

Postmodern consumption Rituals: The re-enchantment present in a life sentence

Rituais pós-modernos de consumo: O reencantamento presente numa pena perpétua

*Karla Patriota Bronsztein*¹

*Bruno Anselmo da Silva*²

Abstract *In this article, we have listed the current consumption practices with the notion of the re-enchantment of the world, as postulated in the reading by Pierucci, the concept of the disenchanting world of Max Weber. For this approach, we have used as a basis the process marked by Maffesoli and Bougnoux, the re-valuation of emotion and the most primitive contacts in postmodern social relations and Bauman's analysis of the "consumer society." Reading about the ritual logic that encompasses both consumption and enchantment, it appears challenging, but at the same time very fruitful, to observe the emergence of a possible re-enchantment of the world via consumption.*

Key-words: *Consumption; Postmodernity; Re-enchantment; Identity*

Resumo *Relacionamos neste artigo as práticas de consumo atuais com a noção de reencantamento do mundo, como postulado na leitura feita por Pierucci, do conceito de mundo desencantado de Max Weber. Tomamos como base para tal aproximação o processo assinalado por Maffesoli e Bougnoux, de revalorização do sentimento e dos contatos mais primitivos nas relações sociais pós-modernas e as análises de Bauman sobre a "sociedade de consumidores". A leitura acerca da lógica ritual que perpassa tanto consumo quanto magia revela-se desafiadora*

¹ Universidade Federal de Pernambuco – UFPE (Federal University of Pernambuco), Recife, PE, Brazil.
E-mail: k.patriota@gmail.com

² Universidade Federal de Pernambuco – UFPE (Federal University of Pernambuco), Recife, PE, Brazil.
E-mail: brunoanselmo.br@gmail.com

e, ao mesmo tempo, bastante profícua para que se observe a emergência de um possível reencantamento do mundo via consumo.

Palavras-chave: *Consumo; Pós-modernidade; Reencantamento; Identidade*

Audacity and humility. Love and justice. Freedom and limits. Seemingly opposite realities, as a rule, are difficult to combine. Difficult to determine the thread that generates unity, the logic that pervades, which gives meaning. Beyond appearances, however, to escape the distractions of common sense, certain objects surprise us when they reveal the complex nuances and interconnections that constitute them. This proves especially true as we try to understand the consumption habits in post-modern daily lives.

With this complexity as a structural foundation, this article presented us with the challenge of looking at the current consumption practices, from the proximity between two ideas which at first appear to be contradictory: the first, of very positive semantics, which can even be referred to as “happy”, and the other, a more critical view, considered by some to be too pessimistic. We are referring to the notion of “re-enchantment of the world,” re-reading what was postulated by Max Weber, when he talked about the emergence of a disenchanted world, reflections that will be anchored in contemporary authors such as Michel Maffesoli, Colin Campbell, Antônio Flávio Pierucci and Déborah Pereira.

Secondly, we use the critical bias analysis regarding the so-called “consumer society” proposed by the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. We understand that analyzing consumption in postmodernity requires a certain reflection on enchantment and imprisonment. Impossible to conjugate? Improbable, perhaps.

We will start with happiness. As Antônio Flávio Pierucci observed, in his exegetical effort to understand the most accurate meaning of the concept of “disenchantment of the world” in the set of Max Weber’s work, “in any language of the world, for the idea of enchantment you say gladly, joyfully, in beautiful, breathtaking and fascinating forms” (PIERUCCI, 2005, p.31). The plasticity of this word, which evokes beautiful images and poetic meanings, coupled with other factors such as shortcomings in the translation of the term into Portuguese, in addition to suggesting interpretations for the order of common sense, has, therefore, hampered the understanding of the concept formulated by Weber. As Pierucci shows in said work, for Max Weber, the disenchantment of

the world has nothing to do with melancholy, despair or - when translated into Portuguese with disenchantment - “a mental state of personal disillusionment with the world (modern) or with the directions in which society is moving” (PIERUCCI, 2005, p.34).

But after all, what is the meaning that Max Weber attributed to the concept of disenchantment of the world? As it should be, this is a fundamental question for understanding the possibility of the return of enchantment that is underway today. Pierucci points out that the disenchantment of the world in Weber has two very precise meanings, namely: 1) the disenchantment of the world by religion (through the historical and gradual process of contempt for enchantment as a means of salvation and radical moral norms of religious life), which dates back to Jewish³ prophecy and finds its highest expression in ascetic⁴ Protestantism of Puritanism, which, in many instances, has treated profession as a synonym for vocation, in what might be called the “Protestant distortion” (GUINNESS, 2001, p.102); and 2) the disenchantment of the world by the rationality of science. The two senses are concurrent in Weber’s work, although the former has primacy over the latter:

For Weber the literal meaning of disenchantment of the world as taking away the magic in the search for salvation may even be its strongest and most decisive sense, to the extent that it is nothing more than the other side of the moralization process of religious practice, a typically Western historical-religious process and with serious consequences for human life. (PIERUCCI, 2005, p.146).

On the road leading to modernity, practical-technical rationalization (scientific) allegedly got a lift with the practical and ethical rationalization (religious), in a process Weber called the ‘disenchantment of the world’. The abandonment of religious belief as a valid means of explaining reality, certainly took the charm away from the world that conferred

³ In his arguments against idolatry and the worship of other gods, considered false by the Jewish monotheistic conception.

⁴ Mainly from the withdrawal of the importance given to, by Roman Catholicism, the sacraments as “visible means” to reach the invisible grace of God. Because of this it loses, even more, some of the liturgical-religious enchantment.

ARTICLE

him plausibility. However, before this, a rationalization process within its own religious life is what really began to lead the West to modernity. The very ‘rationalism of Protestantism’, as postulated by Weber (1963, p.248), has already marked the emergence of “rational mastery of the world” from the perspective of the Western rationalization model, with its extensive and fundamental social and cultural processes, but mainly by the interweaving of the “disenchantment and intellectualization of the world” (BRUKAKER 1996, p.642).

Thus, it is correct to think that the notion of disenchantment of the world helps us to understand modernity. For Weber, however, curiously (or not!), Understanding the West has as its starting point this cultural facet called experience with the sacred, or simply, religion. The German sociologist demonstrates categorically the decisive role of religion in being able to analyze human behavior in society: “The magical and religious forces, and the ethical ideas of duty based upon them have, in the past, always been among the most important formative influences on conduct” (Weber, 2004, p.32). Therefore, it is clear that, although religion is not the only source capable of providing answers to social analysis, it undoubtedly has much to contribute. It is therefore essential to keep this in mind when referring to a supposed “re-enchantment of the world”, a process that we would be experiencing during the passage from modernity to postmodernity, and what in fact is of interest in this article.

First of all, it is still necessary for our objectives of reflection to clarify that Weber distinguished two forms of relation with the sacred: magic and religion itself. Magic relates to a more primitive stage of religion, animistic nature, in which it would be possible to manipulate the gods and the spirits that populate every part of the world - these being neither good nor bad in their essence - to achieve certain interests. As for Religion, according to the author, is later stage to magic; it is necessarily linked to a doctrinal standard of norms required by one/some God(s) only (or not) as a way of acceptable life for its people, and it can even change the “naturally spontaneous character of secular life in the world” (Weber, 2004,

p.116). Thus, when Weber said that the modern world is disenchanted, he did not mean it in the sense that it lost its religious connections, but that is it has become disenchanted since it lost its magic. Soon, the disenchantment of the world, in its strictest sense, is the passage from magic to religion, a process that, according to Weber, had its maximum expression in the puritanical line of Protestantism:

Only ascetic Protestantism effectively destroyed magic (...) On the contrary, for popular Asian religions of any kind, the world remained a great enchanted garden: the veneration or coercion of 'spirits', the search for ritualistic salvation, idolatrous, sacramental, continued to be the way to guide you and for you to be ensured in the practice (WEBER *in* PIERUCCI, 2005, p.112).

For the purposes of this article, however, we will focus our attention on the most primitive form of the relationship with the sacred. Magic is strongly attached to tradition, averse to change, full of rituals. Magic is an attempt; it is control, and a strategy to obtain salvation. Magic is irrationality, but there is logic behind its practices. Pierucci explains: "The goods that people seek through magic really fulfill the definition of what are indisputably rational goods: money, food, health, longevity and offspring" (PIERUCCI, 2005, p.75). Magic is above all "irrationality uncommon to everyday life" (PIERUCCI, 2005, p.78), as it is anchored in successive rituals, yet punctual, moments of ecstasy and invocation of supernatural powers out of everyday order.

In contrast to religion, it is not active 24 hours a day. There is a certain time for its embodiment. Magic is extremely pragmatic; it works through liturgies and it is ritualistic in its attempt to manipulate the gods. It is God in the service of man, rightfully so, and it has a defined purpose: to strictly achieve worldly goals. Pierucci makes it clear: "magical interests are entirely of this world (...) nothing there is metaphysical, nothing is for the next world, nothing is for the other side" (PIERUCCI, 2005, p.80). Still, magic is unaware of ethics because it lacks "clarity of the distinction between a technical rule and a normative rule, and lacks a break, a differentiation between utility and duty" (PIERUCCI, 2005,

p. 74). It does not worry, therefore, with a streamlined practice of a life in harmony and consistency with divine ethical principles. The focus of magic, therefore, is objectified in goods, goods that would be able to generate happiness.

At this point, we can conclude hastily that the re-enchantment of the world can mean the simple return to magic. As a kind of “re-sacralizing” - which would simulate an ‘eclipse’ of the secularization that we will witness. This association, although easy to do, seems wrong to us. The assumption that our society would be making a mere return to a pre-modern stage of development, disregarding all the historical and cultural journey which we are on, consciously or not, immersed and rooted, and which would be impossible to extricate us from, seems biased and even rather naive. Re-enchantment of the world is not this. As Pierucci warns,

The locus of human existence into which sneaks an effective possibility to re-enchant the world is not a religious sphere, but another cultural sphere, while non-religious and non-rational: the erotic sphere, according to Weber, the ‘irrational power of life’ - sexual love reigns. (PIERUCCI, 2005, p.221).

Nevertheless, as we will address it later, it is fully possible to realize many similarities between magic and various postmodern behaviors, especially in consumption practices. Magic not strictly in the religious sense, but in a much broader sense, which addresses even this erotic sphere mentioned by Pierucci.

The return of the senses

Let us now try to look at the contemporary scene through a different prism. It is a fact that the proposals of modernity proved insufficient to fully meet the wishes and demands of human beings for affection, intimacy, sense, knowledge, transcendence. On the one hand, religious values based on faith, as well as the beliefs, superstitions, mystical experiences and emotions, lost their place for a reason; On the other hand,

they left a gap to be filled in everyday social life that ethical, technical and scientific rationalism simply did not have the power to fill. Reflecting on the effervescent years of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Colin Campbell speaks of “a marked alienation from the culture of rationality and a decided Anti-Puritanism” (Campbell, 2001, p.12) among young people. Some analysts pointed out a certain longing and a movement of return that many people today begin to endeavor towards primitivism, the irrational, the immaterial, in search of happiness. We mention only two, both French: sociologist Michel Maffesoli and philosopher Daniel Bournoux.

Counting on methodological devices, language and very different starting points, the two authors have in common the fact that they contrast modernity and postmodernity in analyzes that touch on many points. Both express optimism in achieving a return to the earliest contacts, previously abandoned by modernity.

Analyzing the changes that affect, in contemporary times, human relations and the emergence of new forms of social grouping, Maffesoli concludes that the proposed model for modernity is saturated. Instead, new relationships have been established in what he calls “sociality” (MAFFESOLI 1998, p.79). In his words: “After a period in which distance prevailed, an ‘optical period’, which might be called, with reference to its etymology, a theoretical period (*theorein*: see), it would be entering a ‘tactile’ period in which only proxemia matters “(MAFFESOLI 1998, p.46). For the author, we are, therefore, in the process of change. It is not something rationally thought out or planned. It goes through more spontaneous ways, linked to elements that were half asleep with emotion, affection and feeling. Thus, the “mechanical structure” composed of “individuals” with well-defined functions that come together in “contractual groups,” all of which are good characteristics of modernity, Maffesoli schematically contrasted a “complex and organic structure,” which is drawing on postmodernity, in which “people” are playing roles and congregate in “affection tribes” (MAFFESOLI 1998, p.9).

Daniel Bournoux seems to follow a similar reasoning, based, however, on the assumptions of Peirce’s semiotics. Leaning across the three

ARTICLE

categories, in which the signs, that is, indexes, icons and symbols, are divided, Bognoux (1994) makes a strong link between the sign and the cultural development process of the individual and the social group. For him, “access to the symbolic represses the index: it restrains the senses (sensations) in favor of meaning (the meaning). Man uproots from nature in order to dominate it or fix it”(BOUGNOUX, 1994, p.67). What he suggests is that, in the learning process through which the individual goes in life, in a broad manner, in civilizational development of societies, communication and interaction are becoming increasingly cold and impersonal, becoming artificial through the use of codes, as well as increasingly more abstract (the symbols).

The first contacts with the world, by instinct and emotion - that is, the indexes - which are, by nature, full of vitality, are progressively being drowned out or disciplined in an acculturation process. Therefore, according to Bognoux, we can say that modernity corresponds to this cold and rational atmosphere, an alleged intellect domain at the expense of everything else. At this point, the author takes a step forward and provides a concrete interpretation key to postmodernity.

It is what Bognoux calls “aesthetic regression” (Bognoux 1994, p.67). Individuals have given clear signs of this “missing” of indexical contact. The current forms of social grouping, of religiosity, the link between individuals and the institutions, consumer practices and new media are there to prove it. The same is noticed in the revaluation of the senses and emotions. Just look closely at cinema, advertising and marketing strategies, increasingly directed to the emotional involvement of the consumer, humanizing brands and promoting the exaltation of the image, appearance and aesthetics, in all fields.

As an effect, such approaches seem, at some level, aligned with the notion of re-enchantment of the world. But can we really talk about re-enchantment connected to the revaluation of emotion, the heat, the most primitive contact, touch and affection in human relations? We will return to the theme of magic to outline some possible correlations, but, before that, let us look at a feature that proves to be crucial to understand the logic behind postmodernity: consumption.

Consumption, aesthetics and happiness

We reaffirm that the enchantment of the return process today is not in mere resurgence of religion in its most primitive forms, though, especially in the Brazilian scenario, we can even speak of a mystical-religious effervescence - that is embodied in contemporary religious outbreaks. They suggest a “come back”, a “return” of religion, which was named by Kepel (1991) as the “Revenge of God.” But we insist: this is not the approach that we propose.

The re-enchantment of the world is linked, rather, to the practical, somewhat utilitarian, irrational, emotional, sensory, community and ritualists that emerge every day. Apparently, it is precisely from these practices that we have sought to extract meaning, identity, transcendence, wholeness, affection, belonging and, in short, happiness. And the fact that draws our attention, a close observation of the present, is the place for the excellence of these practices and the consumer. Déborah Pereira da Silva, a PhD in Communication and Semiotics and holder of a Master’s Degree in Religious Sciences from PUC São Paulo, raises the question as follows:

We have adopted the idea that, through advertising developed by capitalist investments, you re-signify the senses to a life through consumption. Thus, goods and services could become happiness project fragments and slowly enter into the sphere of the meaning of human life, which for centuries had been sustained almost exclusively by the religious universe (PEREIRA, 2008, p.93).

Happiness project. Our search for happiness today is, mandatorily, going towards the scope of consumption. This is what leads Zygmunt Bauman to name our society as a “consumer society”, in which “the human bonds tend to be conducted and mediated by the consumer goods markets” (BAUMAN, 2008 p.107,108) a society of “excess and extravagance” (BAUMAN, 2008, p.112). Unlike the tone of enthusiasm that you can feel from Michel Maffesoli, according to whom we would be immersed in an “aesthetic aura” (MAFFESOLI 1998, p.20), in itself a social aggregation factor, omnipresent in post-modern ambiances.

Bauman (2008), in another perspective, criticizes in many aspects, the quality and the results of this process of change and reinterpretation of consumption. This is what we can see, for example, in his analysis of the consumerist culture in which he quotes Maffesoli (Bauman, 2008, p.107-148).

The urgent, and even educational, appeal of advertising, that we are and remain one step ahead of the style trends, can only be realized, according to Bauman, based on the fear we have of falling behind, in return for some sacrifices and adoptions for a lifestyle that requires a good and steady dose of effort. As with consumer society, the sense of belonging is only obtained “by its own metonymic identification of the aspirant with the trends” (Bauman, 2008, p.108); therefore, they must urgently carry their “membership badges” and then live in a constant state of alert in order to know what products and behaviors that are fashionable now, those that are trending, and obviously those that are moving on to be replaced by others (Bauman, 2008, p.108).

In addition to advertising, the markets and consumers themselves, we realize that the iconic figures, the people who choose them as such, membership badges and the groups to which they refer to are also included as constituent parts in this consumerist process. Bauman also highlights a kind of consumption cycle, rather clear, which “begins with the acquisition of badges, gained through the public announcement of possession, which is only considered to be complete when ownership becomes public knowledge” (Bauman, 2008 p.108). Thinking especially about this act of publishing possessions to which he refers, it is worth noting how the Internet, and social networks in particular, play a central role. Would that be the reason many of us are unable to disconnect? Fear, most likely, appears in current consumption practices as one of the forces that drives consumption:

The reference to “being ahead” suggests a genuine concern to futility of the time the current emblems of “belonging” have before falling out of circulation and are replaced by new ones, and their unsuspecting bearers are at risk of being left out - what if in the plea, mediated by the market, to become a member, translates to the feeling of being rejected, excluded

and neglected, and ultimately reflected in the sharp pain of personal inadequacy. (BAUMAN, 2008, p.109).

If it is through the aesthetic codes that we hold and disclose, that we can say who we are and where we position ourselves in a society that continually renews (faster and faster) its belonging brands, so it is easy to reach the next logical conclusion: to be inattentively satisfied is extremely inadvisable. For the “*Homo consumens*” (Bauman, 2008, p.127), there is a lot of risk in carrying things for too long. We need to be insatiable. We cannot stop to experience the sensations of the act of consuming, even for a brief moment, because they will pass us by. We should feel, although misleadingly, that we have value, that we are well liked, that we represent something to someone. Identity, in the end, is what is at stake. In postmodernity, therefore, our identity will constitute from others, who, for Bauman, especially in virtual spaces, “are reduced to their hard core self-confirmation instrument which is somewhat possible to manipulate” (Bauman 2008: .148). The constant renewal of the acquisition of goods and appropriate disclosure of possession would be responsible, in the consumption cycle, for conveying safety to the individual, which, in contemporary times, it is distinguished as a measure and as an end.

Feel satisfaction, feel belonging, feel irrational, and even in a false way, feeling whole, whole with one another. That is why we need to talk about an “aesthetic paradigm” to define postmodernity (MAFFESOLI, 1998, p.15) or a “*Homo Eroticus*”, the title of the latest work by Michel Maffesoli, in which the author resumes and reinforces the last thirty years of his work. For him, this is the climate of our times: fragile links, which “in their moment, are the object of strong emotional involvement” (MAFFESOLI 1998, p.107). If we dare to take magic, as described by Weber, in the expanded religious sense of this *reconnection* adopted by Maffesoli (MAFFESOLI 1998, p.109), we can see some very suggestive parallels. It is precisely in this instance of reconnection with others, in which religion and eroticism, in a way, merge, we could talk about the re-enchantment of the world through consumption.

Re-enchantment via consumption

It is clear, up to here, how much the habits and consumer goods have acquired new meanings today, which are attached to feelings, sensations, emotions and affection. The direct metonymic relation is also clear in the way we try to build our identity, since “consumer goods are hardly neutral in relation to identity; they tend to come with the label ‘identity included’” (BAUMAN, 2008, p.143). Thus, we finally come to what seems to be an important key to the understanding of postmodernity: we experience a re-enchantment of the world via consumption.

First, we must remember that, through endless rituals, the search undertaken by magic was to ultimately obtain happiness. It did not seek to regulate the totality of everyday life, with moral rules that give meaning to existence and reverberate in eternity. Before, its realization was found in specific times, aimed at gains here, now, in this world. If, as argued by Maffesoli and Bougnoux, we witnessed the revaluation of primitive impulses that modernity tried to smother, it is possible to trace points of contact between these consumption practices, observed in postmodernity, and the guiding principles of the magical practices of the past. In support of this final level of our argument, we will use another quite strong image, which is, for many, overly pessimistic, provided by Zygmunt Bauman: “Identity is a life sentence of forced labor” (BAUMAN, 2008, p.142)

We cannot escape the logic that governs the current consumption practices: we constantly need to renew our safety guarantees. The idea is really one of necessity, indispensability. In a context in which habits and consumer goods, in relation to society, define who we are, we simply cannot stop consuming, acquiring and making the ownership of property public a type of perpetual penalty, as Bauman describes. In a time when there is so much talk of freedom, we are, in a sense, trapped, forced or, to use a harsher term, condemned to fulfill a series of forced labor.

Maffesoli strives to try to describe this postmodern way by relating us to one another, via consumption, using the metaphor of the tribe, which

in itself already evokes many words referring to primitivism: ritual, marriage, aggregation, fight, mysticism, territory. For the author, we have the need to defend a symbolic territory that unites us, awakening in us collective memories, feelings that make us recognize ourselves as members of the tribe. This does not occur through political manifestations. It is the ritual practices of everyday life that spontaneously show who we are and where we came from. If, in postmodernity, sense was replaced by the same sentiment, we now tend to put all our energy in to aesthetics. Aesthetics as a social bond. Very fragile?

In fact, for this to work, a lot of energy must be spent every day by repeated rituals that reaffirm the feeling of being in a group. The concern with the construction (or maintenance) of identity is not limited to clothing. You have to buy, listen, be constantly updated on the scene, go to the same places, circulate in the same spaces. Finally, new consumption patterns are acquired. But it is expensive, not only financially. There is an expense (higher or lower) of energy, emotion and time involved in the process. These are rituals - or “forced labor” in Bauman’s language – that, in their repetition, give us the impression of safety (MAFFESOLI 1998, p.25).

Thus, from everyday consumerism, and obviously with the strong encouragement of “consumer goods vendors” (BAUMAN, 2008, p.142), we see certain characteristics being reborn and with force, those related to magical practices as described by Weber. This obligation to repeat - which is observed in the rituals of postmodern consumption - is also seen in the logic that encompasses magic. Not only that, but the motivating factor of rituals seems quite similar. In light of the history of religions and philosophy, systematic theologian Louis Berkhof states that the universality of feeling this guilt in human beings in all cultures is responsible for leading us to religious acts and sacrifices: “There is a widespread feeling that the gods are offended and must be placated in some way” (BERKHOF 1990, p.235). Thus, as in the religious actions of the once-enchanted world described by Weber, today we would be imposing on ourselves the duty to perform, tirelessly, endless rituals to

‘be saved’. Salvation, it is worth remembering, that is only connected to items linked to this world: money, food, health, achievement, and love. Pierucci also highlights a commercial exchange attribute present in this magic:

In the gesture of coercing the spirits with a magic formula, not requesting anything from them, it is assured to get an intervention from them that goes in the direction desired by the customer and charismatically ordered by the Wizard (PIERUCCI, 2005, p.75).

The utilitarian aspect of magic, therefore, is evident, as well as, in our postmodern experiences, others will be reduced to a tool for our self-assertion. It is also highlighted the fact that, when speaking of magic, we’re talking about specific moments of our relationship with the sacred, instead of a life entirely dedicated to the observance of rules. In the post-modern consumerism, as Bauman describes, the moment needs to be renewed constantly, because being satisfied does not matter anymore. Neither engaging in lasting causes. The Puritan ethics that helped promote the spirit of capitalism would be giving way to “romantic ethics”, which operates and enables the “spirit of consumerism” (CAMPBELL, 2001, p.15). Ethics tends to dissolve itself, although the discourse about it is more fertile than ever. Luiz Felipe Pondé goes as far as to comment on a “faith in ethics” that, according to him, very common nowadays, and argues: “When you do not know what to say, talk about ethics” (PONDÉ, 2012, p.144).

Therefore, the emphasis is on consumerist gains, not necessarily in the conduct of life. As magic has its domain in an essentially polytheistic field, for Maffesoli, the only religion proclaimed in the modern context is giving way to a “polytheism whose outlines are always undefined” (MAFFESOLI, 2001, p.110). For Maffesoli, this polytheism does not mean the actual existence of many gods, but a cluster of elements, most of them aesthetic, whose function is expected to be the reconnecting of each other. It is what Pierucci seems to point out when recalling Weber’s term “polytheism of values”, with its “disenchanted gods” (PIERUCCI, 2005 p.137, 139).

Because of all that has been said, we believe we are experiencing the re-enchantment of the world through consumption. An approach that is somewhat paradoxical. However, to understand the intricate relationship between the apparent joy evoked by the return of the enchantment and the painful imprisonment contained in the life sentence of consumer rituals defies common sense. A closer look allows us to question, on the one hand, if the re-enchantment of the world is as happy as its semantics (and some enthusiasts) suggest, at the same time leading us to reflect whether the most critical analyses of consumer society, as those of Bauman, could not effectively help us find better ways in which to follow the path in our relations with others.

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About the authors

Karla Patriota Bronshtein - PhD in Sociology at the Universidade Federal de Pernambuco – UFPE (Federal University of Pernambuco). Associate Professor 4 of the Publicity and Advertising Course at the Federal University of Pernambuco and the Graduate Program in Communication - PPGCOM.

Bruno Anselmo da Silva – Master's degree student in Communication in the Graduate Program in Communication at the Federal University of Pernambuco - UFPE

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