

# Riding the flow of luxury

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[PP 1]

I would like to thank the organizers for the opportunity to give a presentation at the Esprit conference and I am pleased to present to you in the following twenty minutes the magazine *Sport im Bild* (sports in pictures) as an example of the relationship between capitalism and the modern press. To this end, I will proceed in three steps: First, I will outline the evolution of the magazine from a medium of sports coverage to a medium of luxurious living. Following this, I will subject an issue of the *Sport im Bild* from 1920 to a more detailed analysis. Finally, I will hint the critical and aesthetical potential the magazine reached at its peak by looking into an issue from the year 1928.

On the one hand, this analysis should make clear the extent to which the magazine can be understood both as a marketplace and as a utopia of capitalism in the modern era. On the other hand, it should also show the ways in which the magazine gains its aesthetic potential and its own form from these economic contexts, a form which can be characterized by the fact that it develops an ambivalent relationship to the capitalist fantasies and dream images of luxury depicted in the magazine. It is worth noting that this aesthetic form seem to be typical for the medium of the periodical in that it results from the miscellaneous interplay of heterogeneous elements such as text and image, advertisement and essay, literature and reportage, and the flow of reading that is produced by switching between these elemets. Against this background, the reference to luxury which helped the *Sport im Bild* to gain a profile in the 1920s and to form a brand itself is at least twofold: on the one hand, the magazine can be understood as a platform for the promotion and staging of luxurious goods as well as the lifestyle associated with them in advertisements, articles, and artwork. On the other hand, the *Sport im Bild* is also permeated by luxury insofar as the terms that can be used to define 'luxury', namely 'exuberance, excess, and abundance' characterize not only the sales articles presented, but also the semiotic

and aesthetic relationships of the magazine's elements to each other. And it is mainly this semiotic and aesthetic excess that produces semantic relations that can no longer be described simply as an affirmation of capitalist achievements.

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The *Sport im Bild* was published in Vienna and Berlin from 1895 to 1934. It began as a medium for sports reporting and lived up to its title "sports in pictures" because it was the first illustrated German-language sports magazine. It was founded by two British journalists living in Berlin who wanted to establish the format of the sports illustrated magazine in Germany. In 1904, the journal was sold to the major Berlin publisher August Scherl. The magazine's ambition is quite clearly reflected in its layout, as these images from 1897 show. The sixteen-page issues of this year are set in three columns and present exclusively reports from the world of sports, supplemented and illustrated by photographs or by lithographs made from photographs. The advertising section of the magazine is consistently located on its last four pages and mostly advertises sporting goods, especially bicycles.

After Scherl took over the magazine, the design changed fundamentally:

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Not only does the magazine start with advertisements, giving it a double beginning, so to speak, as the outer cover within the issue receives a reprise announcing the real start of the editorial section, which is delayed by the full-page advertisements on the first pages of the magazine. The proportion of advertising has also increased significantly and constitutes a quarter of the magazine. The quantity of pictures has also been heightened: in the 1909 issue shown here, not a single one of the thirty pages does not contain a photograph or an advertisement. This decrease in the proportion of text is also reflected in the fact that the text is now set in two columns and printed in a larger type and with larger line spacing. Thematically, sports coverage continues to remain in the foreground, although with the society page "Aus der Gesellschaft", a category has entered the magazine that announces news from the

aristocracy and upper middle classes without any reference to sports. Likewise, the sports that is being reported on have become more sophisticated. Equestrian and hunting sports are now clearly in the foreground. That *Sport im Bild* appeals to a different audience than before becomes also apparent in the advertisements. These now no longer only promote sports products, but also fashion, cosmetics and lifestyle articles, and occasionally automobiles. [PP 4]

Nowhere, however, becomes this change in the magazine's readership more evident than in the "Illustrated Property Advertisements," which are included as an insert in the magazine and address exclusively the social class of the extraordinarily wealthy. They try to sell manors, knights' estates and villas and also contain ads for very exclusive vacation spots.

All of these aforementioned characteristics remain constant for a decade, i.e. even during the Great War, until far-reaching changes in layout, design and content are made in 1920, which will characterize the *Sport im Bild* until its run ends in 1934.

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These changes are already plainly reflected at the level of the surface aesthetics. There, the photographs used up to this point are replaced by drawings, graphics and paintings. Since 1920, photographs in the *Sport im Bild* will almost only be of film stars and other celebrities. If there is still reporting on sports – which, however, happens more and more rarely and only about more glamorous kinds of sport – then it is done without photographs and with a completely different aim than before. Whereas until 1920 the sports coverage was interested in the sport itself, since 1920 sporting events are mainly of interest to the *Sport im Bild* as social phenomena. Sports in general and Sport are only of interest insofar as they symbolize something other than themselves, for example: a certain attitude to life or certain aspects of what is perceived as 'modern'. The sporting performance in and of itself no longer plays a role and becomes a mere sign, a simulacrum in Baudrillard's sense, since it is no longer supposed to refer in any way to the 'reality' of sports but to what it represents. The renunciation of the photographic image also fits into this logic because it can be

interpreted as a turning away from a naturalistic or realistic claim to representation and as a turning towards an iconization of sports, towards an imaginary reshaping of what is represented.

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The covers of the magazine illustrate these changes: While the cover of issue 39 of the year 1920 still makes a direct reference to sports, even if the sport 'golf' and the fashionable clothing of the lady depicted already make it clear that the main focus is no longer on sports as a physical activity but as a social activity, this kind of reference is completely lost with the next issue 40. Why the magazine should carry *Sport im Bild* as its title at all can only remain puzzling in view of the lady who is at the center of the watercolor. The way this lady, who has stepped out of a limousine, presents herself, her clothing and the bouquet of flowers, the way she is framed and brought to the foreground by the bellboy and the chauffeur, is suggestive of a magazine for fashion and luxury goods rather than a sports magazine. And indeed, this assumption can be confirmed by the subtitle, which changes with this issue. It is no longer "Sports – Society – Theater – Movies – Fashion", from now on it is "Das Blatt der guten Gesellschaft". (The gazette of the high society/good company). That the magazine's reference to the luxurious is by no means the exception from now on, but rather the rule that has been made permanent since issue 40, is made clear by the title page of issue 51 shown on the right-hand side. Unlike issue 40, which has a special status in that it calls itself a "movies number" and has a corresponding thematic focus, number 51 is a regular issue. Regular, however, does by no means imply that the issue is less interested in the chic and the fashionable. To the contrary: in the spilling of the punch, the cover even explicitly symbolizes glamour, extravagance, and lavishness – which are from now on standard topics of the *Sport im Bild*.

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Of course, this desire for luxury is not only reflected superficially on the covers and in the subtitle, but also in the content development and the pictorial politics inside the issue, as a brief look at number 51 of 1920 will make clear.

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With the term 'pictorial politics' I refer to the way in which the various images of the journal are related to one another and placed in a relationship, how they 'live together' under the roof of the magazine. For the *Sport im Bild* this politics can be characterized above all by the fact that a clear distinction between editorial contributions and advertisements can no longer be made when leafing through the magazine and only becomes apparent - if at all - to a closer reading of the images.

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This can be illustrated, for example, by looking at the two images on the left, one of which is an advertisement for the sparkling wine brand "Kupferberg Gold" and the other an artwork, an editorial picture contribution. Both are not only stylistically similar, but above all thematically because both attempt to reproduce a certain atmosphere related to Christmas as well as the consumption of goods. Obviously, the editors of *Sport im Bild* assume that the presentation of the "last purchases", as the right-hand image is titled, provides an aesthetic pleasure in and of itself. That they believe that the magazine's readership appreciates such an image shows clearly that the consumption of high-end commodities is a positive good within the magazine's ideological system. This is an opinion that the magazine, of course, shares with the advertisements within it: and that is one reason why the economic framework and the magazine's editorial contributions become – at least in part – indistinguishable from one another.

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By the way the two images simultaneously attempt to reproduce a certain atmosphere and evoke it in their readers, they also refer to a peculiarity shared by all the commodities that are either advertised or depicted as aesthetic elements in the *Sport im Bild*. What is pivotal for their evaluation – to refer back to two classical terms of economic labor theory – is neither their value in use (Gebrauchswert), which denotes the usefulness of an object, nor their exchange value (Tauschwert), which is

determined by the demand during the trade of goods in a market, but their staging value (Inszenierungswert). In the case of the goods peddled in the *Sport im Bild*, the staging value entirely replaces the value in use, since, strictly speaking, the luxury goods advertised no longer bear any relation to any kind of utility. Their decisive value lies either in their aesthetic properties or in the attitude towards life with which they are associated or which they are capable of symbolizing and evoking.

The concept of staging value refers to two different theoretical areas: on the one hand to theories of "aesthetic capitalism", a concept used in the previous decades to describe a subtype or variant of late capitalism and post-industrialism in the last third of the 20th century. On the other hand, the term also refers to historical economic or sociological theories that were formulated around the 1900s and 1910s such as those of Thorstein Veblen or Werner Sombart. This already indicates that the phenomenon of aesthetic capitalism can by no means be associated only with the developments of postmodernism, as some theories of the 1980s and 1990s seem to imply but is rather already of great importance for the modernity of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Veblen's Theory of the Leisure Class in particular contains many helpful insights that can be made fruitful for the reading of a magazine such as the *Sport im Bild*.

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For example, the following, rather basic insight: "In order to gain and to hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence." Against the background of these two sentences, the *Sport im Bild* reads like a catalog that presents possibilities how 'wealth or power' can be 'put in evidence', with which means, which luxury goods and opulent activities such a presentation can be achieved convincingly. Accordingly, the *Sport im Bild* is not only a magazine in the sense of a periodical, but also a magazine in the original Arabic sense of the word: a warehouse. Or perhaps it is better to say: a marketplace where commodities are offered, advertised, and provided with a corresponding ideology, a marketplace, however,

that at the same time always advertises itself, that offers the magazine for sale as a commodity. In this sense, the advertisements and the luxurious attitude to life they convey not only finance the magazine, but the magazine also associates itself with the ideology they represent and thus increases its own staging value. This association of the magazine and the luxury advertised in it is, of course, promoted and reinforced by the indistinguishability between editorial and advertising contributions. And this undecidability results in a flow that permeates the entire magazine and unfolds its suggestive powers everywhere.

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The next two images from the same issue are further examples of the way this flow unfolds between the various miscellaneous elements of the magazine, and of the manner the ideology of aesthetic capitalism and its structures of desire unfolds from the advertising elements to the original contributions of the magazine and back again (thus reinforcing each other). The left image follows a review of the movie COLOMBINE. DIE BRAUT DES APACHEN and presents the female star of the film, Margarete Lanner. But which function should be assign to the photograph, since it has no direct relation to the film described? Does the picture advertise the film star, who is never just an actor, but always also a product? Or the *Vera Filmwerke* which are explicitly mentioned in the caption and with which Margarete Lanner was exclusively under contract? Or does it advertise the movie and thus also the article about it on the previous page? Or the fashionable clothing and hairstyle that the actress flaunts? Or is the glamour of the star supposed to simply present a show value in itself and to radiate onto the whole magazine? All these questions can be answered in the affirmative. The image has a variety of possible references and connections, none of which could really claim priority over the others. Equivalent overlaps between the editorial and economic spheres arise with regard to many of the advertising images, such as the one shown here on the right. It promotes the Berlin fashion house *Behmer* and the clothes portrayed in it are absolutely indistinguishable

from such depictions as are shown in the magazine's original fashion articles. Only the text clarifies the page's status as an advertisement.

Even though the magazine *Sport im Bild* repeatedly identifies itself by relying on such pictorial politics with the ideology of aesthetic capitalism and its regard of the display of luxury and wealth, the magazine does not simply reproduce the ideology of the upper class. Instead, it at least at times remakes this ideology, supplements it, and ironizes it. Such critical reformulations become particularly evident in the text articles of the *Sport im Bild*. These, like the pictures, are characterized by the fact that the boundaries between the various genres and writing styles are extraordinarily fluid, and that narrating, criticizing, entertaining, advertising, and thinking often merge seamlessly both inside of individual texts and between different texts. In terms of textual stylistics and comparable to the undecidability already observed with regard to the images of the magazine, some advertisements are difficult to distinguish from the original contributions so that the *Sport im Bild* can generally be characterized by an aesthetics in which essayistic, journalistic, critical, advertising, and literary writing styles are inextricably interwoven in a multitude of hybrid texts. Nevertheless, individual constellations can be found repeatedly that bring texts into oppositional relationships with one another.

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One of these examples is the shown constellation. It consists of a reporting text about the latest news from aristocratic families and the upper middle classes on the left and an essay about the loss of social manners on the right. The two articles are separated from each other by six pages, but a relation between them is obviously established by the consonance of the headings "Aus der Gesellschaft" (News about the high society) and "Über die Geselligkeit" (About sociability). While the first article in no way questions the moral and political superiority of the aristocracy and the upper class, the second, on the other hand, laments a decline in the culture of conversation in the higher circles of society and hopes – of all things – for a renewed intellectualization of manners from the 'great poverty' after the war, an improvement

which would make "dinners and soupers" more than just an occasion to consume "caviar and oysters" again. That this interjection about 'sociability' is, however, rather an even more heightened form of snobbery than a serious critique of the higher society becomes quite apparent at the end of the text, even if it is clearly formulated in a self-mocking way.

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It can be translated as: "The human being is always more interesting than a leg of veal, even than a saddle of venison, yes, even in the case of foie gras, one can still be in doubt as to whether a poet, for example, is not basically more estimable, even if not always more edible. The victory of the man of letters over delicacies, of the spiritual over the material, will hopefully be the symbol of the new sociability."

Similar and more sophisticated ironic references become a lot more common in the further course of the 1920s. This can mainly be attributed to the fact that the *Sport im Bild* printed more and more contributions by better-known and avantgardistic authors. Before concluding my presentation, I want to briefly show an example for this by taking a brief look at an issue from 1928.

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The men of letters requested in the essay on sociability seem to have answered the call of the *Sport im Bild*. The table of contents already reveals how much the literary quality of the texts in the magazine has improved since the 1910s.

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The special issue on the topic of "Metropolis" assembles several well-known names: Robert Neumann, Kasimir Edschmid, Norbert Jacques, Robert Walser and Jean Giraudoux are authors who have been included in the canon of modernism and are still well-known today.

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For example, Robert Neumann's poem titled "Bahnhof Nachts" (Railway station at night) is anything but light fare, as it cites various avant-gardistic styles of modernism. But it is totally unclear, especially because of its existentialist ending, whether the poem is meant to be read as an ironic intertextual game (as would be typical for Neumann as the master of literary parodies) or as an accusation of modernism's estrangements and alienations. And Norbert Jacques' essay on London, with its evocation of the mythical power of the fog in the moloch of the big city, also make a big effort create a melancholy, gloomy atmosphere, which is clearly opposed to the normallay rather cheerful reading attitude that the *Sport im Bild* promotes.

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By contrast, Robert Walser's miniature about "Das Schaufenster" (the shop window) is quite cheerful but clearly ironic. On the one hand, it deals less with shop windows than with the problem of writing about shop windows and with the economic value of authors' names. On the other hand, it challenges the value system of the modern world and its commercial ideology with an ironic closing that tells a storyabout a girl who, because of her inauthentic emotional life, could be easily made into an "excellent mannequin". Walser's view into the shop window also opens up another metaphorical territory that also – in addition to the already mentioned marketplace and magazine – aptly characterizes large areas of the *Sport im Bild*, a territory, into which we could enter with the map of Walter Benjamin's analysis of the arcade as an emblem of high capitalism.

In fact, the magazine's advertisements invite readers to take a stroll and turn it into a shopping street.

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The *Sport im Bild* even tries to present the great arcades from Berlin and Paris directly on its pages by doubling their shops in the advertisements on its pages.

And the commodity that is most often advertised and discussed in essays and reportages is the car as an emblem of speed, modernity and technological progress.

Accordingly, the status of aesthetic capitalism as well as the relationship of the *Sport im Bild* to its ideology can be observed particularly well in the design and change of automobile advertisements.

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In the essay on the left called “physiognomies of cars”, the street becomes an arcade for the flaneur that exhibits vehicles from the bodies of which he can decipher their individual characteristics. The next image shows an artwork that is intended to be a joking commentary on the turn of the year, and tries to capitalize on the double meaning of the word 'rocket' that is as at the same time a name for fireworks and for the rocket-powered vehicle of the Opel company, famous in the 1920s for establishing speed records. Unfortunately, the image must probably be considered to be more of an unintentional advertising than a successful joke. And the last two images on the right demonstrate how much the automobile has already become a fashionable accessory in 1928. The automobile is an accessory, and its merits are no longer expressed in its utility, its power or its technical data, but in its aesthetics and what its atmospheric contributions to the lifestyle of its owners. These four mythicizations of the automobile can all be found, among many others, in the same issue as the texts just discussed. All these imaginations of the automobile, along with a great many of the other evocations of luxury in the *Sport im Bild* have certain characteristics in common, characteristics that Walter Benjamin formulated in his reflections on the arcade as following:

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"These images are wish images, and in them the collective attempts both to transcend and to transfigure the unfinishedness of the social product as well as the defects of the social order of production."