

Media Culture

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In 1839, the year that Charles Darwin's notebooks of his famous research voyage aboard the "Beagle" were first published, Daguerre publicly presented his "Daguerrotype" photographic process. Unrelated? Of course — but is it really only a coincidence? The ideas that inspired Darwin and Daguerre had been simmering in the cultural soup for at least a century waiting to be formulated. When Darwin's *On the origin of species* by means of natural selection was published 20 years later, photography was already an established medium and the first steps had been taken in photo-engraving and lithography, telegraphy and sound recording — the age of "technical reproducibility"[1] was under way.

Just as Darwin's materialist theory of evolution by natural selection undermined metaphysics, photography and other recording technologies demolished the mystique of representation. Artists were suddenly confronted with equipment, operated by a technician, which claimed to provide an objective, authentic image of the world. But that was just the beginning of the avalanche of technological revolutions which created contemporary media culture. Media culture is what those images are that flicker past our eyes on the TV screen. Media culture is always present, always now. It is as though the TV screen was a kind of reading glass passing over an infinite field of events completely devoid of narrative sequence or time. Every image since the invention of photography is a part of this field and equally present, equally now, like the ghosts of the long-dead actors — Bogart, Chaplin, Monroe — who populate our TV screens after midnight. Since Edison marketed his recording machine we have been haunted by the voices of the dead. Media culture is virtual history reassembled daily from the infinite reservoir of sounds and images, some a century, some an hour, some a second old — a multiplicity of views of a single moment, the moment of recording, of capture by the recording medium.

Duchamp, Warhol and the New World Order

According to Arthur Kroker, Marshal McLuhan always accorded Seurat a privileged position as the "art fulcrum between Renaissance visual and modern tactile. The coalescing of inner and outer, subject and object." [...] Seurat presented us with a searing visual image of the age of the "anxious object".[2] While not wanting to quarrel with McLuhan's [or Kroker's] enthusiasm for Seurat, I detect here another example of the tendency of philosophers to consider art as being limited to painting and sculpture.

Seurat's fascination with the new perceptual technologies and his recognition that the image of the world is received, retinally, as fragmented elements of light/colour was an important step in the movement away from a purely representational art. But Seurat's superb art was itself never more than a representation of fragmentation and dematerialization. It was in the generation following Seurat, after the collapse of Newtonian physics and the opening of the paradigm chasm in the topology of late-industrial culture, that real "anxious objects" appeared — objects which were uncertain of their identity and subject to mediation. The most famous are the "Readymades" of Duchamp dating from just before, and during, the first great industrial war.

"Readymades", being "themselves" in their identity as useful everyday things and simultaneously "something other" in their identity as works of art become, in this oscillating field, pure content [or pure "meaning"] — like McLuhan's electric light, a medium without a message[3]. It can surely be no coincidence that this iconoclastic artistic "statement" entered

the debate about the nature of the world just as the revolutions in linguistics, physics, psychology — and commerce - were exploding the rationalist certainties of the 19th century — and just as the industrial age was beginning its long disintegration, soon to be accelerated by the explosive power of industrialized warfare.

With the "Readymade" the mediated object is born — an object that is produced by announcement, by declaration, by negotiation. More clearly than convoluted semiological texts, the "Readymade" presents all the problems of signifier and signified in the context of the industrial experience — the questionable identity of millions of identical products, the separation of content and context in "brand-name" marketing, the extension of mass production techniques into the mass-murder machinery of the '40s — or of industrial automation technology disclosing itself as the automated killing machinery of the Gulf War.

About 50 years after Duchamp's prophetic statement, and about 15 years after the second great industrial war, Andy Warhol began to operate with the iconography of the "logo-landscape" of the American kitchen, supermarket and media. Using Duchamp's principle, the soup-can logos became, in Andy's studio, both their corporate selves and a Warhol artwork in a flickering confusion of identity. Warhol went on to explore the whole range of 20th century media transience — he developed the perilous notion of "business-art" [as opposed to "art business"], confused his identity by inventing a "double" and a Warhol robot, established a factory, a film studio, a pop group [Velvet Underground], a magazine [Interview] and the promotional machinery to turn himself into a media personality and culture hero. There was little substance, and no "quality" to anything Warhol did — and Warhol did everything to avoid "substance" and "quality". In the culture of commercialism everything is defined by the questions: "did it sell?" and "for how much?" and Warhol managed to include these questions as part of the content of his art. Most of the money from the sale of the paintings and other products of Warhol and his factory went to support what I call the Warhol Project. By the time it was ended by his death in 1988, Warhol had made himself into a "brand name" like the subject of so much of his work — and, like a brand name product, the logo on the box was more important than its contents.

Here, too, it cannot be a coincidence that just as McLuhan was writing *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, Barthes his *Mythologies*, Thomas Kuhn his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Warhol was beginning his deconstruction of the ideology of contemporary American media and marketing. A study of Warhol will tell you everything you would prefer not to know about the seductive surface of consumer-culture.

The Real Thing

One of the Tweedledum and Tweedledee twins of global soft drink manufacturing — the larger one — is marketing an aluminum can containing its brand of sweet, brown, fizzy water, printed with the slogan "The Real Thing". Alongside the slogan is a picture of the famous "original" glass bottle — presumably a portrait of "The Real Thing". You don't have to be a semiologist to notice the semantic fuzziness between the slogan, the image, the can and its contents that defies any precise reading. It is impossible to separate the can from its context or even to determine which is context and which is content — it all shimmers in that haze of suggestion, promise, half-truth and hype we know as brand marketing.

Is "The Real Thing" the original bottle? The contents of the can? The logo? All, or any permutation, of them? In the manner of a Duchampian readymade the can is forced into dialogue with itself about its identity and meaning while the person drinking the contents feels

confident that they are taking part in "The Real Thing" — namely participating in a 20th century cultural ritual. The company, on the other hand, knows that the real "Real Thing" is the sale of another can of coke.

But other shadowy meanings can be discerned inside the haze of the "The Real Thing". The original bottle — designed in the last years of the 19th century — has become one of the most conspicuous commercial icons of the 20th while the company logo is practically synonymous with "America" in its role as signifier of a global culture. The red, white and blue flag of stars and stripes may symbolise the political America but the red and white script of the Tweedledum logo has come to signify America's "free market" ideology — and the company's marketing strategy and propaganda for a specific "life-style" has been no small factor in the victory over the enemies of capitalism.

If you can manage to focus your senses beyond the clouds of marketing hype, life-style blather and free-market hustle it may be possible to notice that the really real thing about "The Real Thing" is its casual projection of an impending ideological monoculture — the triumph of style over substance and the end of cultural and political pluralism.

The Marketing Meme

There is certainly something very "memesis-like" about the incredibly successful merchandising methods of brand marketing. Memes, like successful brand-name products, are wrapped in the same kind of fluffy de-contextualized vagueness. Everything happening in our brains that isn't doing some sort of life-supporting or muscle-controlling function, is a meme ... and the meme meme is the enabling factor. The meme meme, like the integrated, sophisticated "life-style" marketing strategy of the clever brand manager, facilitates the acquisition of other memes — that is it persuades you that everything you are thinking is a meme and that this is a perfectly natural condition.

In the old pre-postmodern days "life-style" was often confused with "ideology" but in the memetic paradigm ideology is taboo. If we apply the notion of memetic evolution to the strategy of "Life-Style" marketing we can begin to talk about memetic engineering which allows advertising and public relations programs [and even propaganda] to be reformatted to look like memetic evolution. Memetic engineering will let you buy memes. That is, you will be able to hire a firm of memetic engineers [public relations consultants] who will engineer a few suitable attitudes for memetic implantation ... in furtherance of the well-being of your product, company or political party. Commercial or political "memes" can be engineered to replicate in self-sustaining symbiosis — colonizing other memetic territory and replacing [or should we say "downsizing"] redundant notions in a process of artificial selection.

Not that this really changes anything — it is just the same old process with a new name. But unfortunately it transfers the Darwinian notion of the inevitability of genetic evolution to the memetic evolution in ideas and cultures and by implication to the culture of media manipulation known as advertising. The meme meme cunningly insinuates that the "cold beer meme", the "free market meme", the "car in every garage meme" are somehow "survivors" in the evolutionary sweepstakes of natural selection in the same way that a species has come to exist after a million years of genetic evolution.

Dawkins' too clever choice of the word "meme" to almost rhyme with "gene" is a reckless and dangerous invitation to confusion.[4] The idea of the meme is a brilliant metaphoric device for provoking discussion among geneticists, social scientists and philosophers about

the nature of paradigm shifts and cultural change. The trouble is that not even all geneticists, social scientists and philosophers are as entirely free of prejudices about other cultures, political systems, religious beliefs — other peoples' memes — as they would like us to believe. In spite of the protests of its supporters to the contrary, the memetic idea opens the door to new versions of the old notion of social Darwinism — development Darwinism[5] for instance — while reassuring us that the lack of political diversity since the collapse of the socialist economies is because capitalist memes are simply more robust — socialist memes were dud memes.

The Collage Tactic

Collaging is the way that artists have tried to map media culture and there are aspects of collaging that make one think of the description of the "meme". At the turn of the last century Picasso and Braque began to cut photographic reproductions from magazines and newspapers and paste them down in their work. A photo of a chair printed in a cheap magazine could be made to portray a chair in a picture and still retain its identity as a found object — a printed image. Perhaps the first "anxious objects" are really this kind of "readymade". With the advent of radio it became possible to imagine hanging a microphone out in the street in Milan and having the sound be heard in New York. The sound of Milan could be collaged onto the sound of New York — an unrealisable fantasy in 1920 but a completely normal part of our culture now. Sampling is the most recent of the techniques of sound collaging — any sound can be sampled and digitally edited, mixed and re-mixed with other material. Any recorded sound or image in any analogue or digital medium is available for audio or visual sampling and appropriation and it all grows from the concept of collaging. Collaging assumes a cultural universe — or primal soup — comprised, like Borges' Library of Babel, of all recorded sounds and images in all imaginable and unimaginable combinations and versions. The artist navigates within it, like a William Gibson hero jacked into Cyberspace, rearranging, combining and collaging — but adding nothing except change itself. Cyber-serendipity?

[1] Taken from the title *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* by Walter Benjamin, usually mistranslated into English as "... mechanical reproduction".

[2] Arthur Kroker, *Digital Humanism: The processed World of Marshall McLuhan, CTHEORY*, Article 28, <http://www.freedonia.com/ctheory/>

[3] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1964

[4] [mimeme] ... a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation. "Mimeme" comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like "gene" ...: Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 1976 p.206. [Quoted in: Daniel C.Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, 1995]

[5] Development Darwinism allows the stratification of the world's human population into "developmental" stages [developed, developing, underdeveloped etc.] to be accepted as stages in "evolution" toward developed [consumerist] status by a process of memetic selection as measured by purchasing power.