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(UN)OBTAINABLE LUXURY AND PERFORMANCE: THE SEMIOTICS OF MICHAEL JORDAN'S 1996 V12 MERCEDES S600 LORINSER

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Abstract: On August 23rd, 2020, a 1996 V12 Mercedes S600 Lorinser was sold at an eBay auction. While the asking price for this particular model, in 2020, was approximately between \$4,500 and \$11,000, this specific car was sold for the hefty sum of \$202,200. What makes this Mercedes car unique and pricey is the fact that it used to belong to a basketball great, Michael Jordan. The timing of the auction in question, finalized in the midst of the global Coronavirus pandemic, and following the release of *The Last Dance* documentary on Jordan's career, factors into the interpretation of the semiotics of the automobile itself. The aim of this article is to analyze: the semiotic dimension of Michael Jordan as a persona and a brand/sign; the semiotic dimension of the Mercedes brand and cars; and, ultimately, the semiotic dimension of the auction of Jordan's 1996 V12 Mercedes S600 Lorinser in the context of time and selling price, with nostalgia as a factor, in order to examine the result of the synergy of "Jordan" and "Mercedes."

[A]utomobiles, as culturally intensive products, have been a common topic for semiotic analysis, "with their meanings often tied to Western science and technology, sociocultural status and power, and personal freedom and escape" [Mick et al. in Wilson, Haładewicz-Grzelak 2015, 6].

On August 23rd, 2020, a 1996 V12 Mercedes S600 Lorinser was sold at an eBay auction. While the asking price for this particular model, in 2020, was approximately between \$4,500 and \$11,000, this particular car was sold

for the hefty sum of \$202,200 [Schrader 2020]. What makes this Mercedes car unique and pricey is the fact that it used to belong to a basketball great, Michael Jordan. The fact that the auction in question was finalized in the midst of a global Coronavirus pandemic, and following the release of *The Last Dance* documentary on Jordan's career, factors into the interpretation of the semiotics of the automobile itself.

This article deals with mainly two terms: Jordan and Mercedes, which begs the question, "What, then, is the meaning of a term?" [Eco 1967, 67], to which Eco's answer is:

From a semiotic point of view it can only be a cultural unit. In every culture "a unit ... is simply anything that is culturally defined and distinguished as an entity. It may be a person, place, thing, feeling, state of affairs, sense of foreboding, fantasy, hallucination, hope or idea. In American culture, such units as uncle, town, blue (depressed), a mess, a hunch, the idea of progress, hope and art are cultural units" [Schneider 1968, 2]. [Eco 1976, 67].

Eco also notes that "a unit of this type might also be recognized as an intercultural unit which remains invariable despite the linguistic symbol with which it is signified" [Eco 1976, 67]. Given the above, Jordan and Mercedes are cultural units, both of which signify two phenomena respectively: Jordan signifies the person of Michael Jordan and the Jordan Brand; Mercedes signifies a make of a car and any given car of this brand. Moreover, due to the global reach of both brands, Jordan and Mercedes are also intercultural units which, as linguistic expressions, carry particular messages. Eco describes the relation between cultural units and their messages in the following manner:

Recognition of the presence of these cultural units ... involves understanding language as a social phenomenon. If I declare that /There are two natures in Christ, the human and the divine, and one Person/ a logician or scientist might observe to me that this string of sign-vehicles has neither extension nor referent – and that it could be defined as lacking meaning and therefore as a pseudo-statement. But they will never succeed in explaining why whole groups of people have fought for centuries over a statement of this kind or its denial. Evidently this happened because the expression conveyed precise contents which existed as cultural units within a civilization. Since they existed they became the supports for connotative developments and opened up a whole range of semantic reactions of a type that directly affected behavior. But behavioral reactions are not necessary in order to establish that the expression has a content; the civilization itself elaborated a series of definitions and explanations of the terms involved (person, nature, etc.). Each definition was a new linguistic (or visual) message whose meaning had in turn to be clarified by means of other linguistic expressions which defined the cultural units carried by the preceding expression [Eco 1976, 67-68].

In Eco's view, every statement, even though it may seem semantically empty, carries an interpretable message due to the fact that it is comprised of linguistic expressions of cultural units with messages assigned to the said units. Therefore, the statement: "Mercedes is the Michael Jordan of car

manufacturers” might appear as lacking meaning and a pseudo-statement, but those who see Jordan as a cultural unit, e.g., basketball fans, and etymologists, will read the statement as: “The Mercedes company is best when it comes to manufacturing cars,” i.e., “Mercedes makes the best cars.”

In this article, I will discuss the meanings of the cultural units of Jordan, Mercedes (having previously analyzed both cultural units, and having assigned their semiotic meanings), and Michael Jordan’s Mercedes, as it is assumed that this particular automobile, as a cultural unit, carries semiotic meanings extending the very similar meanings of the first two units. After taking into consideration the fact that the automobile in question used to belong to a mass culture icon (Jordan), the nostalgia of whose heydays was kindled by the 2020 *The Last Dance* documentary, and the fact that the automobile’s auction took place in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the above-the-market-value price obtained for the automobile, I intend to demonstrate that the semiotics of Jordan’s Mercedes is one that carries more meanings than could be assumed in discussing the synergy of meanings of the two cultural units in question.

Semiotics of Michael Jordan

In his book, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism*, Walter LaFeber entitled one of his chapters “The Greatest Endorser of the Twentieth Century” or “An Insidious Form of Imperialism?” [LaFeber 1999, 130], which succinctly epitomizes the polysemic nature of Jordan. Jordan has meant different things to different readers of his semiotic meanings, largely due to the dual nature of his public persona – an athlete and a celebrity endorser. As a basketball superstar, Jordan has been described almost exclusively in superlatives, all of which are summed up in Harry Edwards’s statement: “If I were charged with introducing an alien life form to the epitome of human potential, creativity, perseverance, and spirit, I would introduce that alien life form to Michael Jordan” [LaFeber 1999, 28]. LaFeber adds that

Jordan personified not only the imaginative, individual skills that Americans dream of displaying in a society that adores graceful and successful individualism, but the all-out competitive spirit and discipline that Americans like to think drove their nation to the peak of world power [LaFeber 1999, 28],

and emphasizes the fact that Jordan “became famous for grace and success” [LaFeber 1999, 31] and that he was “a respected person with good values instilled by strong parents” [LaFeber 1999, 63].

Jordan’s image was, for a long time, that of a perfect human being. Physically, he embodied athletic excellence, which, in 2016, led President

Barack Obama to justify the fact that he was awarding Jordan with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, in the following manner:

There is a reason you call somebody “the Michael Jordan of...” ..., they know what you are talking about. Because Michael Jordan is the Michael Jordan of greatness; he is the definition of somebody so good at what they do that everybody recognizes it. That’s pretty rare [NBA online].

As a human being, Jordan was a family man honoring traditional, American values; he was graceful, successful and did not “alienate anybody” [LaFeber 1999, 64]. With time, Jordan’s perfectly polished image gained fractures, as a darker side of his character came to light (gambling, divorce, and political indifference). Nevertheless, in the consciousness of the masses, he remains an American icon of success, ingenuity and greatness.

To a large extent, Michael Jordan symbolizes the USA’s cultural dominance of the 1990s. He (as the face of Nike and the NBA) was one of the main American exports in the first decade after the collapse of the communist bloc, along with other American multinational companies and international brands, such as Levi’s, Coca-Cola and IBM. Moreover, America’s economic, cultural and political dominance in the last decade of the twentieth century is reflected in Jordan’s dominance on basketball courts (six NBA championships in 1991-98, Olympic gold in Barcelona in 1992, and McDonald’s Tournament championship in Paris in 1997), as well as in the world of advertising, as among numerous products endorsed by Jordan, there were those immanent with American culture – Coca-Cola, McDonald’s, and Chevrolet. To use a simile, after Ervin “Magic” Johnson and Larry Bird retired in 1991 and 1992 respectively, Jordan was the only superpower left in the NBA, much like the USA, which in the 1990s was the only superpower in a world where the Soviet empire was no more, and China had not yet emerged as a superpower.

As the embodiment of the zeitgeist of late twentieth century America, Jordan’s success also exemplified “U.S. exploitation of the new information age” [LaFeber 1999, 13]. LaFeber begins his book with this statement:

[a]t the end of the twentieth century, Americans, their economy, and their culture seemed to dominate many parts of the globe. A basketball player who lived in Chicago, Michael Jordan, was arguably the most recognized and revered of those Americans to billions of people worldwide [LaFeber 1999, 27].

thus placing Jordan in the semiotic space of representing American culture of the era. However, to LaFeber, Jordan was the face of 1990s America not only due to his athletic achievements and charismatic personality; Jordan was also an

immensely profitable commodity in a society that, especially with the end of the Cold War, seemed to value profit, celebrity, and marketability above all else. He and Nike thus became post-Cold-War symbols—indeed phenomena—of American culture, American globalization, American marketing, American wealth, American-

headquartered media, American-based transnationals. Jordan and Nike were also becoming symbols for the sometime corruption of this Americanization, when its too often seamy underside contaminated its professed principles [LaFeber 1999, 128].

LaFeber, in referring to Jordan as a “commodity”, and an “image like the [Nike] Swoosh” [LaFeber 1999, 63], as well as observing that ““His Airness” ... and the Air Jordan shoe became one” [LaFeber 1999, 65] echoes Denzin’s description of Jordan as “The man who became a sign of himself” [in Andrews ed. 3]. Such immanence of the person and the sign poses a semiotic challenge as “[e]very attempt to establish what the referent of a sign is forces us to define the referent in terms of an abstract entity which moreover is only a cultural convention” [Eco 1976, 66]. In the case of Jordan, the referent of “Jordan” is both, a real person and an abstract identity whose cultural meanings are the result of Jordan’s athletic accomplishments as well as the “aggressive promotion” [Kellner in Andrews ed. 45] of Jordan as an endorser and a commodity in one. Therefore, while as a person Jordan could be perceived as many things: a champion, a prominent African American, an American success story, an arrogant and tyrannical teammate, a business-owner, a philanthropist, etc., as a brand (or sign), he is at the core of the Jordan Brand (Nike’s subsidiary), both physically as the face and the logo of the brand, and as the brand’s representation of abstract values and cultural identity.

Mark Aronoff’s account of how he “first looked at brand names in general and discovered very little in the way of meaning, finding instead that brand names are words which are owned by individuals” [Aronoff 1981, 339], on the one hand, applies to the Jordan Brand, which obtained its name from one Michael Jordan (although the word is *de facto* owned by Nike). However, on the other hand, the immanence of Michael Jordan and the Jordan Brand turns the name into a signifier of values and meanings which Michael Jordan stood for as an active NBA player and an American icon.

When discussing car names (i.e. brands), Aronoff makes the claim that:

First and most important, car names are not proper names, but rather common nouns. This can easily be shown by the fact that they readily allow determiners and adjectives:

- (1) a blue Chevrolet
two big Cadillacs

In addition, they exhibit the characteristically English peculiarity [Levi 1978] of appearing as attributives:

- (2) a pink Cadillac coupe
a Chevrolet Impala sedan [Aronoff 1981, 331],

which is also true in the case of the player-shoes immanence. In the sentence “The player laced up his brand new Jordans and went out and played,” determiners and adjectives are allowed, and in “This season Russel Westbrook

is playing in his new model of Air Jordan sneakers” an attributive is present. In both sentences, “Jordan(s)” signifies a pair of basketball shoes and the only manner in which the word relates to the person is by means of association. Since the Jordan Brand is immanent with Michael Jordan, so are the brand’s semiotic meanings. In the market of basketball sneakers and apparel, the Jordan Brand represents athletic performance, endurance, dominance and innovation as well as being chic, cool, trendy and yet classic (or vintage), and fashionable – everything that Michael Jordan has stood for in basketball. Moreover, Jordan’s basketball superiority (to his contemporary rivals, and, as some would have it, to any other basketball player ever) is incorporated into the Jordan Brand, whose basketball shoes are worn by a selected group of players and whose price is higher than the average price of Nike shoes. Air Jordans are to Nikes as Maybach is to Mercedes – a luxury line of the finest quality.

Jordan himself was, and still is, a brand whose marketing potential has been valued in millions of dollars and whose advertising power was frequently employed by other companies to sell their products on the simple premise that if Jordan, for example, drinks Gatorade, then the soft drink must be good. Gatorade was actually, next to Nike, the brand that not only used Jordan’s marketing power but, in fact elevated his brand by highlighting his role model status in the now classic “Be like Mike. Drink Gatorade” commercial spot [Bigwayne84 2006] in which Jordan leisurely plays basketball and drinks Gatorade. This commercial, featuring a catchy song whose lyrics went “Sometimes I dream that he is me ... Like Mike, if I could be like Mike...” [Bernie Pitzel – *Be Like Mike* 1992], was so popular and impactful that in the mass consciousness the “Drink Gatorade” part of the slogan was dropped and “Be like Mike” became a life philosophy of hard-work and dreams of success (a.k.a. the American Dream) and a call to teenagers dreaming of careers as pro-athletes. The “Be Like Mike” commercial epitomizes what Łukasz Muniowski sees as the “brand myth” of Michael Jordan, whom Muniowski sees as “the only athlete who reached mythical status in the anthropological as well as in the brand sense” [Muniowski 2019, 5]. In Muniowski’s view, brand myths permeate cultures rooted in capitalism and provide meaning for a price (5). Therefore, Jordan is a commodity, which semiotically “still gives meaning to human life as it provides it with a sort of ritual action, practiced through watching the mythical hero perform and buying the merchandise he promotes” [Muniowski 2019, 5].

Semiotics of Mercedes-Benz

As observed by Roland Barthes, “cars today are ... the supreme creation of an era, conceived with passion by unknown artists, and consumed in image if not in usage by a whole population which appropriates them as a purely magical object” [Barthes 1991, 88]. Barthes’s observation on modern cars, which he based on the 1960-70s Citroen DS car still applies to cars manufactured by Mercedes. The Mercedes-Benz brand, much like the Jordan Brand, relies on its own brand myth to produce the semiotic connotations of prestige, professionalism, innovation, and reliability and sell their cars as purely magical objects. Like most car companies, and unlike brands specializing exclusively in luxury cars (Rolls Royce, Bugatti, etc.), over the years the company released different models of its vehicles of diverse purposes, body lines, and sizes, from trucks and vans through buses and sports models, to family sedans and limousines. Regardless of the company’s rich portfolio, semiotically, the brand is definitely more in line with Aston Martin than Honda Civic.

As observed by Aronoff: “[t]he only property which is constant, besides the name, is the position which the car occupies in the field. That is why position in the field is so important in the semantics of automobiles” [Aronoff 1981, 338]. Mercedes-Benz’s position is that of a top shelf in the car market, which is especially visible when juxtaposed with the company’s competitor from its home, German market – Volkswagen. In Aronoff’s ranking of car makes according to their price, VW is lower- to mid-priced, while Mercedes is above mid-priced, on the verge of luxury [Aronoff 1981, 333]. The differences in price ranges between the two makes stem from technical specification as well as from brand connotations. As Aronoff points out:

price category ... is a comparative scale or ranking, not an absolute one: the fact that Chevrolet is lower-priced does not mean that all Chevrolets will be less expensive than all Pontiacs; it means rather that a given Chevrolet will be less expensive than a comparably equipped Pontiac, and so on up the line. ... It follows that the price ranking is related to prestige. One reason why a person buys a Pontiac rather than a similarly equipped Chevrolet is that the Pontiac carries more prestige. The higher the category, the greater the prestige [Aronoff 1981, 333].

The Chevrolet-Pontiac comparison used by Aronoff, may as well be applied to Volkswagen and Mercedes. Therefore, semiotically, while Volkswagen literally stands for “car for the people” and is associated with masses of working-class drivers, Mercedes has been associated with upper class executives and professionals. As observed by Jing and Yan in their study of Mercedes’s application of signs in creative technology design, “[a]s an innovative automobile brand, it [Mercedes] leads and represents the unique symbol image of high-quality automobiles” [Jing, Yan 2021, 1] and “Mercedes-benz leads the German car elegant, high-performance brand image” [Jing, Yan 2021, 4].

Their observations are supported by those of Aronoff, who approaches car brands as cultural concepts:

With cultural concepts, there is a closer tie between sense and reference than there is for natural kinds, and the nature of the tie is different. For example, Cadillacs are luxury cars. This is in part a referential fact which we could discover if we knew nothing about the sense of the term Cadillac. But why are there no economy model Cadillacs, with rubber floor mats and manual transmissions? Because of the sense of the word. Thus, the sense of Cadillac influences the nature of Cadillacs [Aronoff 1981, 346].

Again, Aronoff's example of Cadillac applies to Mercedes as well; even though the company sells economy models, the semiotic meaning of the brand still results in them being perceived as top shelf cars for wealthier members of society. Even Mercedes's car design reflects the company's image of luxury and prestige. While BMW "using strong shapes and dynamic forms ... clearly communicate BMW's values of performance and power" [Wilson, Haładewicz-Grzelak 2015, 9], Mercedes' large and limo-like bodies, rounded shapes and smooth lines communicate comfort and a sense of significance as "smoothness is always an attribute of perfection because its opposite reveals a technical and typically human operation of assembling" [Barthes 1991, 88]. Moreover, by applying the symbol design into the product design, Mercedes creators directly or indirectly shape and maintain the company's image [Jing, Yan 2021, 1]. Mercedes's designers and engineers make use of "the appearance design of products as an important means to show the basic functions, express the original intention of design, highlight the value of products and flout the brand concept" [Jing, Yan 2021, 4]. These professionals "[t]hrough research and analysis ... integrate lines, colors and local details, logos that represent brand characteristics into the appearance of the product" [Jing, Yan 2021, 4], which, in turn, allows:

Mercedes Benz ... [to] always take a leading position in the competitive world market environment, because it has the core symbol of the brand (visual identification function, form, language, etc.). With the change of the environment, regardless of the evolution and innovation of product appearance, the modeling symbols of these core products have never been abandoned, and have played an important role in the "product family gene" for a long time [Jing, Yan 2021, 4].

Jing and Yan's observations echo those of Barthes's comments on the Citroen DS car. Much like Citroen, Mercedes is not merely a machine but is "more spiritual and more objectlike, ... and more homely" [Barthes 1991, 89], and the Mercedes brand cars signify "comfort rather than performance" thus "[o]ne is obviously turning from an alchemy of speed to a relish in driving" [Barthes 1991, 89].

Semiotics of Jordan's 1996 V12 Mercedes S600 Lorinser

It can be argued that Mercedes-Benz was a pioneering brand in the sense that, while it retained its upper-class image, it managed to sell to [the] mass customer. For example, its CLA class sedan model, while cheaper than S or C class sedans, and aimed at middle-class drivers, still offers a relative level of “[e]legance and authenticity through engineering excellence” [Anonymous 2013], for which the brand is known. In this respect Mercedes is much like the Air Jordan brand – mass-sold basketball (and not only) sneakers of a cultural value higher than that of “regular” Nikes. The two brands are also semiotically similar given the fact that Jordan was a pioneering figure in American marketing of the 1980s, who broke an “unwritten, but acknowledged, rule among advertisers ... that black players’ endorsements did not sell products” [LaFeber 1999, 45].

There is actually a number of similarities between the brands of Jordan and Mercedes. Both brands are associated with luxury which encompasses “scarce products with an objective or symbolic extra value, with a higher standard of quality, and with a higher price than comparable products” [Mortelmans in Wilson, Haładewicz-Grzelak 2015, 5] and “those products that have a sign value on top of (or in substitution of) their functional or economical meaning” [Mortelmans in Wilson, Haładewicz-Grzelak 2015, 5]. Both Air Jordans and Mercedes are famous for using high quality materials, and their symbolic value translates to economic added value expressed in a higher price than comparable products. Also, both entities (the person and the company) behind the brands have had their share of bad press – Jordan was accused of having gambling problems and being politically insensitive, and Mercedes-Benz wishes their collaboration with the rulers of Nazi Germany was forgotten. The bad press could translate into problems for both brands, e.g., affect said brands’ sales numbers, but, in fact, it has not.

In terms of the semiotic meanings of Jordan and Mercedes combined, the S600 Lorinser, which once belonged to Michael Jordan, carries the messages of greatness, reliability, and class. However, the 1996 model can no longer be seen as a semiotic symbol of innovation and technological excellence; therefore its value (well exceeding the market value of the model in 2020) needs to be derived only through the prism of association with Michael Jordan, and the fact that the superstar of basketball used to drive the car in question. It is the fact that Jordan was once the owner of this car that shifts the car’s economic value from a second-hand and somewhat outdated car to the cultural value of a memorabilia item marked by the greatness of its previous owner. Given the above, the S600 Lorinser in question is similar to a pair of vintage Air Jordans; not, however, the regularly released renditions of e.g. Air Jordan 3s

which are replicas of the shoes worn by Jordan in the 1987-88 season, but a pair of Air Jordans which Jordan actually wore in a game, such as the Air Jordan 1s worn by Jordan for the 1985 exhibition game in Trieste, Italy, and sold for \$615,000 at a Christie's auction [Boren 2020]. Quite remarkably, the worn-out sneakers reached a price higher than the Lorinser in question by a margin of \$400,000, which can only be explained by the fact that the sneakers are semiotically associated with Michael Jordan to a higher degree than the Mercedes car which appeared in the *The Last Dance* documentary only for a brief moment.

The Last Dance premiered in April 2020; the Beverly Hills Car Club put the Mercedes car in question up for auction in August 2020. Given that the auction lasted only ten days and managed to attract "177 bids before Sunday's sale. For reference, that S600 sale price is just shy of the \$204K you'd need for a brand new Porsche 911 Turbo S" [Schrader 2020] before the final bid of \$202,200, it is safe to say that the eBay auction of Jordan's Mercedes was the aftermath of the car being featured in the *Last Dance* miniseries, which premiered four months before the internet auction. The question is what motivated the seller and, more importantly, the buyer of the car in question. Since the seller is known to be the Beverly Hills Car Club, a Los Angeles based car dealer specializing in classic cars, their motivation is obvious – it is their business. The buyer, on the other hand, remains anonymous, therefore it is only possible to speculate on their motivation.

The timing of the eBay auction in question and *The Last Dance* which boosted the sales of Air Jordan sneakers and enhanced demand for Jordan memorabilia allows us to look at the Lorinser auction as the outcome of yet another example of documentary-inspired nostalgia. As observed by Sean Gammon and Gregory Ramshaw:

sport can serve as a rich source of collective nostalgia: creating important and memorable life moments that can be experienced both by fans and an entire nation.

Producers of films and documentaries are all too aware of the appeal of nostalgically delivered stories that hark back to the 'golden age' of a sport, player, event or team [Gammon, Ramshaw 2013, 204-205].

If the 1990s were the "golden age" of the NBA, it was because basketball (sport) was played by Michael Jordan (player), who, led the Chicago Bulls (team) to six championships (event) that decade. The producers of *The Last Dance* certainly looked at their subject matter in this manner as the docuseries portrays Jordan's feats as some of the most extraordinary moments in sports history. *The Last Dance* met with critical acclaim and, in 2020 and 2021, won: the Primetime Emmy Award, AAFCA TV Honors, Black Reel Award for Television, NAACP Image Award, OFTA Television Award, PGA Award, and TCA Award – all for outstanding documentary series [IMDb]. The series was also highly popular in terms of viewership as, when released in April 2020

by ESPN in the USA, the series averaged “5.8 million viewers across premieres of its first six episodes, which is 62% more viewers than the next-closest documentary debut on ESPN (“You Don’t Know Bo” in 2012)” [NBA online], and on Netflix (released at the same time, outside the US); the documentary was watched by approximately 37,600,000 in the first month of its streaming [Moore 2021]. Given the above, it is fair to assume that nostalgia factored in the timing of the eBay auction of Jordan’s Lorinser.

Another aspect of the timing when the car was sold is the fact that it happened in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemics, i.e., at the period of weakened economy and growing unemployment. According to a report from September 2020 by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, during the coronavirus outbreak 46% of American households faced serious financial problems, which included loss of savings, and inability to pay bills and mortgages. Moreover, in 46% of the households, an adult either lost their source of income or had their income reduced [2021, 2]. These statistics not only illustrate the difficult financial situation of an average American household, but also subtly signal the growing disproportion between the wealthy and the poor. In other words, while nearly half of American households were struggling financially due to job or income losses, there were also those who were not affected by the pandemic-induced financial crisis, and who could afford to spend \$200,000 they had “spare” on somewhat frivolous purchases of memorabilia. If that was the case, then Jordan’s once-owned Mercedes S600 Lorinser was, to paraphrase Barthes, totally prostituted and appropriated to actualize “the very essence of petit-bourgeois advancement” [Barthes 1991, 90] by depriving it of any functional value and highlighting its symbolic value. Naturally, it is possible to look at the purchase of Jordan’s Lorinser as a practical purchase of a car which was meant to be driven, or as an investment, much like trading cards or autographed sneakers, although both options seem unlikely as the \$200,000 car is outdated by 2020 standards and it had not been serviced since 2011 [Gorgan 2021] and its current market value of between \$4,500 and \$11,000 [American Collectors Insurance online] is nowhere near the car’s sentimental and semantic value, which stems only from the car’s connection to Michael Jordan. In this context, Jordan’s Mercedes symbolizes the disparity between the *la dolce vita* of the “haves” and the struggles of the “have-nots.” However, there is also another reason why the purchase of Jordan’s Lorinser should not be viewed as an investment; the reason being the fact that it was not actually purchased by the eBay auction buyer, which causes a shift in the semiotics of the car.

“[C]ars are cultural objects and change fairly rapidly” [Aronoff 1981, 346] and so did the story of Michael Jordan’s S600 Lorinser as it did not have its climax in the 2020 eBay auction, thus its semiotics shifted. As reported by autoevolutio.com, the buyer of the said Mercedes did not actually purchase the car once owned by Jordan. The website cites the statement by the Beverly

Hills Car Club, which reads, “the winner [of the auction] failed to raise the necessary amount of cash in due time”, thus the car is being auctioned again, however, it has not yet found a buyer. The fact that the original buyer of the car “failed to raise the necessary amount of cash” [Gorgan 2021] implies that either: a) the purchase was impulsive and not thought through, or b) the buyer, while certain of their financial position at the moment of the purchase, might have lost the financial liquidity, perhaps, as a result of the economic slump caused by the COVID-19 pandemics or for other reasons. Although the new asking price is still the hefty sum of \$159,500 [All Auto Network], it seems that the car, in March 2021, is not as desirable as it was in August 2020. The fact that the car in question has not found a new buyer can be hypothesized to be a result of either miscommunication – the hypothetical new buyer does not realize that the car is still for sale; the uncertain economic situation, which discourages potential buyers from risky investments and, even more so, from making frivolous purchases typical of nostalgia-fueled, die-hard fans; or simply due to the fact that, by the standards of contemporary culture of rapidly changing reality, *The Last Dance* was a long time ago and it no longer inspires behavioral reactions. The narrative shift in the story of Michael Jordan’s Lorinser purchase, or rather the lack of it, results in a shift of its semiotic meaning as it is possible, after applying socio-economic interpretation, to see the car as a symbol of the uncertain reality of the times of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which impractical investments in memorabilia were just one element of reality which was put on hold.

Conclusions

As demonstrated, the immanence of Michael Jordan and the Jordan brand resulted in the Jordan brand myth, and since myth is depoliticized speech [Barthes 1991, 142], semiotically, “Jordan” stands for perfection, high-level performance, dominance, success, style, grace, and greatness. Similarly, the brand myth of Mercedes attaches to the brand the semiotic meanings of reliability, luxury, professionalism, comfort, and high social status. In Marxist terms, both “Jordan” and “Mercedes” function as commodities which are social identity markers, and in the culture of commodity fetishism, they both offer the mark of prestige. The story of Michael Jordan’s 1996 V12 Mercedes S600 Lorinser provides polysemic messages of prestige and demand for collectibles stemming from nostalgia and sentimentality, as well as economic disparity, and the unstable reality of the world in the times of pandemics. Nevertheless, in the *Last Dance* and the subsequent eBay auction, the brands of Jordan and Mercedes ultimately came together, and, despite the contextually conditioned semiotic meanings of Michael Jordan’s Mercedes, what was revealed is how much the semiotics of these two are semantically alike.

However, their similarity is not reflected in the sales figures of the two brands, which, symbolically, reflects the instability of the Coronavirus pandemic era. The Jordan Brand did well in the time of the pandemic as its sales increased by 54% in 2020 compared to 2019 [Richter 2021], to which the *Last Dance*-reawakened interest in the brand, as well as the man behind the brand, has contributed to a degree. During the same period, Mercedes-Benz's sales dropped from 2.8 million units sold in 2019 to 2.46 million in 2020 [Wagner 2021]. Despite its sales going down by 3%, the Mercedes-Benz brand still retains a strong position among car brands with its brand value second to only Toyota and, depending on the source, Tesla [Guthrie 2020; BBC 2020]. Given the semiotic similarity between Jordan and Mercedes, the only question that remains is a linguistic one: are Air Jordans the Mercedes of basketball sneakers or is Mercedes the Michael Jordan of cars?

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