

Consequences of Over Exposure to Billboards and Cultural Jamming

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Abstract

Signs are never innocent of meaning; sometimes universally clear others having a restricted local meaning, their heterogeneity defining cultural differences, while globalization homogenizes any symbol in a unique worldwide meaning.

Welcome to our world, full of so many signs that nobody seems to note anymore, where the ability to decode is a plus because it increases the possibility of reaching success and even survive according to Darwinian evolutionary theory. A time overfull of images pumping out of screens, passing through us on our way home or towards somewhere else: in the gigantic billboards -mechanical, digital or mobile- standing all over the highways exactly 30° from our eyes angle while the automobile passes, watch out, don't crash. Beware!

Existence has been burst by a bunch of gigantic outside images able of shrinking our brain's capacity. On the rooftops of the big cosmopolitan centers grows a jungle of billboards covering the clouds. Everything is flashing, neon lights screaming "here, here, here!" and there isn't anyone there. Emptiness: an existence of short term sparkling just until the next spot, the new absolutely essential thing that we just have to buy or die.

There is less space for introspection and critical thinking in the suffocating atmosphere made of billboards and other outdoors advertisement. There is less time in-between fast cars and quick emotions to deepen ideas concerning those images made to socialize a troop ready to defend the well being of endless consuming values. But sometimes the minimum becomes the most visible spot. In culture jamming the artist expresses his ideas by making use of simple resources to transform the advertisement medium. This paper intends to reflect on the intrusive role of billboards in individuals' personality development and on the work of culture jamming in alerting conscious awareness.

Keywords: billboards, culture jamming, consciousness, advertisement, globalization, perception.

You can't miss it

If a programme on the television or radio is giving on your nerves you just have to shut off the transmitter. If you don't like to read a newspaper you don't buy it and if the new issue on your favourite magazine has been nothing else than disappointing you just throw it in the trash. But if you are

driving over the highway and meet a billboard on the road-side you can't close your eyes, can you? (I mean, technically, you can but it is not advisable). If you are walking in the city and you don't like the heavy advertisement "decorating" both sides of the street you can always try another road next time but the truth is that the objective of the billboard itself was reached and the advertisement has been a success since you saw it, so you were caught.

Once your eyes have hit the image you can't erase it. And you never know where the new billboard is going to pop up from. With television and the computer screen you have control over the location of the transmitter, at least concerning those within your own house, over a shelf, on the wall, on your desk, it's there and it stays there where you have placed them. They will play once you push the button but will never start by themselves, unless you have programmed them. If you live alone you can have absolute control over your wall's cover: colour, paper, texture, pictures, you can choose to have works of art or your dogs' photograph, you can choose to have a plain wall. Light, sound and other components of life at home can be limited by exterior factors but controlled through synthetic ones. Once you approach the window and look through it, what you will be able to see is out of the reach of your hand. (Unless you live under the surface). Although thick curtains might be a temporary solution for the visual shock caused by the confrontation of your within and outside life, sometimes you can not avoid to go out. And there you will possibly get caught by images that you have never asked for.

How sacred is the world of the icon

Cinematically, I was never an admirer of westerns. Good guy, nasty guy, easy girl, hard woman, a lot of shooting, may be some Indians, but there was always an incredible open field and a great horse riding towards this unbelievable sunset. (Any resemblance to reality is pure tobacco advertisement). As if the buildings were not tall enough, there have to be billboards on the roofs also. And fine, we could live with five percent of sky visibility; if our optic nerves were not attacked at night by lighten outdoors. Is there any law recognizing the universal right to see the stars?

In 2004, while the city was getting ready for receiving the Olympic Games, an estimated \$750,000 was spent on clearing thousands of billboards from buildings and rooftops around Athens. This single gesture was more important to the improvement of the Athenians' daily life than the building of new stadiums. There was the sense of the city being cleaned-up and the feeling that one was rediscovering his or her own city because it was given the opportunity to the people of finally seeing walls that had been covered from the public eye for years. Additionally it was also offered visibility to new artists by giving them the chance to decorate a few high exposure public walls. Obviously, neither Greece nor Athens became billboard-free; during

the Olympic Games the advertisement dedicated to the main sponsors was visible but limited to the areas close to the stadiums (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/world/europe/3565616.stm>).

In the U.S.A., since federal regulations leave much of the decision making to states and municipalities on this issue, there are states which are billboard-free and other states that control the numbers of existing billboards by prohibiting the construction of new ones. These actions seem to be negative only to the billboard industry. Experience has demonstrated that after banning billboards, which commonly advertise international branch marks' products, local economies saw increase of their profits, in the sectors of both tourism and retail sales. Would you photograph an historical building half covered by a gigantic billboard? Or would you sit and have a salad in a vegetarian restaurant with a view towards the image of a gigantic meat burger which doesn't even resembles the one you would be having if you were sitting instead at the establishment of this widely known fast-food franchising?

Billboards mischaracterize a community's intrinsic qualities by introducing homogenizing aspects, which can be commonly found worldwide among the features that contribute to the distinctiveness of each specific place. Like a virus contaminating scenic, natural, historical, recreational, archaeological and cultural spaces, mutating their unique sense of place and time, positioning people into a virtual space and removing from them their own identity. Concerning the issue of environmental aesthetics it seems interesting to refer the campaign created by DDB New Zealand in March 2007 as response to the Auckland city council's attempts to ban billboards: the "Say No to No Billboards" ads focus on the beautification action of billboards placed on 'ugly' buildings (http://www.etre.com/blog/2007/03/say_no_to_no_billboards_auckland/).

The impact of billboards on natural environment has been all but 'beautificating'. In fact, outdoor advertisement has been the cause for deliberate cutting trees on the public right-of-way to provide a clear view of billboards. Although the billboard is placed in private property its value consists on the proximity to public highways, on its visibility on behalf of the drivers. In the U.S.A., the outdoor advertisement companies' claim having the legal right to visibility but such so-called right has not been recognized by the courts. Cutting down trees represents, for this reason, destruction of public property for a purpose that is alien both to the public and the highway.

Seeing and buying

Another issue concerning billboards is the possibility of causing safety reduction on highways. During March 2007 the Federal Highway Administration in Washington commissioned a \$150,000 study to assess the safety of digital highway billboards

(<http://www.sciencedaily.com/upi/index.php?feed=TopNews&article=UPI-1-20070306-14581500-bc-us-videobillboards.xml>). Critics involve the danger that digital billboards on highways might represent by causing distraction to the drivers, especially when there is a limited time reaction to traffic signs in areas involving high levels of information concentration. At psychosomatic level, after being exposed to stressful situations, there seems to be a quick reduction of high stress levels, while driving through a billboard-free road of rural character, compared with driving through a road with billboards, where drivers experience higher blood pressure, heart rate and respiration, and increased eye movements and facial muscle activity (http://www.scenic.org/billboards/background/public_health).

As with television, it is not the visual narrative content of the digital billboard but its stylistic tricks (cuts, edits, zooms, plans, sudden noises, etc.) that activate orienting response to the screen since human beings are biologically programmed to detect and pay attention to movement. Is it possible that constant long-term exposure to billboard information reduces the brain's neurological capacity to make judgements about what is been seen and heard on the screen? In television's case, after 30 seconds of exposure, the brain waves switch to predominantly alpha waves (unfocused, receptive lack of attention), the brain's left hemisphere (logical and analytical information processing) tunes out, and the involvement of the frontal lobe (self-control, moral judgement and attention) is subdued. The brain releases dopamine when in contact with information but, when daily exposed to more than four hours of television watching, the brain develops a neurochemical dependency. Images surround our visual environment, fill our perception with colors and affect our mood. They can attract our attention and provoke disgust; they can relax us or draw us. Advertisement uses the survival tool to detect movement and multiplies image kinetics in order to trap human gaze.

Media corporations and advertising agencies have conducted intensive research into audiences and identify its members' socio-economic class, lifestyles, motivation, disposable income, fantasies etc. and that knowledge enables them to sharply 'target' their audiences. According to New Audience Research theory, audiences are *active producers of meaning*, instead of simple consumers of media meanings. Each individual's use of the media is closely connected to the rest of daily life and conditioned by what he or she wants to get out of it, resisting the constructions of reality chosen by the mass media and constructing personal meanings for media texts. During the act of viewing, the audience is involved in the co-construction of meanings and interpretations and the same image might be decoded differently by different audience members according to their social and cultural circumstances and the ways that they, individually, experience those circumstances.

Michel de Certeau criticizes the generalized assumption that the public is shaped by the products imposed on it, and refers that instead what should be considered are the uses people give to those. According to the author, ordinary people develop '*tactics*' for carrying out '*raids*' on the dominant culture. They pinch their own meanings from the cultural commodities offered to them through '*strategies*' of the dominant elite (used by total institutions such as the army, cities, supermarket chains to create and delimit their own place), according to their needs, as '*poachers*'.

Like de Certeau, John Fiske recognizes that the dominant classes' strategy is to impose their preferred reading. Adjustment is made to the dominant readings coded in media texts by members of a community, through interpersonal communication, so that it can suit the specific needs of that community. Research shows that there are patterns of interpretation; the personal interpretations produced by media users are not always radically different from other individual interpretations. In Fiske's view, the generation of meanings by readers of popular texts, their guerrilla tactics of resistance to the dominant order, is essentially progressive. The existence of a variety of synchronized media texts being expressed by dominant opinion forces seems to be a proof that these guerrilla tactic of resistance are contributing to the retarding spreading of a cultural homogenizing unilateral sense of reality. Although popular culture is seen as operating to maintain the status quo, Fiske, on the other hand, sees the generation of oppositional meanings as an emancipator source. It starts by providing examples of resistance at the micro political level, this way empowering the repressed ones to act against oppression, and acting as a constant erosive force upon the macro political level able of making the system progressively weaker and preparing it to adapt to change.

How liberating a world without logos

A social movement that aims to bring changes at cultural levels, by interacting differently with mass media and changing the way meaning is produced in society is culture jamming. A worldwide spread movement which actions, such as anti-billboards activities, are practiced by media activists, it integrates individuals from different backgrounds and some long-time activists (left, green, anarchists, feminists, etc.) who found a common ground for action: the feeling that life's real values have been sold for a brand image, culture jammers refuse a world where everything is sold and everything is bought. They resist the society of spectacle (Guy Debord) where products, celebrities and entertainments became culture, citizens were transformed into members of the audience, who listen, watch and buy. They are aware that words which had meaning such as democracy and freedom became slogans to sell products, where images of drinking can be associated to self-confidence and smoking a sign of maturity, depending on the

trademark. To culture jammers the economic agents have overlapped their field of action and have penetrated the political and cultural structures, in order to increase their profits. Because corporations know no ideology, the same company sells fizzy drinks to both the Allies and the Nazis, being careful enough to change the name and the product. By joining both sides one does not risk to loose, or compromise, or choose. The attitude towards the common good is inexistent. One fizzy drink to fit each ideology, without remorse or principles: the important is to take profit out of it.

Media and new cultural forces suppress individual emotions and personality. They promote an idea of life based on the act of sleeping, eating, sitting in a car, working, shopping and watching television. In-between these actions there is no personal time, no silence for introspection, no opportunity is left to the achievement of conscious moments. There are no surprises in this life, where everything is limited to the programme that has been stipulated for our lives: once more sleeping, eating, sitting in a car, working, shopping and watching television day after day.

Our moments of happiness are by command the instants we are told to be happy. Everybody is laughing with the same funny scene on television, so I laugh because everybody else seems to be doing so. Except that those laughs are recorded on the programme with the purpose of informing me when to laugh, but why is all people laughing? Slowly one learns to associate certain behaviours with a certain reaction, like the bell to Pavlov's dog, and we laugh. When we laugh together with those previously recorded laughs we feel less alone, we feel we belong, but our participation in the team is limited to our abandoning of any element of creativity of spontaneous behaviour. We are what we seem to be, dressed with the t-shirt of the team, the one we had to buy and will possibly be forced to change for a new one every now and then, so that we do not stay behind and stop belonging. The new cultural pressure propelled by the media can flatten in a couple of years communities, traditions, cultural heritages, sovereignties and replace entire pieces of history by its own versions, an homogenized front considered politically correct but which should be called instead an economically profitable version of history. If one is used to drink tea and enjoys it, why drinking a fizzy drink with caffeine? May be because the company that owns the fizzy drink with caffeine bought the old tea company and stopped distributing tea in the traditionally tea consuming market. Without tea one is finally free to enjoy the new drink. That is the power of choice according to capitalistic democracy.

Who are we actually? Our clothes, our hair style, our diet, do all these things put together describe us? Can the things we own define us? Do we decide what things to buy in our everyday life or have these things been suggested to us through different media? Are we being programmed to buy passively? By the end of the day what is the product? Culture jammers

remind us, using a renewed adaptation of McLuhan's motto, that the product is you. The screens train our mind to seated submissiveness and we stop questioning. There is no more why just now; there is no more 'who am I', just 'what I own'. I am a plurality of potential personalities, lacking consistence to compromise, patience to try and courage to create. In front of the possibility we rather choose cynicism and commonly reject the idea that change is at the reach of our hands.

Media jammers pretend to shake the values imposed by these new cultural forces of social pressure by inverting their text meanings. Their forms of action are diverse but consist in using the same media that advertises corporative interests to promote individual creativity. Their main message is that human beings have the right to live in a world free of advertisements, because before we are buyers we are all citizens. Each person has the right to develop his or her own personality before buying the next fashion object. In order to develop ones personality the person needs to live in an environment free of commercial spots, one has to fight to win the right to live in a world where there is space for silence and horizon to the eye. One should cross the seas and reach the highest mountains instead of running to the shop in the sales' opening. By putting obstacles such as billboards in-between the human eye and the sky, the advertisement companies are violating the universal right to each individual pursuit of happiness.

Consuming has been converted into religion. Feuerbach defends that each society creates a god at its own image according to their needs but this god brings alienation to the individual because while attributing to the divine qualities that are initially human the person is dissociating itself from its own consciousness. Sartre reminds us that man is too afraid to abandon the idea of god because he refuses to be responsible for his own existence and can not accept the fact that he is alone. Media jammers fight the new profitable 'sacred' gods by destroying their icons in billboards and they launch an invitation. Do not be afraid. Happiness comes with consciousness: the clear image of what one really needs in order to live, the relief from the pressure of what one 'just has' to acquire. Actions such as the 'buy nothing today' might be liberating at personal level but disastrous for corporations. Imagine Christmas celebrated with gifts made by your own hands? Imagine a world where happiness is not sold inside cans. Imagine a world free of logos, a world without billboards between you and the sky.

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