Culture Contest

The Minerva judges have consulted and we decided to leave the culture contest open for another week.

This is the one that asks you to compare the cultural strategies of USA Networks and Showtime.

We had some very good entries but too few of them, hence the extension.

You can find the Culture Contest [here](#).

Ida Blankenship R.I.P.

Ida Blankenship died on Sunday. At her desk at the advertising agency Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce. She will be remembered as Don Draper’s secretary. As one her colleagues put, it “She died as she lived—surrounded by the people she answered phones for.”

The good news is that Ida is a fictional character. Her death was therefore a fictional event. No mourning is called for. Unless of course you had grown to love her contribution to *Mad Men*, as many of us had.

(It tells you how absolutely, effortlessly creative the *Mad Men* team is that they could kill off Ida so casually and so early. Most TV shows would thrill to have a character half as rich and funny. Having created her, they would have given her up only with the greatest reluctance. The *Mad Men* team evidence a certain arrogance. As if to say, “Oh, there are plenty more where she came from. She was easy as anything.”)

That Ida is a fictional character didn’t stop the *Daily Beast* from running a eulogy for her. Which is pretty charming. I think.

For starters, it plays out the *Mad Men* fiction. It pretends Ida Blankenship were the real thing. It’s a small act of cocreation.

But it’s more than cocreation. It’s witty. It attributes the honor given real humans to a pretend human. "Ah," we think, "clever."
Lots of wit has this quality. We take the properties of one thing and we assign them to another thing. When we say Roger, the family poodle, is considering an advance degree in ophthalmology, we suppose… Well for starters we are acting as if Roger has a first degree. This is a cultural act of transposition or relocation. We are moving cultural meanings around. We are reassigning them. (Witness relocation, kinda.)

We may also think of the Ida eulogy as simple play. It’s a little “what if.” As in, “what if we treated Ida is if she were a real person.” As in, “let’s act as if Roger isn’t a dog.” And this gets us a little closer to the mechanics of the transposition.

This movement of meanings is successful when it fails. If we attribute something to Roger that does work, “Roger is a good doggie woggie” for instance, it’s like “so?” It’s only when we say Roger is a) thinking, b) about an advanced degree, that we begin to get somewhere humor wise.

This cultural act is designed to make a small buzzer sound in our brain. It designed to forces us to say “that doesn’t go there. Roger is a dog.” It’s only when we think of Roger otherwise that it’s drole (drool?).

I’m surprised. Apparently, we don’t mind it when meanings are reassigned. Apparently, we actually quite like when culture is corrupted. (Well, not stupid people. Stupid people get confused and then they blame the rest of us for their confusion.) But the rest of the world, and that’s most of the world, love this kind of play.

Maybe this is just the kind of thing that bothers an anthropologist. (It is after all only linguists who do not groan at puns. They just fall into a reverential silence.) I guess when you spend your life looking at how we build culture up, there is something astonishing at looking at the pleasure we take when someone ever so briefly tears it down.

It could also be that I am writing this at 31,000 feet courtesy of American Airlines and Go Go In Flight. It’s the oxygen debt talking. But it is weird. No? Just me? Ok, it’s just me.

Acknowledgements

To Pam DeCesare for giving me the head’s up on the Daily Beast article.

To Randee Heller, the very gifted actress who helped invent Ida.

References


This entry was posted in Uncategorized and tagged Christopher Crocker, David Sapir, humor, Ida Blankenship, Mad Men, meaning, meaning movement, Pam DeCesare, Randee Heller, The Daily Beast, The Social Use of Metaphor, wit on September 22, 2010 by Grant.
The Steve Carell character is funny because he doesn’t “get it.” We can rely upon him to leap to the wrong conclusion. He’s “often wrong but never in doubt.”

There is something endearing about this guy. We wish we were as sure of anything as he is of everything. He may be a bull in the china shop of daily life, but he means so well we cannot fault him.

There is something flattering too. Because by this standard, we are all social virtuosos. We do get it. By the Carell standard, each of us is a genius.

But something more than intellectual slapstick going on. When the Carell character [hereafter, Carell] gets it wrong, he makes a small piece of our culture materialize before our eyes.

In Dinner for Schmucks, Carell states the obvious, “She’s talking to the lobster.” This is funny because a smarter person would know that the obvious "goes without saying."

When Paul Rudd is accused by a ventriloquist’s dummy of looking down her dress, Carell asks, “Tim–were you? God, don’t do that man.” We understand that this discipline of gaze, this new standard of male sensitivity, does not apply to an inanimate object, even an animated inanimate object. But Carell doesn’t quite see this. (The joke within the joke: is the dummy sufficiently animated that social rules do apply to her. But of course it’s a mute question because, this is the still deeper joke, this is really just dummies in conversation.)

Carell doesn’t grasp what the rest of us take for granted. In fact, he draws some of his humor from the fact that he is violating rules the rest of us obey but cannot see. And in this respect he acts as a kind of dowser. He can detect and to bring to the surface cultural rules otherwise invisible.

The Paul Rudd character in I Love You, Man is almost the perfect opposite. He couldn’t find cultural rules with both hands and a map, as they say. The humor of this movie turns on the fact that the Paul Rudd character [hereafter, Rudd] doesn’t understand how to act like a guy. Almost every male socialized in our culture gets “guyness.” Somehow Rudd just missed it.

What a splendid piece of anthropology. The movie acts of a catalog of the rules of maleness. Which is a way of saying that Rudd ends up drawing his comedy from the same well as Carrel, from the violating of cultural rules that govern the rest of us invisibly.

All comedy, with the possible exception of slap stick, toys with the expectations installed by culture. This is why the Billy Crystal character in Mr. Saturday Night is always saying, “Do you see what I did there?” He is asking the viewer to admire the intelligence with which he played a trick on our cultural expectations.

But it seems to be that the rise of this school of comedy marks a shift of some kind. I am not sure what to call this school. We could use the names of its leading directors: Judd Apatow, Jay Roach, John Hamburg or its stars: Steve Carrel and Paul Rudd. Or just call it culture comedy.

But the question is this: why culture comedy now? If I weren’t rushing to get to the airport and would have a go at it. I would be your grateful for thoughts and comments.

References


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Burberry’s Angela Ahrendts and the next generation

She listens intently. [She] has trained herself not to interrupt or seem rushed. Her eye contact never wavers, and while she insists she couldn’t function without her briefing folders, she never seems to need to look at them. [She] mixes folksy sincerity and laser focus [...] effortlessly. Unlike corporate chiefs who favor an inaccessible, imperial style, Ahrendts seems comfortable with dissent; her executives joke easily with her, and aren’t afraid to press their points.

This is the stuff of managerial grace, isn’t it? A boss who solicits staff opinion. A boss who listens well.

Listening is a good idea for lots of reasons. It is the signature of corporations in which information moves easily and well. It is the stuff of transparency which is one of the vital signs of the corporation (Bennis, Goldman, and O’Toole).

But listening well matters for Ahrendts especially because she is, as every CEO is, an exalted creature. She travels and lives in a well upholstered, carefully modulated world. Limos, corporate jets, luxurious homes and hotels.

This doesn’t matter much if you make electronic components, but it matters a lot when you are the CEO of a luxury brand. Burberry has survived aristocratic lows, licensing lows, and it will flourish now only if it learns to run the rapids of contemporary culture.

And the trouble is that there is some kid in Norway, or maybe it’s Cheng Du, working on music, software or a video that will help shift our culture. This kid is extremely hard to see from the deep comfort of a corporate limo.

Now, of course, Ahrendts is not without resources when it comes to staying in touch with culture. Christopher Bailey serves as her brilliant Chief Creative Officer. Her kids create and curate culture. She lives in the American heartland so there is no island (i.e., Manhattan) captivity to worry about. Burberry has experimented successfully with social media and cocreation. Plus, it sounds like Ahrendts can pick up the phone and call David Bowie any time she wants and that has to be quite a good thing.

The trouble is it’s not just that kid in Norway. The malls of America are a Petrie dish. At the moment they are nursing a new set of values. These values won’t matter directly to a luxury brand like Burberry, but they will matter indirectly and that’s the question in its fully difficulty. How will they matter? How will they concatenate into the world Burberry must master? America is having one of its periodic thinks on the ideas of fashion and luxury. This is hard to conger with from the inside the world of fashion and luxury (and a corporate limo).

And this is why it is so very critical that Ahrendts listens well. Because she is surrounded everyday by a small army of young people who are a little less cushioned and a little more connected. (It’s not perfect, but hey…as they say.) But this body of information, opinion and pattern recognition is only available if you are the kind of boss who invites people to insist on what they know. These kids are the aquifer out of which Ahrendts can and plainly does draw great things.

I believe it’s true that most corporations are a little less inclusive. Most corporations ignore the great stock of knowledge that generations X and Y bring to work every morning. Occasionally, from the precipice of a decision, someone will say, “run this down the hall and see what the intern thinks.” This is listening very badly indeed. I keep hoping that new generations will find a way to insist on their inclusion, that they will stage a palace coup if necessary. Indeed, I hoped Chief Culture Officer might serve as a rallying cry. But so far I’m not seeing any evidence of a fifth column. Just the noblesse oblige of a CEO listening well.

References


On the listening question, there’s a nice opportunity to compare Ahrendts’ style to that of another CEO in the garment industry. Here's how Paumgarten describes Mickey Drexler, the CEO of J. Crew.

*His inquisitions have an auctioneer’s temp and a depositional intensity, but they also project an ease that derives from the pleasure he seems to take in them, and the pleasure, albeit of a wary and poised kind, that his employees seem to take in him. Some combination of self-possession, insecurity, good humor, and good tailoring makes him approachable. His command of a room is sneaky; it is unexpectedly fortified by curiosity and self-effacement.*

References


Summer reading

Thursday, September 16th? Mid-September? Dark has fallen and it’s only 6:30. The year is dying. At least in New England.

It’s not too soon to look back on summer. The best parts of which are those books that hijack our vacation repose and turn us into the trembling enthusiast of a new idea. (Ideas do like to catch us napping.)

Two books in particular worked this way for me.

This is a smart and clarifying tour of the ideas that have transformed American business over the last 30 years or so. If you are part of what Florida calls the Creative Class, you really have to read this book. Not to do so is to obscure the forces that shape our world.

Every page you will find you thinking, “Really!” and you’ll think back to high flown rhetoric from the CEO you were working for, and say, “That’s what he was talking about!” Think of this as the “survival guide” or, if necessary, the “cheat sheet” for life in the American corporation.

I do realize that all the world is competing to cover Jonathan Franzen with glory. But have a look at this book and see if you don't think that it is Chabon who deserves the honor. Franzen's work is wonderful, but it is, to be fair, merely well observed and constructed. Chabon gives us something much more inventive. This is an act of the imagination from which an entire world springs. Franzen reworks his field notes. Chabon supplants our world with his own.

There is lots to admire, including a use of metaphor that really gave me a new understanding of what metaphor can do. But the thing that impressed me most was the way Chabon takes a relatively difficult "what if" (specifically, what if Israel closes shop in 1948 and its communities are transported to Sitka, Alaska) and makes it not just plausible but somehow accomplished fact. My wife now has to correct me, "Actually, I don’t think there are millions of Jews living in Alaska, dear."

After reading *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, you will swear otherwise.

References

For the Amazon page for Witch Doctors, click here.

For the Amazon page for Chabon’s book, click here.

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This entry was posted in Uncategorized and tagged Adrian Wooldridge, John Micklethwait, Jonathan Franzen, Michael Chabon, The Witch Doctors, Yiddish Policemen's Union on September 16, 2010 by Grant.

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**Calling all journalists (ok, some journalists)**

If you were 22, recently graduated from the college of your choice, and fizzing with literary talent, where would you be headed? Novels? Broadway? Off Broadway? Television?

Exactly. You would be headed for TV. This is where the action is. (Let me read the following programs into evidence:


TV is where people as vastly talented as Aaron Sorkin and David Milch now ply their trades. This is the Globe of the moment. This is our London in the 16th century. This is our Paris of the first half of the 20th century. LA is it.

A couple of days ago, when I was noting the sheer volume of good programs on TV, I failed to see there is no culture without structure. It just didn't occur to me that for Hollywood and Burbank to be turning out good TV, there has to be an influx of talent of every kind (writing, directing, acting, casting, etc.).

Hence my image, here, of Hurricane Fred. This is meant to represent talent being pulled from all directions into Los Angeles. (Yes, I know, Hurricane Fred had nothing to do with LA. Work with me.)

You say hurricane. I say virtuous cycle. The better TV gets, the more talented people come, and the better TV gets and the more talented people
come… and so on.

Which means at this very moment there has to be a 22 year old getting off the bus in LA preparing to make his or her fortune in this the great center of popular culture, make that American culture.

Which means that there is one whopping story to be written here for Rolling Stone or someone, the story of great talent pouring into a city now prepared, sometimes, to make it welcome. This means there are bars where aspiring writers meet to aspire. There have to be places in town where talent eddies. There has to be a whole lot of networking going on.

If I were not preoccupied with other things, (the proposal for the new book is as of this evening officially done. Publishers, start your engines), I would fly to LA and start an anthropological investigation of LA and its literary subcultures. So, I can’t. How about you?

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time colonies, time colonists: next new thing in marketing?

Until his death in 2000, Dennis Severs lived in London’s east-end in a house that had no running water, no electricity, no toilet, no shower, no toaster, no TV, no modern conveniences of any kind.

Mr. Severs had done his best to take up residence in the 18th century, and he and his butler managed a pretty good job of it.

You could tour Mr. Severs' house and as a limited version of time travel, it was a lot of fun. I got a closer to the 18th century, even if I never felt I was moving away very much from the present day.

Historical recreations like the one by Mr. Severs, Colonial Williamsburg and Upper Canada Village give us a vivid sense of difference. When I was at Upper Canada Village, one of the visitors asked one of the staff, "So what’s it like to live without a car?" The answer, "What’s a car?" gave everyone a nice little shock.

The question is this: how and how long would we have to live in a historical recreation to begin to lose touch with the present day in a useful way. Human beings are wonderfully adaptive. We begin to recalibrate immediately. A couple of hours and we are sliding out of many assumptions and arrangements. A couple of days, and we are well down the slippery slope and this close to Stockholm syndrome.

The reason this is useful for marketers is the shock of reentry. So much of good marketing is "getting our head out of the bucket" and "thinking outside the box" and otherwise relieving ourselves of the assumptions that prevent us from seeing what is "right before our eyes."

As Andy Grove puts it in his very interesting Only the Paranoid Survive:

“All business operate by some set of unstated rules and sometimes these rules change—often in very significant ways. Yet there is no flashing sign that heralds these rule changes. […] The trouble was, not only didn’t we realize that the rules had changed—what was worse, we didn’t know what rules we no had to abide by.”
Time travel really helps here. Spend a couple of days in the 18th century and we would be gifted with sight. Indeed, a couple of days in the 18th century would be worth its weight in ethnographies, focus groups and brain storms. Things would just become ever so clear. Grove's "unstated rules" wouldn't be unstated anymore.

Hurray for someone. There must be many people who would like to live in the 18th century or the 7th one for the matter. I mean, who wants to live in the real world? Most of us do it out of necessity and under protest. Or we could take turns staffing the past, on our vacations possibly. Every so often someone from the present day would come wondering in, clearly unclear on the rules in place. Patiently, we would ask her "what's a car?" and ever so gradually the visitor would begin to watch her unstated rules explode like overheated party balloons.

References


Next time:

Time colonies and travel for consumers.

(I am hoping I can pull this off. At the moment all I have is the new Arcade Fire album on the suburbs and their magnificently interesting website that let's us go home again. The album may be hackneyed but this website, Negro, please.

Here's the Arcade Fire http://thewildernessdowntown.com/

If you have other examples, for crying out loud, let me know. Press time approaches.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Anne Moscicki for the Arcade Fire reference and to Jenson Bennett for the Andy Grove reference.

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Can your DVR take it?
I have a friend who keeps two DVRs running day and night. She loves TV that much. I used to think this was one DVR too many. Now I see her point.


Then there’s the anthropological riches of Reality TV The Real Housewives, Project Runway, Wipeout, Ice Road Truckers, Jersey Shore, Deadliest Catch, Survivor, Big Brother, Amazing Race and American Idol

And now the new Fall season and lots of interesting newcomers: Terriers, Rubicon, The Big C, Boardwalk Empire.

So much for Newton Minow’s “wasteland.” So much for academic orthodoxy. So much for the intellectuals who bet heavily on the idea that television was bankrupt and moribund. (No metaphor was left unmixed.) For a wasteland, TV is surprisingly fecund.

Would love to hear from readers how this Fall season compares to last. I can’t honestly remember.

References


Pattern recognition and the Wurman’s response

Richard Saul Wurman and Gloria Nagy live in Newport. The NYC wrote them up yesterday and the results are interesting.

Wurman is the founder of TED and MED. Ms. Nagy, his wife, is a novelist. The kids are equally questing and accomplished. Tony Wurman is an artist who experiments in new media, Joshua is a severe-weather chaser, Reven is a photographer in New York, and Vanessa created a equestrian center in Rhode Island.

All of us in the creative class (as Richard Florida calls it) are interested in Richard Saul Wurman’s speciality: pattern recognition. Could there be secrets here?

And sure enough there are.

The article records Ms. Nagy’s answer to a snooty German architect when he asked, skeptically, about what her husband did for a living.

Ms. Nagy’s reply, she recalls, was something like:
“What Richard does is allow his brain to operate like a great big cellular Cuisinart, mixing all his knowledge, thoughts, frustrations, observations, visual, conceptual and gathered information and feelings about everything together, hitting the high switch and pouring it all out in the form of ideas baked in one mold or another: conference, book, map, exhibit.”

This is as good an account of pattern recognition as I have seen. It emphasizes how inclusive, syncretic, and fecund the process is. It begins with everything and ends up with one very particular thing. And this thing may become productive in its own right. Like TED which had been very productive of patterns indeed.

But why stop there?

The entire family is exemplary of what we now hope for from the creative class. Ms. Nagy is an ethnographer, of a kind, the observer of the architectures and fine details of contemporary life. Tony Wurman leaps media. Reven captures life. Joshua chases storms. (This last is increasingly apt for people who study contemporary culture.) Vanessa manages horses, and if you have ever worked with clients, you know who valuable this skill can be.

This family needs franchising. The Wurmans could be exactly what the corporation needs to make the world make sense. The CEO awakens to discover that her corporation has been disintermediated, disrupted, creatively destroyed as she slept. "Get me a Wurmans," she cries, "For God's sake, get me a Wurmans."

References


Post script

This article by Penelope Green does astonishing things for the NYT Home section. Have we ever seen a NYT story so rich in information about the personal lives of home occupants? With this as a lead, perhaps we will see the NYT take the Home section in new more ethnographic, anthropological directions. I am guessing, but only guessing, that the founder of this section, Joan Kron, would approve.
Preamble

The Big C, the new show starring the deeply talented Laura Linney gives us a glimpse of what is now possible on cable. It resembles a second show on Showtime, Weeds.

Together these shows give us a glimpse into the Showtime thinktank. (One of the principles, apparently: let’s see what happens to suburban living when we mix things up.)

There is another experiment at work at USA Networks, from which a string of hits has recently issued (Burn Notice, Psych, Royal Pains, White Collar). (One of the principles, apparently, stay as far away from the suburbs as possible.)

Your essay question:

1. Compare and contrast Showtime and USA Networks. Identify the grammar or algorithm that produces the shows in question. (Consider my "suburb" reference a hint, but merely one very rough indicator of the possibilities. Please do feel free to contradict me.)

2. What larger cultural significance do you attach to the fact that these two approaches to making TV now exist? Did they exist in the 20th century. Why do they exist now?

Conditions:

Fewer than 1000 words.

point form preferred.

points for being crisp and clear.

Contest winners

Contest winners will receive a Minerva (as pictured) and a place on the winner’s list. (And immortality as a contest winner, of course. See the list of previous winners, by clicking here.) (Note: the Minerva used to be called the "VOWEL.")

Contest judges

Normally I do the judging for Minervas. But this is a recipe for provincialism. So I am invited several people to act as judges. They are:

Rick Boyko, Director and Professor, VCU Brandcenter

Schuyler Brown, Skylab

Bryan Castañeda

Ana Domb

Mark Earls, author, Herd

Brad Grossman, Grossman and Partners

Christine W. Huang, PSFK, Huffington Post and Global Hue

Steve Postrel

Chief Culture Officer

This is precisely the kind of question I would expect a CCO to hit out of the park. If you are having trouble with this question and fancy yourself CCO material, you are not watching enough TV. (When spouses or colleagues complain, look them straight in the eye and say: "It's doctor's orders." (Trust me, I'm an anthropologist.)

Previous Winners
Back to School Special

I am sorry to have been observing radio silence for the latter part of the summer. I was working on a proposal for the new book and going to the beach. Going to the beach? Not a chance. I have been working like a trojan.

I noticed today that the CEO of HSBC is leaving to take a minister’s post in the British government. I dearly hope this does not mean we will see a change in the enduring campaign that greets us every time we go to the airport.

You know the one I mean. The one that shows several balds each with a different identifier (style, soldier, survivor). This is my valentine to the people at JWT for their magnificent work here, and my appeal to the new CEO to leave this campaign (and brilliant ad men and women) in place.

Company: JWT London
ECD: AXEL CHALDECOTT

Company: JWT New York
ECD/JWT: Walt Connelly

Company: JWT NY
ECD: Toby Barlow

Company: JWT
Copywriter: Peter Seterdahl
AD/JWT: Damian Totman
Producer: Dan Heighes
Producer: Hannah Gibson
Producer: Rob Allen/ Jennifer Gulliner
DoP: KJELL LAGERROOS
Editor: Antoine Mills

Company: JWTTwo
Post Producer: Gina Santanos

Company: Wave Recording
Eat, Pray, Love (repeat as necessary)

I finally had a look in on *Eat, Pray, Love*, the memoir by Elizabeth Gilbert that sold 4 million copies in paperback and this summer became a movie starring Julia Roberts. (I know I am late to this, but, as an anthropologist who studies contemporary culture, I’m trying to keep up with everything.)

Three things struck me.

1. This book is tremor material. It begins with a repudiation.

   *Wasn’t I proud of all we [Gilbert and husband had] accomplished—the prestigious home in the Hudson Valley, the apartment in Manhattan, the eight phone lines, the friends and the picnics and the parties, the weekends spent roaming the aisles of some box-shaped superstore of our choice, buying ever more appliances on credit? I had actively participated in every moment of the creation of this life—so why did I feel like none of it resembled me? Why did I feel so overwhelmed with duty, tired of being the primary breadwinner and the housekeeper, and the social coordinator and the dog walker and the wife and the soon-to-be mother, and — somewhere in my stolen moments—a writer…?*

This is a thoroughgoing “no” to the consumer society, and I couldn’t help wondering whether we shouldn’t read the immense popularity of *Eat, Pray, Love* as an indicator of seditious thoughts and impending realities.

No one is very keen on revolution in a downturn, but come the return to prosperity, it’s just possible we will have fewer takers than usual. We may be looking at what Mohamed El-Erian, a prince of the investment markets, calls the “new normal,” a time in which people swear off material goods. I’m on record as arguing that there will be no enduring new normal, but Gilbert’s book gave me pause, as tremors will.

But Gilbert is saying “no” to more than the consumer society. She is actually saying “no” to husbands, babies and suburbs, and “yes” to a spiritual quest. And if *this* is what speaks to 4 million readers, then we are on the verge of cultural revolution that resembles in the late 60s or the early 90s.

Wow! In our culture, many things are possible. So the anthropologist (and fellow traveller) must keep track of everything happening at the moment AND all the alternatives this present will smuggle as stow-aways into the future. At the moment, it feels like we live in a relatively orthodox cultural moment, but then the present always has this “home field” advantage.

The “now” comes equipped with its own feeling of inevitability. But let’s not give in to this feeling. It’s a trickster in our midst. The trickster that pretends it isn’t. Or to borrow, and adapt, the immortal language of *The Usual Suspects*, ‘the greatest trick that culture ever played was to persuade us that it doesn’t exist.’
2. Gilbert, a creature of her time. Gilbert’s quest feels to me a little like the traditional mission of the avant-garde artist. She is keen to discover her real self, the one concealed by a middle class commitment to husbands, babies and suburbs. But it’s not long before we see that she is also a postmodernist. For she is searching not for a single self, but for several of them.

This is a book about eating, praying AND loving. Gilbert seeks her self in Italy, India AND Indonesia. Gilbert is tempted along the way to cultivate one of these existential modalities. But no. She refuses to choose.

The great Sufi poet and philosopher Rumi once advised his students to write down the three things they most wanted in life. If any item on the list clashes with any other item, Rumi warned, you are destined for unhappiness. Better to live a life of single-pointed focus, he taught. … What if you could somehow create an expansive enough life that you could synchronize seemingly incongruous opposites into a worldview that excludes nothing. … I wanted worldly enjoyment and divine transcendence—the dual glories of a human life.

This is the postmodern voice. When told that one ‘life choice,’ one ‘self choice,’ must cost us the other, the postmodernist says, “I refuse to choose. I will have them all.”

Thus when Elvis Mitchell asked Steven Soderbergh how he prepared for the movie Out of Sight, the director said he said to himself, "If you blow this, you will be doing art-house movies for the rest of your life and that’s as bad as doing big budget things. I wanted to do both." Choosing between art house and big budget, this was the cross on which filmmakers of a previous generation had crucified themselves. Because in those days you had to choose. Not Soderbergh, and not Gilbert. Not any of us. Postmodernists don’t.

3. Gilbert, perhaps an architect of her time? Understanding Steven Soderbergh and people like him was the mission of a book I published a couple of years ago called Transformations: constructing identity in contemporary culture. My anthropological mission was to figure out how to describe a culture in which people claimed this kind of latitude and liberty for themselves.

This book ends with my account of something I call “expansionary individualism.” This is too grand a term, to be sure. It came to me while sitting in Central Park beside the reflecting pool. Some guy was sending a small wooden sailing ship out across the water, and just as it was about to crash into the concrete lip of the pool, he would catch it and push it out again. And I thought to myself, “Hey, c’est moi. My life in a nut shell (and reflecting pool). Journeys don’t end neatly. Moments before disaster, I just push off again.”

This is what it’s like to live lives in a culture of expansionary individualism: selves accumulate, experiments come and go, things get messy and stay messy. We just keep going. My favorite description came from someone, I forget who, who said, “my self is like a low rent motel. There are many people living here, we are not all on speaking terms, and frankly everyone’s a little alarmed by the guy in 2C.” (It seemed to me apt that so much of Christopher Nolan’s Memento was shot in a motel.)

Perfect. Postmodernism would have to result, I supposed, in disorder, multiplicity in mess. But that’s not how Gilbert sees it. Her mission was a quest not just for many selves but for a harmony between them. Hey, presto. Artist to the rescue. No sooner have we invented a culture of commotion than an artist steps up and suggests a way we might return to order. That is, I guess, what we pay them for.

References


Apologies

I can’t find the source for the Soderbergh / Mitchell quote.
Will Digital Culture ever invent a Homer Simpson?

First Observation:

*Entertainment Weekly* recently gave us the “100 greatest characters of the last 20 years.” The list includes Buffy, Jack Sparrow, Rachel from *Friends*, Harry Potter, John Locke, Miranda Priestly, and Ron Burgundy.

Second Observation:

In his latest book, Clay Shirky suggests that we now have around 1 trillion hours of creative surplus at our disposal. We use this time variously, offering Lolcats and, yes, blog posts.

The question:

Will Shirky’s surplus ever create a character that will appear on the *Entertainment Weekly* list? Will we ever create our own Homer?

Some thoughts:

I am not being argumentative. This is an open question. The answer could be “soon” or it could be “never,” and I’ll be happy. However we answer this question, we will have improved our anthropological understanding of contemporary culture.

There is a general presumption, I think, that we are sitting on a gusher. Shirky’s surplus is so vast, so inexorable that the creation of an EW “100 winner” can’t be far off. And it’s not that we are talking about the proverbial 100 monkeys. It won’t happen by evolutionary accident. It will happen because our use of the Shirky surplus gets better and better. This argument says “soon.”

Some will say our surplus is already in evidence on the EW list. They will say that these creatures are the result of user participation, consumer cocreation, the agency and activity of fans, transmedia assembly, textual poaching, and a liberal borrowing from the cultural commons. Homer Simpson is all about borrowing and, like any bard, his standing depends finally on our consent. This argument says “already.”

But there is an argument that says “never.” The red neck version of the argument rehearses the idea that popular culture is a waste land. Thus speak Keen and Bauerlein. But there’s a more sophisticated approach that says the creativity of the internet is a derivative creativity, that mashup culture must begin with something first to mash. Our culture may be in the direction of the consumer-producer but it will always depend on the producer-producer as a kind of "first mover."

Let’s push things a little further. (And again I do this for the sake of argument only. Living at the intersection of Anthropology and Economics, I can be ecumenical on a question like this.) What if the people who make Homers and Buffys must be funded by something other than the "creative surplus.” Must there be an enterprise that engages people to invest financial and creative capitals in a (relatively) expensive and therefore risky productions which then compete in some cultural marketplace.

By this reckoning, the EW 100 list will not exist without the intervention of commerce (of some pretty literal kind that goes well beyond the gift economies of the cultural commons.)

I’m just asking.

The Upshot:

This would make a dandy topic for a Futures of Entertainment session, with Shirky, Henry Jenkins, Larry Lessig, David Weinberger, Dan Snider. Jeff Jensen, and several other thinkers. With Sam Ford moderating, of course.

References


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This entry was posted in Uncategorized and tagged Andrew Keen, anthropology, Clay Shirky, Dan Snierson, David Weinberger, economics, Entertainment Weekly, Gareth Kay, gift economy, Henry Jenkins, Homer Simpson, Jeff Jensen, John Carey, Larry Lessig, Mark Bauerlein, Sam Ford on July 29, 2010 by Grant.

“IT” extraction (killing a brand softly)

Last week, quietly and without fanfare, ThinkPad decided not to renew its flagship model, the X301.

The X301 is a beautiful machine. It has that wonderful ThinkPad keyboard, a huge screen, and it weighs only a little bit more than a ballet slipper. It is a miraculous demonstration of what design and engineer can do.

And now it’s done for. Lenovo is proposing the ThinkPad T410s as the x301s replacement. When called upon to explain himself, Lenovo Marketing Director, Wang Lipin said that T400 series was more powerful than the x301, and cheaper by a thousand dollars.

The trouble: the T400 doesn't have “it” quality. It is a business machine in the most pedestrian sense of the term. No trace of elegance. No claim to being the pick of the technological litter. No “wow” factor. The T410 is just another business machine.

This takes us into one of the thorniest issue in the branding world. What is “it?” And what's “it” worth?

It's a difficult discussion because “it” is inscrutable. We can point to “it.” We know “it” when we see it. But when it comes to anatomizing, measuring, and pricing “it,” well, this proves difficult and all the marketing and pricing models break down.

This would be a mere irritation if “it” weren't such a gusher in the tech world. But it is. All of us can buy a phone that is smarter, faster and cheaper than the iPhone. But none of these has “it” status. We may not be able to measure “it,” but we don’t hesitate to pay the premium it demands of us.
Apple turns out to be pretty good at “it.” In fact, Apple now pretty much owns “it” in the computer world at the moment.

Except when it come to the lightest, full function lap top. The Apple entry in this category, the MacBook Air, is a pretty good machine. But that’s all it is. A pretty good machine. It doesn’t have “it.” Until last week, that belonged to ThinkPad.

So why did Lenovo perform an “it” extraction? That’s clear enough. It was making a rational business decision. It was applying a pricing model. It may well have been working from Robert Dolan’s exemplary text book on the topic. This was a perfectly sensible marketing decision.

But it was of course an absolutely disastrous business decision, one that may cost Lenovo dearly. When Lenovo took the “it” out of ThinkPad, it gave up the only branding advantage it had over Apple. Sadder still, it destroyed much of the brand value that prompted Lenovo to buy ThinkPad from IBM in the first place. Having taken on a brand that would help it fight its way out of the commodity basement, it has now descended into that commodity basement, slamming the door behind it as it goes.

Lenovo’s “it extraction” was a good, rational, pricing decision. But if we are not protecting “it” when our designers and engineers gift us with it, if we are not building the brand that protects us from the commodity basement, our decision, rational by some narrow standard, is wildly irrational by any broader one.

Commerce isn’t good at imponderables. And “it” is nothing if not imponderable. The fault lies largely on the side of the design house and the ad agency. When asked to measure and account for “it,” and every cultural moments has it’s its (it girls, it brands, it activities, it restaurants, it industries), designers and agency people demurred. “Oh, listen, don’t bother your pretty little heads about it,” they said to the client. “This is what you pay us for. We’ll keep track of it. You just get product on the shelf.” (If only they had a Chief Culture Officer.)

So it’s not entirely surprising that pricing models don’t have anything to say about “it.” And it’s not surprising that senior managers boot this sort of decision with some frequency. But when you think about how much value “it” creates for us, how essential it is to the life of the corporation, and how much there is at stake in terms of careers and brands, isn’t it time we did better?

Put these on the business conference agenda. What is it? What's it worth? How do we price it? How do we manage it? In the meantime, hire a CCO.

References


The Vampire genre has been a big producer in popular culture.

The question is, will it remain so?

No, that’s not the question. (For this too shall pass.)

No, the question is, when will Vampires fall from fashion.

I gave a presentation this summer to a big media holding company

One of my slides read “Are Vampires Done Yet”

I was trying to be provocative. I was talking about the inscrutability of our culture and the difficulty this causes, um, big media holding companies.

The head of the publishing house came up afterwards, her eye’s wide.

“I heard you on Vampires. We’re still signing up authors. And I just know the thing is going to turn, and we will be stuck with projects we cannot publish, let alone sell.”

The question, then, is, how? How do we track the Vampire trend and spot its decline.

This morning I dropped in to HSX.com to see if I could find any evidence. And I found this. The Hollywood Stock Exchange is tracking a Vampire movie in production and the HSXers now evidence a waning enthusiasm.

To be sure:

a. their enthusiasm is not waning very dramatically.

b. HSXers may be not be a useful measure of popular opinion.

c. even if HSXers were a measure, they might be acting out of other motives. (They don’t like the choice of director or leading lady, for example.)

Still, it’s a project that expresses our (and Hollywood’s) interest in Vampires. It’s a measure. It changes over time.

Not perfect. But better then, “I just have this feeling.”
The talking point: is there a way to use the Hollywood Stock Exchange as a cultural metric and, if so, how.

References


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Importantly, I'm trying to do this without a plugin and just use the functions file or even a WP_Query loop. Example.