse in content, title and plot and sends a political message right into the tense integration-of-immigrants debate:

Diversity sparks innovation. It pushes innovation. It helps us to build safer and smarter cars, designed around people’s everyday life. (Volvo’s description of commercial, see URL in Online Appendix 1)

The commercial is embedded in the throbbing electro house beat ‘Made of’ by Viola Martinsson, which starts quietly and accelerates in intensity as we go along. The commercial starts in the early morning, before dawn, in various people’s homes where they wake up by alarm clocks, eat breakfast and go about their morning routines. Phenotypes and ethnic clothing are specific for each home, and we hear them talking what sounds to me like languages from Arabic, Balkan, African and East Asian countries. We also hear Swedish. We join them when they leave their kids at
preschool or go directly by public transport or in Volvo cars to the Volvo factory at Hisingen in Gothenburg. The rest of the film takes place at the factory where we see these people, and others, a mix of Non-White and White people, in their various working roles until it is time to go home when it is dark again. We see friendly cooperation and smiles. Some wear protective uniforms and do typical working-class jobs like welding, driving trucks or controlling varnish robots, while some (the Asian looking men) wear their own clothes, sit in sci-fi looking control rooms and make strategic, high-tech decisions. Apart from the employees, the Volvo car in the making is also in centre at the assembly line. As the song picks up and the film approaches its end, the text ‘Made by Croatia’, ‘Made by France’, ‘Made by China’ and so on appears on screen with the country rapidly changing along with the beats of the music. It ends with ‘Made by People’ and finally the Volvo logo.

From a postcolonial perspective, this commercial could, at a first glance, be considered less problematic than many other ‘diversity’ venerating advertisements, as it concentrates on actual employees at Volvo in their everyday working life, has documentary qualities and focuses less on visibly selling a product than on showing the variation of human beings producing it. In Bhabha’s (1994) particularist versus universalist framework, it commutes between cautious particularism (at home) and discreet universalism (at the factory), and thereby manages quite well to give voice to the postcolonial fantasy of hybridity. Yet, with a stern postcolonial gaze, is it not still exploiting the interaction of phenotypical difference (Hall, 1991) between these people as a product to consume? Or as hooks (1992) expressed it,

it is the ever present reality of racist domination, of white supremacy, that renders problematic the desire of white people to have contact with the Other, [] it is this reality that is most masked when representations of contact between white and non-white, white and black, appear in mass culture.

Also, is there not an assimilatory quality to the way the non-White employees, when having left their homes, transform into similar units in their uniforms and erase their differences? Such universalist tendency would according to Bhabha (1994) fix cultural differences in relation to the normative (White Swedish) centre and, in doing so, aim to control these differences.

But, through a Žižekian lens, the above reading could be seen as anachronistic. Although the most obvious story in this film is the power of diversity and the overcoming of this same diversity, a closer examination disturbs this image. Is not Asia the new colonial super power in the era of late global capitalism and also in this commercial? And is Volvo not owned by the Asians? Yes, since 2010 Volvo has been owned by a Chinese holding company (Geely Holding) and is, in that sense, no longer Swedish (and has not been since the Ford Company bought it 1999) in any more than in a symbolic (big Other) sense. Whereas the Zlatan commercial was heavily infused with a Swedishness mythology in its complex unification of brutal nature, individual freedom and collectivity (Berggren and Trägårdh, 2015; Ehn et al., 1993), this Volvo commercial marginalizes anything Swedish in favour of trigger-happy globalization. Sure, it is recorded in Volvo’s Swedish factory and not in their Chinese factory but, in this space, the whole world and the spectator is subjected to work for the Asians in Doctor Evil’s sci-fi room (any objection regarding reappropriated Orientalization is noted). Is it not an unbearable colonial guilt of White privilege, a postcolonial superego, bombarding us with ‘impossible demands and then mocking [our] botched attempts to meet them’ (Žižek, 2007: 81) and thereby feeding this complete surrendering of dominance? Or is it rather the terrified fright and absolute horror of abyssal futility, and hence necessary extinction, the Real? When the in-the-making Volvo is lit up at the assembly line, it glows like impenetrable
but mouldable platinum which has literally absorbed – and, thus, fetishized – all the social (global) relations represented in the film by the multicultural diversity and incoming and outgoing cargo ships. When we are to fill in the puns and understand that the Volvo voluntarily drives to the port to forever leave in a cargo ship, the Swedish subject is reduced to an empty place without support in imaginary or symbolic identification – annulled. In contrast to in the Zlatan commercial, here is an erased, castrated Sweden, left in a void of others’ vengeful versions of ‘truth’, where the social inequality of global capitalism serves as a more bearable alternative than the traumatic horror of visible racism.

**Breaking wave**

On 13th March 2016, Ica Sweden launches a commercial called ‘Ica-Welcome to Abbe’. Ica is Sweden’s largest grocery chains, owned by the Ica Group and listed on the Stockholm stock exchange. Since 2001, they have launched a new 45-second long sketch-like commercial every week, which has granted Ica a position in the Guinness Book of Records for the longest commercial series in history. It always takes place in the same Ica store with minimal turnover of characters but, after years of critique regarding its homogeneous (white and heterosexual) set of characters, the fictional Ica store began to employ characters that partly broke with these norm (e.g. Jerry with Down’s syndrome and the homosexual Sebastian). The commercial examined in this article is an example of such a norm-break as it involves a newly arrived refugee from Afghanistan, Abbe (Abdullah).

Unlike Volvo’s ‘Made by Sweden’ and ‘Made by People’ that both tapped into the multicultural imaginary in various but general ways, Ica’s Abbe commercial directly and specifically addresses the conflict-laden political and cultural crisis Sweden goes through at this time, related to the refugee wave. As a tentative illustration, through a quick, quantitative search using the digital media analysis tool Retriever, the words ‘nyanlända’ (‘newly arrived’) and ‘Afghanistan’ show a remarkable peak in Swedish media articles in 2016 as compared with other years. For illustration, in 2014, there were 287 articles including these search terms, in 2016, 2073 and, in 2020, 420. In other words, the newly arrived refugees from Afghanistan constituted a very heated debate (e.g. ‘Stop them and send them back!’ vs. ‘Open the borders and help everyone!’). Bringing in Abdullah to the Ica family and ‘blessing’ him with a nick name curiously similar to the iconic Swedish pop band Abba can, hence, be seen as a hyper sensitive cultural branding move.

In brief, the spot shows how the store manager, Stig, flanked by co-workers Cindy and Jerry, tries to introduce the new employee. ‘Come and greet Abdullah, “Abbe,” who will work extra here at the store’, he says, in Swedish, to the extraordinarily silly gay guy, Sebastian. But Sebastian assumes that Abbe doesn’t speak Swedish (which he already does, albeit with a very broken accent) and welcomes him flirtatiously in English. He then burlesquely knocks two egg boxes together at the same time as he stares at Abbe in an excessively seductive way and says ‘Neeew frieend’, upon which he excuses himself for having to rush off and get to work. Abbe smiles and says to Ulf that it is commendable how they practice ‘diversity’ – ‘diversity is good!’ – and refers to that Sebastian must be British (as he speaks English and not Swedish).

In a general, postcolonial reading, this spot, despite the Ica uniforms, explicitly hails ‘diversity’ (stay different!) in the Bhabhaian form of particularism. Not surprisingly, it becomes implicitly explicit that metalevels of prejudices about old and new immigrants are intersecting here. Sebastian’s assumption that immigrants are not schooled in Swedish is implied to be something the spectator is supposed to disapprove of. The cosmopolitan Abbe who takes for granted that
Sebastian wouldn’t speak English with him if he weren’t English himself (because why on earth should he do that? Bodies don’t matter do they?) and therefore naively thinks he, Sebastian, is the immigrant. Moreover, having picked up the liberal ‘diversity’ buzz word, he uses it to everyone’s surprise referring to Sebastian and not to himself. ‘Diversity’ is here a commodity fetish on one hand, but everyone (one stereotyped gay, one with Down’s syndrome, one refugee, etc.) are framed as ‘the same’ through the Ica uniform and through the dialogue where Sebastian, who assumes difference, is ridiculed. As spectators we are thereby subjectified as colour-blind (Bonilla-Silva, 2014, 2015; Osanami Töngren and Ulver, 2020) as are the girl and the manager and equivalences between (White) characters. But, at the same time, we are situated as colour sensitive, as we are supposed to understand what is going on here. The White ‘British immigrant’ and the Non-White Afghani ‘newly arrived’ necessarily implicate radically different social conditions but are still supposed to condemn Sebastian’s colour sensitivity.

But a more Žižekian reading may disclose some more uncomfortable details. First of all, as would also be the insight made in critical race theory (Borgerson and Schroeder, 2018; Burton, 2002), if we really were colour-blind we would not have understood what was going on this commercial. The fantasy of colour-blindness necessarily rests on strong skin colour, phenotype and race sensitivity (Bonilla-Silva, 2014) but ‘we’ so wish to be tolerant and free from prejudice (at least since UN’s declaration of human rights in 1948) and where spots like this function as the embodied big Other. But unconscious desires peak out in this fantasy, where the discursive and political tensions surrounding the multicultural Sweden are invisibly at work. Is the film not taking an eye-catching assimilatory position when the first food product for sale held up by the manager is ham, the epitomy of abandoned Islam? What is more, the ham is followed by Cindy’s sales-pitch ‘And this week all our products are SWEDISH, like this Swedish bacon’. Also, the clear (homo)sexual undertones in the absurd egg box scene, are they not unconsciously speaking to Žižek’s (2008a) psychoanalytical thesis that there are no coincidences – only glimpses of real desire mocked by the superego – where the non-coincidence here would be the disavowed desire for the purely un-reproductive?

What these blunders materialize in Žižek’s Lacan, is our real desire that Abbe converts to Swedish in a heartbeat, tosses his Muslim (which his identity as Afghani assumes) luggage, sticks to men and starts eating pig. Islamization and genocide of White Christians makes out a traumatic fear which can be solved with bacon. And, of course, eggs.

The trough of the wave

The ‘Do the Donk’ commercial, from McDonalds, is launched on 22nd May 2017, a time when (according to Retriever) the topic of ‘integration’ has never, in Swedish media history, been as discussed as now. It shows seven young individuals (racially/ethnically diverse judged by their phenotypical looks and socially diverse judged by their housing situations) leaving their homes to go to work and is dominated by a serious, movie-like male narrator voice saying:

In the uniform we are all equal. No consideration is paid to sex, ethnic background, or sexual orientation. Here, nobody cares whose god you pray to or if you don’t pray at all. All we demand is that you are solution-oriented and focused on the task. For generations we have taught hundreds of thousands of young Swedes the importance of self-discipline, team spirit and cooperation. And, believe it or not, this has shown to be the recipe for diversity and integration . . .
At this point, the (culturally immersed) spectator is clearly to believe this is a recruitment infomercial from the department of the Swedish Armed Forces, as it sounds and looks conspicuously similar to one of theirs. Indeed, there is a high-profile political discussion at this time about the re-inducement of mandatory military service for young adults and, in the medial, narrative nexus of militant order and failed integration, this commercial claims to offer a solution, where the voice-over surprisingly ends with ‘... and REALLY good burgers!’ All the actors are dressed in McDonalds uniforms and are working together in the McDonalds kitchen in a spirited mood at high tempo. ‘Do the donk’ is a semiotic play on the old Swedish slang for participating in what was – until the 1990s – the mandatory general military service. It combines, ‘do the lump’, which is slang for ‘do the military service’, and ‘Donken’, slang for McDonalds. By marrying these urban dictionary expressions, the fast-food kitchen offers a cultural branding solution, and thereby relief, to multicultural segregation.

From a postcolonialist perspective, this film makes literally militant universalist claims. Everyone must become the same. But not in the benevolent way postcolonialist critics refer to sameness, as hybrid (Hall, 1996). Whether Black, White, Arab, Balkan, gay, hetero, Muslim, Hindu or atheist, differences are briskly wiped out, once the uniform is on, in the name of standardizing and rationalizing McDonaldization. Full of polysemic meanings, varying subject positions, narrative conventional wishes and nostalgia, the ad contains conflating identities as well as equivalences between characters and thereby becomes seductive through visual substitutions of same movements (Rose, 2016), different people and colours.

However, in a Žižekian reading, this is comedy, albeit cynical and a neoliberal travesty. First, it apparently plays with puns of historic, Swedish, associations with military discipline, tapping into the increasingly discussed political proposition to re-induce mandatory military service because of alien threats and an acute, Oedipal lack of paternal authority and offers, as an antidote, a steadfast and resolute lure of paternal endurance and authoritative order. Secondly, it directly problematizes multicultural segregation, and for that it offers a solution to our Oral desires through the revelation that it is not the Swedish military that will solve this, but ‘REEAALLY good burgers’! If the three previous commercials sucked up to immigrants, this certainly does not. But, if the obvious reading was that it gives voice to nationalist, modernist, industrialist, assimilationist and nostalgic fantasies of nationalist grandeur, is not the true trauma that the ‘gentrification of the [monstruous] neighbor’ (Žižek, 2009: 114) is not one of a Swedish ubermensch disciplining the ‘monstruous’ Middle-Easters, but the one of an American, fat-dripping burger joint disciplining the castrated Swedes?

Tickling tensions

In this article, I have tried to approach the multicultural imaginary in advertising that is representative of the genre of cultural branding (Holt, 2004). This was done in the context of Sweden, a mediascape hotbed for political and cultural tensions related to issues of multiculturalism. To this context in turn, I aimed to provide an additional ‘context of context’ (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011) for each of these market-texts as cultural branding resources at their specific points in time. Theoretically, this was, on the one hand, analysed according to the, in CCT, somewhat mandatory postcolonial perspective but then juxtaposed with Žižek’s psychoanalytical vernacular on ideology. This would be the first contribution of this article. The core principle of cultural branding, to specifically address cultural contradictions in society (Holt, 2004), has to my knowledge not yet been conceptualized according to this perspective, despite its apparent fit. Unlike previous explanations of cultural branding’s depoliticizing implications as a result of the therapeutic
remedy for salient cultural contradictions and anxieties (Holt, 2004; Humphreys and Thompson, 2014), the Žižekian perspective elucidates another interpretation. For example, through Žižek’s (2009) concept of the parallax gap we can understand cultural branding’s narrative target, namely an historically constructed ‘cultural contradiction’ in society (Holt, 2004), as the deadlock space between polar perspectives where solution is impossible. The parallax gap is the irreducible gap between two versions of ‘truth’. It is a ‘minimal difference’ whose ‘presence can be discerned – only when the landscape is viewed from a certain perspective’ (Žižek, 2009: 18), and itself becomes an object that affects the subject. The gap is the traumatic core around which the versions of ‘truth’ circulate, and there is no way to resolve the tension because the ‘absent Cause, the unfathomable X’ undermines every narrative solution’ (Žižek, 2009: 19). And, indeed, in this analysis of advertising, the versions of a multicultural imaginary first pretend to offer a (re)solution but, on closer examination, make it yet more unsolved.

The observant reader may note that this is close to an inverted – or negative – version of Holtian cultural branding strategy. Negative because this version offers no solution between the conflicting ‘truths’, not even in trials to assuage anxiety through narrative solutions. From this perspective, previous explanations for why cultural branding strategies can save brands from their own disaster by diverting cultural attention away from crises and to re-establish status-quo trust (Humphreys and Thompson, 2014) or, more generally, can make brands iconic through therapeutic visuality by soothing tension and anxieties connected to troublesome cultural conflicts in society (Holt and Cameron, 2010; Holt, 2004), do not provide the full picture. The political inertia coming from ideo-affective dimensions of cultural branding does not come from therapeutic sedation, but from the opposite, namely the teasing upholding of tension and suspense. The parallax gap makes a solution impossible because of its ideological deadlock and because the space of difference between a fantasy structure’s polar positions – the parallax object – keeps on tickling the subject (Žižek, 2000, 2009). And she likes it!

The possibility that cultural branding (also) is about not closing the gap of tensions leads us to the second contribution of this article, namely to the critical marketing literature stream, where the ideological functioning of the market is examined through the lens of psychoanalytic theory. In this stream, Bradshaw and Zwick (2016: 268) understand failed ethical consumerism (the so-called attitude–behaviour gap) not as an ethical flaw but as ‘an essential component of an ethics that makes possible the field of business sustainability’ where businesses can pretend to be doing something ‘that really matters even though we know that it doesn’t’ (Bradshaw and Zwick, 2016: 278), a fetishistic disavowal, a refusal to see. In turn, Carrington et al. (2016: 32) understand that same gap in the exact same way – ‘the fetishist transfers a fantasy of the real as the real’ (Bradshaw and Zwick, 2016: 267) – but also as an ideological figure invested in by the marketer’s unconscious desire to ‘resolve a contradiction’. In that case, capitalism is ‘predicated on destructive consumerism that requires (ethical) consumerism to negate its own destructiveness’ (Bradshaw and Zwick, 2016: 29). But what if the unconscious desire is not to resolve the contradiction, but to actually enforce it? In Cronin and Fitchett’s (2020: 17) fetishistic inversion, the capitalist subject goes on, not as if they do not know the truth, but as if ‘the complete opposite was the truth’. Here, on the other hand, I believe I have explored a fetishist tickling, according to which, the capitalist subject (the marketer) goes on because he knows there is no acceptable ‘true’ version to be found in the parallax gap but pretends there is one because the parallax object (the void made up by tensions) tickles so good.

This leads us to the third and final contribution of this article. Here I turn towards the CCT and critical marketing literature about racial, ethnic and multicultural relations. My selection process of
commercials apparently meant that invisibility of minority groups, a common critique (e.g. Stern, 1999), was not a problem here. Neither do these spots seem to undermine the full human status of exotic Others (Borgerson and Schroeder, 2002), use extrovertly negative stereotyping of racialized characters (Olivotti, 2016) (except for in the case of white homosexual men), mythologize mixed-race bodies, lack mundane consumption practices or be devoid of sociopolitical context (Harrison et al., 2015). At least not according to the Žižekian reading. What they do seem to do, however, is engage in representational fetishization (Borgerson and Schroeder, 2018), use racial signifiers as ‘cultural currency’ (Harrison et al., 2015) and adhere to broad social goals like racial equality, albeit while never depicting uncomfortable racial inequality or the mass market’s potential contribution to social problems (Crockett, 2008). All in line with a more ‘enlightened’ and necessarily ideo-affective cultural branding strategy.

But (my) postcolonial version of readings was blind to the nuances above. In postcolonial theory, ethnic/racial representation in advertising is predestined to lose as it is back-bound by its own ontology. No matter how much ad-makers have tried to create representations of hybridity, do quantitatively equal representations, celebrate sameness and not just difference and set up third spaces, the postcolonial gaze will always condemn it for exotizing and dehumanizing the Other. Although the postcolonial tradition, especially through Stuart Hall (e.g. 1997), historically raised the importance of meaningful representation, any representation in commercial imagery is bound to be critiqued as appropriated, co-opted and exploiting (e.g. Ahmed, 2011) precisely because the sender is the Market. But many of the commercials explored in this article demonstrate a burgeoning category of advertising, which speaks to the majority group about political immigration and integration issues instead of merely consuming the Other. In other words, decades of postcolonial critique of the market’s co-optation of critical postcolonialism has now been fully absorbed by the neoliberal market, and the result is space-making for other, dirtier fantasies (such as ethnonationalism) partly due to the decentring and destabilization of (White) majority groups (see Peñaloza, 2018). Not that leading postcolonialist theorists haven’t highlighted this paradox themselves, but still the paradox remains. The prominent postcolonial scholar, Spivak (1999), agrees that postcolonial theory is inherently problematic, as her ‘strategic essentialism’ (forcing quantitative and qualitative affirmative action and representation of persons of colour in all spheres of life), which is supposed to be distinct from ‘ontological essentialism’ (e.g. race biology), unfortunately also reproduces destructive difference and makes impossible the dissolution of race biology, albeit with another purpose. In other words, by highlighting and dismissing race at the same time, critical postcolonialism has become a zero-sum game. The identity–political consequence of postcolonialist theory brings with it an inescapable evocation of masking where the superego takes over. If the Black subject’s inferiority complex from colonial subjugation is internalized through the evocation of a ‘White mask’ of self-loathing (Nayak, 2007), in my multicultural advertising material, this ‘White mask’ is replaced by another mask; a postcolonialist mask of its own. The mask is now Non-White but the gaze is White and the self-loathing directed at itself, the sort of self-oblation Lacan called aphanisis (Žižek, 2007: 55). Postcolonial theory and concepts have, for many decades, been co-opted by the Market and are now so naturalized and normalized that they no longer make up a progressive movement to co-opt. Postcolonial theory is no longer the ideological underdog, but a dominant ideology of its own. Hence, it is the superego that ‘bombards me with impossible demands and then mocks my botched attempts to meet them’ (Žižek, 2007: 80).

Postcolonial critique of tokenism is (of course) right that multicultural advertisements distract from structural disruption. The multicultural imaginary is (just) about strategic representation.
What Spivak (1999) calls postcolonial strategic essentialism could, in that sense, be said to have contributed to a deadlocked polarization which, instead of abrogating conflict, makes everyone permanently frightened to do and say the wrong thing. The deadlock is between the market fetishization of difference and postcolonialist idealization of hybridity based in similarity, which cannot meet. Related to this, Žižek’s own general objection against postcolonial studies deals with the ‘left-liberal humanitarian discourse’ (2008a: xiv), its ‘prettification’ of the Other (2009: 177) and the subsequent de-politicization:

The problem of post colonialism is undoubtedly crucial; however, post colonial studies tends to translate it into the multiculturalist problematic of the colonized minorities’ right to narrate their victimizing experience, of the power mechanisms that express otherness, so that, at the end of the day, we learn that the root of postcolonial exploitation is our intolerance toward the Other and, furthermore, that this intolerance itself is rooted in our intolerance toward the ‘Stranger in Ourselves,’ in our inability to confront what we repressed in and of ourselves. The politico-economic struggle is thus imperceptibly transformed into a pseudopsychoanalytic drama of the subject unable to confront its inner traumas. (Žižek, 2002: 545)

Postcolonial studies’ ‘benign universe’ (Žižek, 2002: 548) of harmonious hybridities can, therefore, be considered an ideology supporting the unbearable truth that such multicultural imaginary is impossible. The impossibility would be horrific and embodied in the Real, which cannot be represented. ‘The neighbour with whom no empathetic relationship is possible’ and as such ‘in its strict Freudo-Lacanian sense, as the monstrous, impenetrable Thing that is the Nebenmensch, the Thing that hystericizes and provokes me’ (Žižek, 2009: 113). Hence, such possible truth (of racism) would be impossible to face and forever lost in the parallax gap but, yet, could/would still be possible to bear as a fetishized tickling and, subsequently, a political status quo.

Future research in critical marketing should further explore how societal and political tensions give pleasure and how the Market fetishizes these. Indeed, the tickling fetish could readily explain why the trope of troublesome ‘polarization’ seems to not be very troublesome. Rather it is extremely persistent, even popular. The perpetual fascination with Donald Trump as America’s President between 2017 and 2021 and the attention given to all and any of his utterances is a good illustration of that. For example, was not the ‘blind spot’ in Trump’s speech, with which I begun this article, a perfect example of a parallax gap where no perspective can grasp the ‘truth’ but the tension between these perspectives becomes, in itself, a parallax object that does things to us? And perhaps, this makes Donald Trump the most virtuoso cultural brander of all.

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Supplemental material

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