

A criticism of ostentation applied to luxury brands<sup>1</sup>

Selvane Mohandas du Ménéil

The start of the 2003 school year in France was marked by the unexpected eruption of anti-advertising militants. The scribbling and parodying of the billboards of big-name brands engendered a lot of confusion but also revealed a large underground phenomenon to the general public, one that called into question the accepted omnipresence of brands in the social space, a presence seen by some as an infringement of individual freedom and which participates in the total saturation of the life-space of the citizen-consumer.

The resentment felt is not just directed at the physical signs of the brand, such as their infinitely repeated logos, or their never-ending advertising slogans, and the scribbling campaigns are merely the more spectacular attacks against a global system. They mark a milestone in a more general movement that calls into question big brands and their invasion of the public space, by opposing their mode of expression which is often seen as very authoritarian. A new consumer behavioural pattern has come to the fore, one that prefers self-expression over logo-wearing. The fashion designer Martin Margiela puts only a white tag on his clothes, emphasising the product over the brand.

At the same time, luxury brands maintain strong links with the ostentatious, leaving them open to attacks. We must admit that most luxury brands define themselves through a high level of visibility, the sine qua non of representing another type of existence. They cannot develop their power of attraction and seduction without situating

themselves – paradoxically – as an unattainable ideal that nevertheless appeals to everyone. The culture of conspicuous consumption attached to luxury business is intended to be the reflection of its supposed superiority over other categories of products. As a result the luxury brand, the conspicuous and highly visible product par excellence is particularly targeted by those critics of the way in which brands sell and expose themselves in general.

### **Context of the uprising**

The unrest felt among the general public regarding big brands did not appear overnight. On the contrary, it is the result of fifty years of heterogeneous fears which all came together at the end of the 20th century in the form of a global movement against all types of brands and branding, not just luxury products, and encompassed different motivations.

The general public didn't really realise its own power until the sixties, thanks notably to Ralph Nader<sup>2</sup>. It became possible for them to object to the abuse of brands, and to protect their rights and personal safety, issues which were to become the leitmotif of the campaigners. During the Vietnam war, campaigners came to the realisation that they not only had an obligation to ensure a safer use of products but also to protect their personal data which could be used by the state in questions of national security and by business to optimise the sale of a product more adapted to the specifically targeted consumer. Brands then began funding socio-psychological surveys in order to better communicate with them<sup>3</sup>, and in doing so became the symbol of the marketing of the individual.

Then came the eighties, a decade with a slew of ecological disasters<sup>4</sup> which merely added to these fears by bringing up the question of the brand's responsibility : are brands really capable of the self-regulation proclaimed by the liberal lobby? The nineties brought the internet and low-budget air travel, thus shrinking the planet

and raising consciousness among travellers of the proximity of poverty. The various scandals – one remembers the virulent attacks against Nike and the Gap – scattered through the decade showed a growing interest in respecting social norms and rules: yet again, the self-regulating ability of brands was called into question, this time on a human level, and not just an ecological level. At the turn of the century, given the bland political situation in most developed countries, the attention of their citizens was transferred from the political sphere to the economic sphere, Naomi Klein published a book which made a mark. She put a general feeling of dissatisfaction into words and did an inventory of consumer, ecological and social issues and expectations. These issues encompass injunctions against the omnipresence of advertising, a will to mobilise citizen-based actions, and above all the condemnation of brands suspected of trying to render the public prisoner, all wrapped up within a criticism of capitalism. Today, in a post-September 11<sup>th</sup> society which is again debating the security issues inherited from Vietnam, brands are now perceived as a powerful Leviathan ready to invade the existence of every consumer while trampling on their freedom of expression and choice in the name of the open market.

This new perception is based notably on the fact that the consumer has never before been better informed, and criticism of brands is widespread and available. This situation did not miraculously appear overnight. It is new only in its widespread coverage, and to the extent that for the first time, big brands have seen their sales drop in favour of «neutral» products<sup>5</sup>. Through this disaffection, consumers are expressing their disappointment in brands which have failed to honour their promise to democratise consumption.

At this point it is important to note that Naomi Klein's book, while it did mark a turning point in the theory of anti-branding, is but one of the illustrations of what can be seen as a battle on many levels.

## The forms of debate

The criticism of economic neo-colonialism by Naomi Klein has indeed been overtaken by other forms of protest which deal with issues closer to home rather than the exploitation of foreign human resources. Two main movements can be outlined in the anti-brand dialectic; on the one hand protest against the physical invasion of brands, such as logos or advertising; on the other and the refusal to take on board brand blurbs which are considered authoritarian when looked at objectively.

A number of movements protesting against the physical presence of brands have developed in France and abroad. They wish to see the public arena kept clear of commercial use, the result of a recent awakening on the part of the general public<sup>6</sup>. This revolt echoes a number of worries: first of all the reappearance of the moral discourse that says that material possessions lead to moral bankruptcy, even though this approach is obsolete; then, the unease felt regarding the gap between the virtual world as seen in advertisements and social reality; finally, the privatisation of public spaces by advertising and individuals in the way they are voluntarily covered in logos.

The opposition, who use a dialectic close to that of the class wars, do not hesitate to take on the mantle of «people's advocate». Advertising is seen as the practical means at the brand's disposal «to make people like their social destiny from which there is no escape». By provoking unhappiness because «a happy person only participates in the economic activity of a society on a very low level», they train a consumer who believes that «happiness can be bought through advertising». Indeed, «an individual who is unhappy with his or her life is the best consumer. Otherwise he or she will just buy what is needed». In addition, «advertising doesn't enlighten the public in any way, it merely flatters their subconscious desires in order to manipulate them».<sup>7</sup>

The organisations include «Résistance à l'agression publicitaire (Resistance to adver-

tising aggression)», the «Casseurs de pub (Ad-busters)», or the «Paysages de France (Countryside association)». We should note that all of these associations only target advertising. They disregard the fact that most consumers are quite happy to wear logos and that they find advertising amusing in general<sup>8</sup>. This dialectical smoke and mirrors trick is carried out using arguments in favour of less growth, or even better, a frugal society without brands, products, or even consumption.

This aversion to advertising can be important, proof of which was seen on October 2003 with the angry reactions to the anti-advertising campaigners who scribbled all over the billboards in the Parisian metro. The RATP (Parisian transport authority) reacted virulently: 62 activists were charged. The violence of this reaction and the refusal to enter any discussion served to reassure all of the anti-advertising movements that advertising is an integral part of the «system» that must be fought: brands are thus condemned through advertising as intrusive and destructive. Advertising de-politicises the public space and imposes itself as the only reference. This fear makes advertising a manifest symptom of this intrusion into the private sphere. The other main type of protest deals with what the brand has to say. Despite the current level of sophistication, advertising in fashion and luxury products answers a basic need, that of a quest for identity. To the question «Who am I?» advertising attempts to propose an identity, a version of reality which corresponds both to the individuality of the target and also to the widest public imaginable so as to be as efficient as possible. Advertising spreads the message ; «you are all equal, but at the same time you are unique with all of your faults». Finally, pushing the consensus to the limit everything becomes possible or nothing as the case may be.

This is what the protesters object to : the obsession with touching only the surface of the public means that advertisers only play to existing expectations without being interested in the true, deep aspirations of the

public. It means creating a dialectic that appeals to the largest number possible, in other words, to annihilate all protest by including it in the message<sup>9</sup>. The opposition is thus eaten up, and can be appropriated at any time by advertising itself.

The authors do not hesitate to paraphrase Roland Barthes in accusing brands of fascism<sup>10</sup>. Despite the illusion of choice, brands impose more than they propose, limited by the poverty of their vocabulary, they reduce the universe to a nutshell adapted to their needs. They can change habits and behaviour, without fearing a rebellion which would be immediately appropriated.

So we speak of fascist brands as they glorify a model of «consumer-her», while eliminating all opposition and encouraging a delusional feeling of belonging to a community that has freedom of choice. Using this very violent term to talk about brands shows to what extent the change in their role has become a worry in recent times: brands now openly take on roles that were not possible before and this is frightening in as much as the economic is taking over from the social and the political. This fear goes way beyond the mere invasion of public space.

At this level of argument, one could suggest that the luxury brand is not concerned with these changes. On the contrary, both movements have issues, particularly with the luxury goods industry which is characterised by a massive physical presence with a benevolent but imposing discourse.

The objective of the brand is to leave a mark, not just on the product but in the mind of the consumer<sup>11</sup>. However, the evolution of interaction between individuals makes the brand durable and the message - even group of messages - polymorphous, this in turn necessitates an official means of communication in order to overshadow the general cacophony. The rough edges must be rubbed out and the history of the brand taken as a theme. The visibility of this message then becomes primordial.

In addition, the luxury brand is a brand that makes a mark: it answers an emotional and

tribal need, a need for social affirmation, or a desire for freedom and constant pleasure. This means constant communication on behalf of the brand on its psychological benefits.

Such an attitude enables the brand to adopt a brave but lucrative position: a mixture between the massive presence of the brand and its simultaneous absence. This paradox of hyper-visibility<sup>12</sup> is built in two stages: luxury items take on an elitist role, making them an exceptional product, a flattering cultural reference, and subject to pyramid consumption. The consumer is physically held at a distance from the product. However, it must remain accessible if it is to remain part of the economic cycle. So, luxury items become relative to remain available. The brand seems attainable and luxury becomes a paradox as it relies on a certain distance but also on a necessary popularity to be recognised as a luxury product by the rest of the population. Successive billboard campaigns in the metro by Dolce & Gabbana prove this point. We will also notice that luxury brands communicate in general with the entire population and not just with their target. The non-consumers enable them in fact to construct a stronger reputation than if they were addressing only their target market.

### Long term protest?

Obviously, the luxury goods industry is the dream target for the protesters: it is built on what the protesters are fighting.

Pushed by ever-increasing demands for profit, the more prestigious houses are dropping range levels to gather new clients and thus create more turnover. This drop in range level is not necessarily on a product level, it can also result in the brand becoming commonplace due to its dilution in too many varied sectors.

In addition, logos are more and more present. In a universe in which everything looks the same, the logo remains a means by which a brand can stand out without doing anything new. For a brand to be successful

today it must be visible<sup>13</sup>. This is why the future is to be full of products with logos, which enable the consumer from a broader public to be more easily identifiable when they wear the product which in turn loses value each time<sup>14</sup>.

The inevitable corollary is that advertising will continue to invade virgin spaces, repeating images or symbols on every support possible that enables them to communicate on the great quality of the product.

Finally the luxury brand has become more incisive than ever. In any industry, evaluation is spread either by individual judgement, critical discussion or by comparison. In the case of luxury goods, critical evaluation is pushed aside as any comment calling into question the high quality of the products is quashed. The luxury brand positions itself as the ultimate brand, any comparison is impossible. It is up to the client to understand the excellence of the product and not the other way round.

Thus notions of rarity and exclusivity which form the basis for luxury products, are called into question by the growing extension of their distribution which makes them commonplace<sup>15</sup>. The fetishisation of the luxury object which is visible in the representation exclusively through its image makes it into a cult object and a fake. At the same time its omnipresence in the media contradicts the supposed exclusivity put forward by the other elements of the brand. The luxury product is emptied of its meaning and we end up with the consumption of logo-ridden products of less quality. The «connoisseur» to whom the luxury product is supposed to appeal thus disappears to be replaced by the consumer of “mass-produced luxury”. We should remind ourselves here that in the United States the most desired brands are Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Ralph Lauren and Burberry, all of which base their strategy on the intensive use of an instantly recognisable logo or monogram<sup>16</sup>. However, it would be optimistic to announce the victory of the anti-brand movement over luxury brands. Anti-advertis-

ing movements carry an inherent contradiction. It is possible to measure the relative impact of the recent anti-advert campaigns in the Parisian metro<sup>17</sup> by remembering that they themselves are subject to appropriation by advertising. This phenomenon shows how difficult it is to criticise advertising. In addition, a study of the relevant message boards show that there is also a moral issue here. The pro-testers wonder if it is possible to defend freedom of expression while denying it to some – advertisers –, and if the change necessary can not be brought about by means other than the destruction of private property.

Finally, the «anti-adverts» are against material possession at a time when advertising is changing its very nature, having realised that consumers found out long ago that owning something changes nothing. Criticism of the commercial invasion should first of all be a criticism of the colonisation of public space which would re-launch the debate on another level.

Public spaces must first of all be seen as places for discussion<sup>18</sup>. If the forum is invaded by commercial blurbs then public life fades, due to the lack of a subject for discussion and a legitimacy (as brand discourse tends to replace social discourse). Even if the anti-advert campaigners are not wrong in attacking the omnipresence of commercial discourse, they are concentrating on the effect and not the cause.

The biggest danger is of course that the omnipresence of advertising renders public life trite and it then becomes little more than a pretext for consumption. In the end shouldn't we regret that the resistance to marketing and advertising should be obliged to use marketing and advertising techniques in order to resist<sup>19</sup>? How can a product be sold without the traditional marketing techniques? How can a product be made recognisable without making its absence of logo in itself a logo?

This is the main problem, something the second group of protesters easily identified through its preoccupations with the brand blurb. The omnipresent communication of a

brand only reinforces its power and its hold on the individual psychology of the consumer. There has been a loss in referential values which urge the consumer to deny the material nature of the product to invest in another type of non-referential use which appeals to individual sensibility: the logoed object builds subjects and society is built on it. Advertising, organised by the brand, regulates the social connection, and society is nothing but an ecosystem of growth between businesses. This voluntary servitude is worrying: logos which are so often a reflection of fashion exist because we want them to. And through logos, we celebrate the adoration of a brand without really taking into account the intellectual poverty that is involved. Thus «we are becoming consumers of our own lives»<sup>20</sup>. From so wanting to have the «experiences» offered by advertising, the consumer ends up consuming himself through market stimuli.

With the obvious presence of brands in the existence of individuals, veritable ideological systems have been set up capable of imposing a true political programme<sup>21</sup>. They present a utopian representation of life and the common good, giving themselves the right to define our ways of seeing, thinking and doing, as we are subject permanently to their world vision.

It becomes impossible to extract oneself from this discourse as it says everything and nothing. Despite an apparent variety of choice, the dismantling of language leads to a vision of the world reduced to uninterrupted consumption which brings us back to the idea of «self-consumption».

### **The issues at stake in a fight that was lost before it began**

The explosion of the number of message-signs has caused a change in people, drawing their attention to the nature of the offer, rather than the means by which it is communicated<sup>22</sup>. This shows that the criticism of the visibility of a brand is not directed at the product but at the way it presents itself to the world. In fact, François

Brune, one of the pillars of the anti-advertisement establishment recognises. When he accuses advertising not of being the armed wing of the brand but simply selling newness rather than authenticity or necessity. They are not targeting the content but the merely the container.

Paradoxically, luxury brands remain a reference point when the protest is at its loudest. In a world-wide troubled context it remains a reference as it guarantees the quality of the object<sup>23</sup>. To go even further, we could even say that it the brands are not receding, but on the contrary are becoming more visible, the brand is a refuge for value and quality. We cover ourselves in logos to signify our own existence, so as not to fade away<sup>24</sup>. The brand has become a real vector for socialisation, the logo is the shield that guarantees social integration. The advertising budget is the only one not to have been cut at Louis Vuitton Malletier (trunks) during the economic slump, which shows that brand equity is the prime concern of the company. In addition, despite the protest, luxury brands are infiltrating all dimensions: they have parasited celebrity to make themselves more famous, they have taken over physical space – whether it be in the Parisian metro or on billboards all around the world – and finally they have even invaded the individual who has made them an extension of himself through logo wearing. The fact that most brands have become «global» meaning they have thrown themselves into diversification at all costs, the example of jewellery at Louis Vuitton is the most striking, going to prove that the «colonisation» movement is not on the wane any time soon. We can also ask ourselves about this situation at a time when the number of protesting voices has never been larger, nor more heterogeneous, and as such truly vital. Apart from the fact that luxury brands now affirm themselves as the uncomplicated incarnation of a capitalistic vision they have always denied, this dumb, private opposition with solid arguments can be seen not as an exterior element to this change but its consequence. Faced with the evolution of the «new» luxury goods indus-

try represented by the big financial groups such as LVMH, Richemont but also Chanel and Hermès, and their will to conquer ever conquer, with more and more logos and adverts, the lack of an argument against them and an alter-native, illustrates the weakness of the sector. We would have serious problems trying to reinvent the luxury industry not based on the constant repetition of signs but on a true idea of rarity and exclusivity, to the detriment of risk-taking in terms of innovation.

Selvane Mohandas du Ménil  
Graduate of HEC and IFM

1. This article is a précis of a final year thesis for the IFM.
2. Ralph Nader, a trained lawyer, came to the fore in 1965 by denouncing the manufacturing faults in the Corvair, a General Motors vehicle. The company attempted to put pressure on him but the federal investigation that followed showed that the firm was aware of the faults in the model. The success of this campaign and those that followed in various domains turned consumer rights into a mass movement.
3. Georges Chetochine, *La dérouté des marques* (Brands off the rails), Paris Editions Liaisons/Points de Vente, 1995.
4. They include the Three Mile Island disaster in the United States in 1979 and the Chernobyl Disaster in the USSR in 1986, the Union Carbide disaster in Bhopal India in 1984 which led to 8 000 deaths, or the diverse and spectacular oil slicks the most memorable of which are the Amoco Cadiz off the coast of Brittany in 1978 or the Exxon Valdez in 1989.
5. Stéphane Lauer, "Distribution is helpless faced with alt-consumers", *Le Monde*, July 14<sup>th</sup> 2004.
6. Stéphane Haber, "De la condamnation du luxe à la critique de la société de consommation (From the condemnation of luxury products to a criticism of consumer society)", in *Le luxe, Essais sur la fabrique de l'ostentation*, Paris, IFM/Regard, 2005.
7. Ariès (2004) quoted by François Brune on the RAP website (Résistance à l'Aggression publicitaire et Casseurs de Pub (<http://www.antipub.net>).
8. RATP study, September 2004.
9. Benoît Heilbrunn, "Prisonniers des marques", in *Libération*, March 11<sup>th</sup> 2004.
10. Benoît Heilbrunn, "Du fascisme des marques", in *Le Monde*, April 24<sup>th</sup> 2004.
11. Marie-Claude Sicard, *Luxe, Mensonges et Marketing*, Paris, Editions du village mondial, 2003.
12. This paradox is also the result of historical evolution as described by Bruno Remaury ("Le luxe à l'ère de la reproductibilité technique" in *Le luxe, Essais sur la fabrique de l'ostentation*, Paris, IFM/Regard, 2005). In fact,

the change in the reproduction and distribution methods provoked a massive sea change in the luxury goods business which then became a consumer object. Today, mass production has rendered necessary the establishment of paradoxical methods which enable the product to be marketed as exceptional and express its accessibility/inaccessibility through the use of different brand narratives. In Xavier Pouget's work "*Le paradoxe (nécessaire) de la popularité des marques de luxe*" a thesis from the IFM under Bruno Remaury, 2001.

13. Oliver Horton, "Big luxury labels are losing cachet", in the *IHT* October 9<sup>th</sup> 2002; Mc fashion puts squeeze on middle market" *IHT*, March 10<sup>th</sup> 2004.

14. by Bruno Remaury "Le luxe à l'ère de la reproductibilité technique" in *Le luxe, Essais s.ur la fabrique de l'ostentation*, Paris, IFM/Regard, 2005

15. *Ibid.*

16. Tracie Rozhon, "Luxury Brands are glittering anew", in the *IHT* October 15<sup>th</sup> 2003 ; "Decking the store with no-name brands", in the *IHT* December 11<sup>th</sup> 2002.

17. Stéphane Haber, *op. cit.*

18. For more references to the notion of public space we refer you to the work of J. Devrey (*Le public et ses problèmes*, 1927, Paris, Farago, Léo Scheer 2003) and that of J. Habermas (*L'espace public*, 1962, Paris, Payot 1986).

19. Naomi Klein, *No Logo*.

20. Jeremy Rifkin, *The Age of Access*.

21. Benoît Heilbrunn, *op. cit.*

22. Alessia Vignali, "Where are the youngsters going?", in *Sport & Street* 33 Summer 2004.

23. Alain Quemin quoting Veblen in *Le luxe, Essais sur la fabrique de l'ostentation*, Paris, IFM/Regard, 2005.

24. Dominique Quessada, *La société de consommation de soi*, Paris Editions Verticales, 1999.