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THE END OF THE SHOCK OF THE NEW

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THE END OF THE SHOCK OF THE NEW

Abstract

'Shock' advertising is the new black. Whether discussing reproduction in graphic detail with children, joyously dismantling chastity, or merely fucking with fuck, it seems that traditional mores can no longer remain virgin territory, unsullied by rapacious marketing. Our mediated experiences of reaching 'extremes', it now appears, are not paralysing, mesmerising, fascinating or inspiring but simply a further prod down the path leading to (gleeful) purchase. And, of course, we get the joke. Not for us any melancholic nostalgia bemoaning the loss of what once was meaningful. Shopping and Fucking will do.

But here lies the rub - where then is the shock, where then is the new when even the shock of the new is seemingly lost? In this paper we explore how, via a series of semiotic reversals, the new, the strange, the unfamiliar and the would-be shocking are rendered banal and thus thoroughly comprehensible through brand association and the endless re-iteration of existing works.

The exhibit above is inspired by one of the T shirts available at http://www.burningtshirt.com/tshirts/funny/same-fcuking-joke-and-its-not-even-funny.php (accessed 24th November 2005).

> The levelling of objects to that of money reduces the subjective interest first in their specific qualities and then, as a further consequence, in the objects themselves. The production of cheap trash is, as it were, the vengeance of the objects for the fact that they have been ousted from the focal point of interest by a merely indifferent means. … Money thoroughly destroys that self-respect that characterises the distinguished person and becomes embedded in certain objects and their appreciation; it forces an extraneous standard upon things, a standard that is quite alien to distinction. By arranging things in a series in which only quantitative differences are valid it deprives them, on the one hand, of their difference and distance of one from another and on the other of the right to reject any relationship or any qualification by comparison with others – these are precisely the two factors whose combination determines the peculiar ideal of distinction. (Simmel, 2004: 394)

Advertising The New

In our exploration of the new we delve into that arena in which the newness of the new strives hardest to be heard, the arena of advertising. More specifically we address that form of advertising in which novelty expresses itself with perhaps the greatest immediacy, that of the shock. For it seems to us, that the shock is ubiquitous, and thus no longer shocking. And, by extension, similarly, that the new is perhaps no longer as new as it might once have been. The shocking and the new exist together in a curious relationship that we interrogate in what follows. We thus explore not only shock advertising but also the role of both the new and the shock in the history of art. For it is in the relationship of art to advertising that we perhaps witness most clearly the shocking fate of the new in a world in which it is so ubiquitous that it can no longer be shocking.

And what could be a better place to start than with what we might see as both the most pervasive and hence least shocking deployments of shock of recent advertising times? That fcuking joke of French Connection's.

Fcuk The System

Just one more time: that fucking joke is no longer funny. Was it ever, now we're faced with its omnipresence: 'fcuk fashion', 'fcuk fear', 'fcuk football', 'cool as fcuk', 'too drunk too fcuk' and 'fcuk it'? It's no longer even shocking, but perhaps it never was. It even seems to have

become an embarrassment to its owners, as French Connection re-asserts its own identity and quietly allows fcuk to fuck off and die. Too fcuked to shock perhaps. But what can this recent departure tell us about the *value* of the shock?

Well, the value for the advertiser is perhaps easiest to spot. As Fred Botting (2004) makes clear in his insightful essay, *Fcuk Speed*:

> The brashness of the campaign, in repeatedly enjoining a misreading of fcuk, occupies that genre of irreverent advertising pioneered by Benetton and later by Levis, with aims of shocking the public, causing controversy and gaining valuable—and free—column inches of advertising in order to present an image bound up with associations of rebellion, freedom, and an attitude of defiance towards rules and conventions. (40)

French Connection confirm this in their own case study of themselves (available at http://www.fcuk.com/fcukadvertising, accessed 24th November 2005) which analyses the success of their thirteen advertising campaigns between 1997 and 2003 in terms of sales increase, profit increase *and* number of complaints to the Advertising Standards Authority. Marketing may indeed shock and cause offence and this is clearly an objective of French Connection – but not always for the simple reasons that Trevor Beattie and the other gurus behind the campaign seem to envisage. It may be a joke – but it's not the obvious one based around poking fun at outdated, wearisome moral codes. Fuck itself, let alone its banal derivative, is already a commonplace – nowadays 'taboos against the F-word are weaker than ever' (Scheidlower, 1999: xi). Indeed even this lack of shock at what would be shocking is not itself particularly new: Scheidlower tells of how a reviewer of the then new Random House dictionary in 1966 complained about the omission of 'fuck': 'a stupid prudery has prevented the inclusion of probably the most widely-used word in the English language'. (Scheidlower 1999: xxv). Thus the suggestions of rebellion and defiance are ambiguous at best since, following Botting (2004), it is not at all clear whether the wearer is an irreverent rebel or an acquiescent follower of corporate fashion.

Now, of course, the *shock of the new* is itself something of a brand, and an increasingly tired brand at that. The phrase was used most famously by the art critic and historian Robert Hughes and first came to wide attention in 1980. And even then it was already tired. It was taken from the title of a book by Ian Dunlop, published eight years before Hughes adopted it,

with suitable acknowledgement, as the title of his own book and BBC television series. Hughes used the phrase to indicate his broad thesis concerning the history of modern art and architecture: that the aesthetic products of the modern age was shocking and new and bore these marks as testimony to and/or critique of the shock of the new age in which they were produced. Thus, when we consider the question of whether a manufactured statement of rebellion is one that is unique to, or merely prevalent in, marketing (and particularly its shock troops of advertising), it is clear that for Hughes at least, it is not.

Our diversion from the fcuk campaign to art history is deliberate and is premised on the understanding that we can understand what's happening in advertising by looking at the history of art, and in particular the history of the *avant-garde*. In turn, this gives an insight into wider phenomena and, specifically, into the notion of the new. Following Hughes, we see the *avant-garde* as an essential part of modernity, in so far as modernity is about celebrating innovation, novelty, change, etc. While the Renaissance may have provided the artistic foundations and the Enlightenment the philosophical scaffolding, modernity's endemic restlessness was perhaps only properly recognised in the mid-nineteenth century. Tellingly, Marx presented his iconic insight that 'all that is solid melts into air' around this time, and the origin of the artistic *avant-garde* can be traced to the same period. The birth of the *avant-garde* is usually fixed at May 17, 1863 when a group of painters, whose work was rejected by the annual Paris Salon of officially sanctioned art, opened the Salon des Refusés in Paris. Gustave Corbet (1819-77) is commonly identified as the first representative *avant-garde* painter, or painter against the system, and in the historical record he is followed by a catalogue of artists that includes, *inter alios*, Duchamp (1887-1968), Warhol (1928-1987), Koons (1955-), and Hirst (1965-). What links these and others in the *avant-garde* is their shared attempt to be so utterly novel as to shock, which necessarily positioned them as artists against the discourse within which they were embedded.

Up until at least the 1930s, there was a strong belief that painting and sculpture were potent forms of social critique and that radical art and radical politics were deeply interconnected. Gradually, however, these beliefs began to unravel. One reason was because the *avant-garde* ultimately turned art in on itself, corroding the essential understanding of what art is or was. Perhaps the most famous illustration of this development occurred in 1917 when Duchamp exhibited a urinal, to which he gave the title 'Fountain'. The shock value of the piece was strong, and it was certainly novel, as it starkly addressed a profound question about the

essence of art: if a urinal is art, then everything is art and if everything is art then nothing is art. The dilemma for the *avant-garde*, however, is that this is a single-shot shock tactic. Another urinal, or a dead pig's head, or a cardboard box can be exhibited to make the same point, but such subsequent pieces will be neither shocking nor new. More importantly for our purposes, in seeking to fundamentally undermine the domain of art the *avant-garde* also axiomatically undermines the idea of the *avant-garde* itself, since the *avant-garde* is a derivative concept that depends for its existence on a primary concept – the idea that art must be understood in a teleological structure, where new and old make sense.

In time, this also undermined the traditional distinction between the value of art and the price of art. As art took to the market, where its value was determined by how much cash it could be transubstantiated into, money, as Simmel (2004) so perceptively observed, forced upon it 'a standard that is quiet alien to distinction' (394). Of course artists in the tradition of the *avant-garde* sought to rebel against this trend, in keeping with their *raison d'être*. Some sought to produce work that could not be not be sold and/or work in which saleability and its consequences for the conceptualisation of art become key subject matter. Perhaps the most notable example of this was Lichtenstein (1923-97) who, in the early sixties, tried to paint a picture so ugly that nobody would hang it, much less buy it. He was, needless to say, spectacularly unsuccessful (or perhaps spectacularly successful).

For the philosopher and art critic, Arthur Danto, the consequence of this is that art (or more specifically art history) has come to an end.

> In our narrative, at first only mimesis was art, then several things were art but each tried to extinguish its competitors, and then, finally, it became apparent that there were no stylistic or philosophical constraints. There is no special way works of art have to be. And that is the present and, I should say, the final moment in the master narrative. It is the end of the story. (Danto 1997:47)

Danto's point (and a similar point has been made by Belting (1987) and Kuspit (2004)) is that there is no longer a progressive master narrative – i.e. no concept of the new or the old – within which art can be situated. Danto sets 1963, precisely 100 years after the advent of the *avant-garde*, as the end point of the story; the end not of art, but the end of the idea of the new in art.

Where then lies the space for recognition of the new and the shock that announces its

newness? And more particularly for our theme here, how can *packaged* rebellion, no matter how well it sells, retain sufficient sense of a real war on a pressing moral code to exceed its mere packaging? Certainly, the pastiches of rebellion that seemingly make up much voguish British Art, and attend to its contemporary rich and tasteless benefactors, suggest that this benign pattern can still find a place in galleries. Even perhaps the last great shock in music – punk rock – soon became an exercise in turning rebellion into money (most adroitly, as ever, announced by John Lydon on the Sex Pistols reunion concert, 'We're fat, we're forty and we're back for the money') and latter-day rock rebels (leaving aside the shambling icons of earlier generations) now brag about their fetishistic accumulation of consumer desirables (Rehn & Sköld, 2003). It would seem that rebellion has always been a profitable area to exploit, but does its commercialisation tell the whole story of its pacification? Wherein, then, the shock? What is the relationship between novelty and commerce? Can the new stay new when it is offered for sale?

Fcuk Art. Fcuk Advertising. Fcuk Rebellion. Fcuk The New

The 'desiderata of Pop art' (according to Hamilton (1957), cited in Hughes 1980: 344), of which of course Lichtenstein was a prime exponent, were that it should be:

> Popular (designed for a mass audience)
> Transient (short-term solution)
> Expendable (easily forgotten)
> Low-cost
> Mass-produced
> Young (aimed at youth)
> Witty
> Sexy
> Gimmicky
> Glamorous
> Big Business…

The list is certainly provocative for those who would seek to defend the more classical notions of creativity that were smuggled in, and indeed celebrated with additional abandon, by early proponents of modern art. And that was precisely the (popular) point. By suggesting that even a small province of the kingdom of art could be one in which the desiderata above could be

valorised, a critique was enabled and mobilised of that whole kingdom. Such a list clearly blurs distinction between advertising and art (unsurprisingly, given the explicit connections Hamilton was making) and may as obviously serve as much as a template for advertising as for Pop Art and its endless copyists. The parallel trajectories of both art and advertising seemingly reflect this. For even when we attempt to force the distinction between the two – as Hughes often does – we find them rushing back together for commerce is at centre-stage in both plots. Consider, in particular, the example of Warhol – for many the epitome of consumer art – an example that Hughes grudgingly renders as important. Because, perhaps if only because, it exposes the 'evil' that lies behind advertising and 'the signs to command' that it employs:

> Warhol's work in the early sixties was a baleful mimicry of advertising, without the gloss. It was about the way advertising promises that the same pap with different labels will give you special, unrepeatable gratifications. Advertising flatters people that they have something in common with artists; the consumer is rare, discriminating, a connoisseur of sensation. If Warhol was once subversive – and in the early sixties he was – it was because he inverted the process on which successful advertising depends, becoming a famous artist who loved nothing but banality and sameness. Nothing would be left in the sphere of art except its use as a container for celebrity, and at one stroke (although it took the art world some time to realise it) the idea of the *avant-garde* was consigned to its social parody, the world of fashion, promotion, and commercial manipulation: a new model artwork every ten minutes. *I want to be a machine*: to print, to repeat, repetitiously to bring forth novelties. (1980: 348)

Rebellion here is rendered vacuous and ripe for exploitation but not only here. Such a cutting contribution also witnesses the beginning of the subsumption of the *avant-garde* in its entirety to that which it would stand against. For Warhol's critique is of both art and commerce. Through the techniques it so artfully and viciously deploys and via its mimicry it revels in becoming part of the system from which art traditionally sought to stand apart. It delighted in becoming a mere adjunct to the production process. In this it is brutal in its baleful honesty. For art, let alone advertising, there can no longer be margins from which to stand loftily aside. Rebellion, anti-fashion, anti-art. All has become Empirically subsumed.

According to Hughes, an artist such as Warhol can subversively critique advertising and

indeed art itself, but because advertising has at best a parasitic relationship with art this carries with it all the dangers that parasitic relationships entail. Dangers that are all the more pronounced when, through the critique, the parasite attacks the host. For, as Hughes himself is forced to admit, once we move within 'a culture of mass-communication art can only survive in two ways: by stealth or by living in those game parks we call museums' (354). And Pop Art particularly, that death knell of traditional conceptions of the purity and difference of the artistic, 'could not survive outside the museum, since contact with a message-packed environment at once trivialised it […] On the street, real mass culture would simply have crushed its ironizing cousin.' (354).

What is interesting is that 'real mass culture' – as epitomised by advertising – is subject to much the same problematic processes that drove and consumed the idea of the *avant-garde* in art. Here we draw on Holt's (2002) chronology on the history of advertising and branding, which he sees as being dialectically intertwined with the evolution of consumer culture. Holt's story begins in first few decades of the twentieth century, when advertising was centred on either (a) educating the customer about the product's basic value proposition, technical details, and the manufacturer's credibility, or (b) inflating product claims on the premise that the customer was a gullible dupe. This model was replaced, from about the 1920s onwards, with the 'modern branding paradigm' wherein products and brands were seen as materially embodying people's social and moral ideals. Rather than focusing on a product's functional attributes, modern branding gurus sought to develop a brand 'image' that embodied psychological and social properties. Moreover, modern branding had a paternalistic dimension in so far as advertisers were selling a set of social values about the nature of the good life as much as any particular product. But by the 1950s, there was growing resistance to the cultural engineering implicit in modern branding, which many saw as antithetical to the philosophy of individualism. Thus, the modern branding paradigm, which was once advertising's *avant-garde*, eventually hit a cultural dead end. Consumers in the 1960s no longer accepted that the values of brands could be dictated by marketing fiat; instead they saw brands and their consumption as integral to individuated identity projects. This, for Holt, is what distinguishes postmodern from modern consumer culture. Moreover, the theme of his narrative is that consumer culture and branding have co-evolved in a dialectical relationship. New forms of advertising 'emerged in a *pas de deux* with the new postmodern consumer culture' (2002: 83). Creative marketers developed this postmodern branding paradigm, which was premised on the

idea that brands are not cultural blueprints but are instead resources for consumers to use in identity work. These creative marketers are very much branding's *avant-garde*. French Connection very much see themselves in the van of the *avant-garde* – 'our campaigns have always been about being one step ahead of the rest' (http://www.fcuk.com/fcukadvertising, consulted 24th November 2005) – but Holt gives us a more representative group (individuals like Bill Bernbach, George Lois, and Jerry Delia Famina, and agencies like Chiat Day and Wieden & Kennedy). These and others led the way in developing a palette of techniques that characterise postmodern branding. Holt distils the palette to four primary methods: the use of irony to distance a brand from the hype and conceit of conventional advertising; building a credible, ongoing relationship between a brand and a cultural epicentre, such as an arts or fashion community, a consumption community, urban culture, or an ethnic subculture; stealth branding (e.g. product placement); and engaging in brand authenticity work by connecting the brand with an authentic life-world so as to camouflage crass commercial intentions (here, the Harley Davidson Company is the pre-eminent example). The objective for these postmodern marketers is to ensure that consumers will use brands in identity work, which means they must be perceived to be authentic, that is 'original and disinterested' (Holt 2002: 85).

Brand New

And so we return to fcuk, perhaps the quintessential postmodern branding campaign. What postmodern consumer culture demands is ambiguity, irony, humour, authenticity, a bit of defiance, and yet a strong dose of conservativism. Fcuk has it all.

> The case of branding, fcuk in particular, is … exemplary: courting and curtailing censure (it's not an expletive but a brand name), coy and brazen, transgressive and banal, innocent and knowing, clever and vulgar, defiant and compliant, infantile and sophisticated, fashionable and against fashion, the perverse play calls up and disavows cultural limits at the same time. (Botting, 2004: 42)

The fcuk campaign is especially postmodern, in Holt's understanding of the term, in the way it enables and encourages consumers to reflexively use marketing resources in identity work through which they strive to deflect the perceived paternalism of corporations by constructing themselves, inter alia, as sovereign consumers. A nice example of this is the run of t-shirts with the *Father Ted* inspired logo (or anti-logo) 'fcek: the Irish connection'.

But Holt's story does not stop here. The problem for the postmodern branding paradigm is that it is beset by a host of postmodern contradictions that very much mirror the difficulties faced by the *avant-garde* in art. A handful of artists/advertisers can mock artistic/advertising conventions, but the irony soon becomes tired through simple repetition. Likewise, reflexive, media-literate consumers have become aware of – if not hostile to – branding's postmodern tricks. And there is limited scope for marketers to attach brands to authentic life-worlds, as these are limited in number and liable to be corroded precisely once perceived as colonised by branding.

End Game

What we have seen is that parallel processes are at work in the *avant-garde* – that is the articulation of the new – in art and advertising. Both face similar problematics. In reflecting on what our culture had lost that the *avant-garde* had in 1890, Hughes singled out 'above all the sense that art, in the most disinterested and noble way, could find the necessary metaphors by which a radically changing culture could be explained to its inhabitants' (1980: 10). Hughes, who attempts to maintain a distinction between art and advertising, laments the loss of disinterest in contemporary art which, tellingly, is precisely what Holt sees as a defining feature of postmodern (though not post-postmodern) marketing: 'To be authentic, brands must be *disinterested*; they must be perceived as invented and disseminated by parties without an instrumental economic agenda, by people who are intrinsically motivated by their inherent value' (Holt 2002: 83, emphasis added). But, as Holt himself maps out, this is unachievable because of the strategic interest that ultimately drives advertising. For in one crucial aspect, advertising *is* different from art. As bluntly put by Hite (1988), 'Techniques of art, layout, typography, radio and television productions and fine writing are important. Nevertheless, they are *secondary* to the basic selling proposition around which the ad or commercial is built' (1988: 206). Or, more succinctly (because one-liners *work*), 'Creative *without* strategy is called "art." Creative *with* strategy is called "advertising"' (Richards, 1995). And this 'strategy' is the antithesis of the disinterest that Hughes so valorises. It is also why the postmodern turn in advertising leads, ultimately, back to the same.

Having identified the limits of postmodern branding, Holt speculates what post-postmodern marketing/consumer culture dialectic might evolve, though his analysis at this point is vague and unconvincing. In place of postmodern marketing – which Holt sees as parasitic – Holt

holds the romantic hope that post-postmodern brands 'will become another form of expressive culture'. In other words, Art. But the history of the *avant-garde* would suggest otherwise.

In essence, the argument brings us back to the end of (the shock of) the new no matter what direction we take. On the one hand, if advertising is nothing more than AIDA (attention, interest, desire, action – which was first discussed in 1898 by Saint Elmo Lewis) then the postmodern turn is only a slight variation on a theme and the same model continues. On the other, if we see the postmodern as akin to an *avant-garde* advertising, then we'll get to the end of the new this way as well as this *avant-garde* will ultimately lead us to where the *avant-garde* in art got to – i.e. the end of the *avant-garde*, the end of the new. Or, more precisely, the end of a teleological narrative founded on concepts like the 'new' and the 'old' and from which the latter derive their ongoing meaning.

In this non-teleological world we have no future vision but live instead in the perpetual present. In this synchronic world, brands provide a potent basis for meaning since '[o]ur primary source of hope has shifted from religion, to art and science, and finally to consumption' (Belk 1996: 93). Advertising has taken on the mantle of progress:

> . . . in the absence of stronger illusions, the public needs to invest its dreams somewhere. Replacing other vendors of illusions that progress has dislodged from their traditional positions, advertising appears at the right time to fill the vacuum. (Brown 1995: 51)

Yet this 'paradise' is a 'mournful, monotonous and superficial' paradise (Baudrillard, 1989: 98): like the traffic on America's freeways, on road systems the world over, we are 'coming from nowhere, going nowhere' (1989: 125). We draw upon and use all of our resources, only to end up destroying 'metaphors, dreams, illusions and utopias by their absolute realization' (Baudrillard, 1994) and indeed, destroying also the possibility of the new.

The melancholic yearning for what has seemingly been lost, perhaps also present beneath Baudrillard's droll critique as well as the outraged responses to it (e.g. Norris, 1992), is what gives a lingering vestige of shock to fcuk – both in the advertisers' goals and in Botting's critique. The deeper malaise comes from the re-attachment of new meaning to copies of what has gone before, with the suggestion that this is a return to what is authentic. This is precisely what Holt pines for in post-postmodern branding, while Don Kuspit, in *The End of Art* (2004), expresses a similar hope that the 'New old masters' will displace the anti-aestheticism of postmodern art. And perhaps that is what we

have to look forward to: the 'new old'. But as always, practice is way ahead of this critique. For his recent (April 2005) New York show, Damien Hirst, formerly the media darling of the so-called Young British Artists, received crushingly damning reviews (see, for example, Arendt, 2005; Stevens, 2005; Salz, 2005). But it is not so much the virulence of critical response here that is of interest, rather that which provoked it. For Hirst's show, mimicking the output of Warhol's Factory, was largely constituted by 'photorealistic paintings… painted with the help of assistants under Hirst's direction' (Arendt, 2005), parading under romantic titles akin to those associated with the highest points of art's history. A series of copies of copies, bereft of clear origin, drawing upon, displaying, and in at least one possible reading positively eviscerating any simple glorification of, the authenticity of, anything approaching 'new old masters'.

The old 'new', by which we mean the shock of the new that was modernity, is no longer new. And there can be no simple return. Our new, if it is anything, is old.

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