

Gentle violence, or brands as the new religion¹

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In today's urban space it is no longer possible to walk for 50 metres without coming across a Nike logo, a Coca cola machine or a Mc Donald's. In a de-politicised and secular society, brands have taken the place of religion by effectively structuring our way of seeing, feeling, acting and thinking. The theological and political demarcation has been usurped by an economic demarcation based on the omnipresence of consumerism and brands. The brand name has acquired a ubiquitous status in as much as the role it plays in today's society could be compared to the role played by God in the Middle Ages: it organises the way people speak, think and act.

This situation has come about through a sort of symbolic violence that we will attempt to analyse here through thefurtive control consumer brands have over the private and social existence of the individual. We will try to define the framework in which this violence operates within a truly subversive and stealthy regime which aims to structure the field of thought and action of consumer-individuals.

Brands and the sensationalisation of violence

Violence is often defined in relation to its Latin etymology (the Latin *violentus* "carried away") to identify the impetuous character of the thing (for example a storm), abstractly "despotic", tyrannical (on power) and imperious (of an order)². Violence is linked to strength in action and most notably strength used against someone else. The term can be applied to anything that

has an intense power for action, that which moves and manifests the idea of power and control. From this specific viewpoint, no one can contest the violent character of brand names in today's consumer society. This violence is used first of all through the powerful media presence of brands whose enormous advertising budgets are sometimes equivalent to that of governments. An individual is exposed to approximately 2 000 logos, 1 500 advertisements per day and knows about 5 000 brand names. A recent report shows that on certain Wednesdays, children between the ages of 6 and 12 can be exposed to as many as 192 advertisements in their TV viewing day, especially for food products and toys whose aims they are not in a position to identify. The same report states that there is no counterbalance to this "spontaneous movement of seduction and invitation to buy which is controlled by no one"³. In the same way, violence manifests itself in a hypnotic way that can provoke a multitude of references in a supermarket; so the frequency of eye batting by women goes from 30 a minute in normal times to 14 a minute when the person finds themselves in front of a shelf, concentrated on what they are seeing⁴.

This violence results in the omnipresence of brands in a consumer society that has eradicated any object that is non-branded. Take for example the Japanese household goods distributor "Muji" whose name literally means "no brand" but has nonetheless become a prestigious brand. In a society that magnifies brands to such an extent and which transforms a non-brand into a brand, the inherent violence becomes ubiquitous enabling it to penetrate almost every level of social life.

In addition, brands are an essential vector in the transmission of this violence, most notable through their advertising strategy which often highlights a power of transformation shown through a violent act. The Lion chocolate bar for example has based its position on its capacity to make us "roar with pleasure". In the same way the chocolate Crunch bar is one that "croustille à tout

casser” (crunches everything down). The link between brands and violence has its origins in the spectacular conception of violence as an “effect” – on objects, on the world and on men. It is related to a paradigm of efficiency based essentially on a logic of visibility of process and results. Violence has become a recurring theme in brand positioning, because it expresses the power of the brand to transform the world and act on the consumer. Violence conveys the value and spectacular aspect of the brand in the purest Western tradition of efficiency. It is conceived as an effect which weighs on the visible and spectacular dimension of the brand linked to its capacity to change the world with its promethean logic.

Entrism or gentle violence

It is now possible to envisage another type of violence which wouldn't so much reflect the effect as the efficiency. Indeed, certain brands use a strategy of entrism in order to infiltrate the daily private life of individuals. Entrism enables brands to abandon their demonstrative powers so as to permeate the lives of individuals and societies on all levels. I call it gentle violence as it is camouflaged in soft clothing all the better to limit the practices and attitudes of individuals. This gentle violence works through a process of immanence which bears witness to a significant change in the role and functions of brands.

Indeed, far from reducing their role to one of identification and differentiation displaying their anthropological nature, commercial brands have become ideological engines which exercise a considerable influence on our way of seeing, thinking and acting. This change in brand function can be explained by a number of factors including the change in the way advertising functions; advertising, by leaving the objective, quantifiable and comparable universe has become a real show. It dramatises lifestyles and myths (created and deformed by marketing) through the gigantic staging of the collective unconscious.

In doing so, brand discourse has deserted the functional character of its products in favour of other imaginary worlds of communication. The brand has thus become an amazing storytelling machine for its consumers as it projects them into a phantasmagorical universe. This ideological control is most notable in the appropriation of almost all of the great myths of the Western collective unconscious (the massive use of Santa Claus by Coca Cola since the fifties, the tales of the Brothers Grimm being adapted by Disney, Barbie becoming the physical ideal for so many little girls, etc.). The ideological control of brands goes way beyond their advertising blurb; brands are no longer content to merely inform us how to use an object, or what to drink when we are thirsty; they also talk to us more and more about our lives and the world at large. Bennetton for example had a tri-monthly magazine (“Colors”) that wrote about the war in Bosnia, the Middle East conflict, as if the brand had appropriated the right and the power to help us understand the workings of global geo-politics (and at the same time uncover the mechanisms of violence itself...). The growing ideological power of brands is doubled with a capacity to penetrate the lives of the consumer on every level. Ubiquity gives brands the ability to squeeze into the lives of the public. Their aim is nothing less than to be present at every important stage of the consumer's life so as to increase the level of consumption and to strengthen the emotional bond with the brand. The work of a brand such as Coca Cola thus aims to optimise consumption by following the individual all through the day; so you will find distributors in places as diverse as schools, stations, companies, sports clubs etc.

In addition to the traditional advertising methods (advertising, attractive packaging, brand characters etc.) certain brands have developed strategies that enable them to touch children of school-going age for example. Even though advertising as such is forbidden within educational establishments, these brands have developed a

school marketing programme which involves coming to the school for supposed educational reasons in order to bring children into contact with the brand's universe, by distributing breakfast (Nesquik) or snacks (Danone), dental hygiene displays (Signal) or distributing samples for school trips (Coca Cola). The advantage of this form of communication is that it benefits from the moral backing of the teacher with the aid of educational kits that can be used in class to increase the attentions levels of the children; eg. the presentation box from Leclerc to explain the workings of the Euro, the Danone kit (Eating for children aged 3 to 6) that explains to children and as such to their mothers, why "snacking is a good habit", or finding maths easier with the "Texas Instruments" kit. These new educational mechanisms using school and publi-promotion can also be used in broader advertising strategies such as Kellogg's "Kelloggs milite en faveur des barres à la récréation" (Kellogg's is in favour of more bars at brektime).

This avalanche of brands that touch children show to what extent brands have attempted to enter the symbolic and private space of consumers so as to follow them throughout their entire lives. Thus Marlboro developed a clothing and accessories line and a string of shops to strengthen their links with the consumer. Brands of sweets such as M&M's or Milka have developed spin-off products (alarms clocks, pencil cases, school bags, cuddly toys) which enable them to become a true partner of the child or adolescent consumer. Beyond the search for the spectacular effect, the aim is to weave a web around the consumer so as to imprison them in the trap of the brand.

From violence as an effect to violence as a process

Violence is no longer effective in this case but it is efficient. It lets the effect happen, it doesn't force things but is on hand to pick up the results⁵. In this case violence is not the direct aim, it is an indirect result, a consequence. It does not attempt here to

remodel the real, to adapt or freeze it using brute strength, but on the contrary it tries to adapt to the daily existence of the consumer and to conform: it is a question of accompaniment rather than trying to act directly on the consumer. Violence is here used at its most extreme as it becomes a part of the way of life rather than upsetting it. This connection of violence has its roots in the very Chinese notion of effect. Unlike the violent effect which can be explained, produced and ended, the process has an operating dimension. Going from process to effect, the violence occurs as part of a method. For example let's take how plants grow. In order to make a plant grow we cannot resort to violence, neither can we ignore the importance of weeding around the plant to encourage growth in favourable conditions. One cannot force a plant to grow but one cannot ignore it either; one must let it grow by freeing it from that which hampers its development. We can legitimately transfer this plant metaphor to the universe of consumerism and consider the individual/consumer as a plant that cannot be directly acted upon. It is a question of creating the conditions for the process of violence which enables the surreptitious influence on the attitudes and behaviour of the individual.

This capacity for transforming spectacular violence into immanent violence is very well illustrated by the detergent Mr. Muscle. The character was created to play the role of a brand icon that could penetrate the private world of the housewife without necessarily creating a domestic disturbance with her husband who has spent his day at the office. If the official version is a fairy tale genie, the actual character is a eunuch as is evident from his earring, symbol of his belonging to a harem and above all his status of devoted servant. This manipulation of violence through the androgynisation of the character enables him to scrub away in the privacy of Madame's home without causing trouble in the household. In addition, the brand's advertising strategy has moved on in recent years from a show of force and effec-

tiveness to a furtive strategy which aims to penetrate the private lives of the consumer through spin-off products (T-shirts with Mr. Muscle, alarm clocks etc.) as well as advertising gimmicks linked to events (for example the high exposure of the brand around Mother's Day). The character no longer represents a strong brute capable of cleaning away dirt; he represents a purposefully effeminate character who accompanies the housewife in all of her household chores.

Brand trinitities

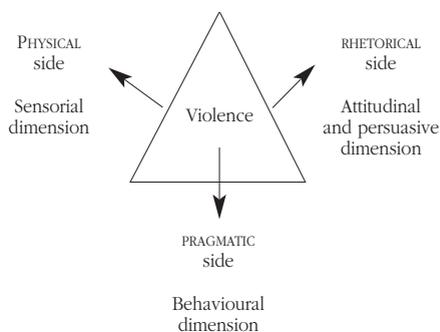
The gentle violence is rooted in the symbolic nature of the brand in as much as, according to Serge Tisseron, the symbol is a constant throwback to the mystery of the Trinity⁶. Establishing a regime of immanence for violence goes way beyond the strict framework of merely showing an effect ; it now covers up a process that engages three complementary threads, that is to say:

Firstly, a physical thread essentially linked to the sensorial dimension of the brand, to its tangible aspects that can be felt directly by the consumer using his or her senses (colour and odour of products, texture, materials, etc.). The attraction that certain brands have for consumers is often expressed through the material aspects of the brand. A few examples are P'tit Dop shampoo which is said to smell good, doesn't sting your eyes and its container looks like a fish the child can play with in the bath, the anthropo-morphic toothbrushes from Signal or the Pim's biscuit (that confesses to be looking for a consenting adult to share lust). Secondly, a rhetorical side linked to the persuasive and discursive dimension of the brand and manifests a belief in the ideology it defends. This particular violence works on individuals from the inside by modelling and adapting their attitude systems (through the creation of strong identification models) and behaviour. This is transmitted notably by a violence of language which aims to constrain the consumer using diverse methods. This can be giving an order by using the imperative (example the Apple slogan

"Think Different" which implies "feel different", "act different" and in the end "live different"), to the indicative which annihilates any idea of subject (for example the Coca Cola slogan "Sourire la vie" (smile life)) or linguistic simplification (through brief slogans such as Sony's "Go create" or Nike's "Just do it"). Rhetorical violence aims to control language so as to reach an univocal meaning⁷. Rather than exploding meaning it seeks rather to contain it so as to develop their control over consumers.

And finally, a pragmatic side that harks back to the brand's capacity to make the consumer act (try, buy, advise etc.) and which is orchestrated through the ability to significantly modify buying and consuming practices. The brand Nesquik when it was brought out as a syrup claimed in its advertising campaign to "transform a healthy snack from idon'twant to iwantmore" showing the brand's capacity to modify children's behaviour. In the same way the work of designers aims to modify or create habits or sequences of gestures. Thus the Mach III razor from Gillette causes the consumer to develop the habit of a sequence of gestures which prevents them from changing brands afterwards.

Diagram 1: The three sides of the gentle violence of brands



Group violence

Through constant attempts to strengthen the link with their consumer using methods involving loyalty, faith and even control, brands become an inescapable partner in the life of the consumer. This strategy of entrism aims, through a fake strategy of hospitality, to enclose the consumer in a tight ideological space while giving them the illusion of choice and variety. For example, the recurring theme of conviviality which enables the brand to slip slyly from “you” to “us” for example; “à nous de vous faire préférer le train” (its up to us to make you prefer the train) from the SNCF, or “le plus important c’est vous” (you are the most important), thus creating a sense of community in which the consumer is merely an oblige. Another example of the annihilation of any idea of difference is the growing porosity between the private space of the individual and the public arena shown by the transformation of commercial spaces into “espaces de vie” (living spaces). This blur between commercial space and domestic space enables brands to enter the private lives of the individual and welcome the consumer into commercial spaces as if they were at home, resulting in slogans such as “Bienvenu chez vous” (Welcome home) for promotional operations in certain shopping centres.

The relational function that once characterised advertising has become a part of the brand itself which then becomes a veritable life partner for the individual providing physical goods but also emotional support. The brand ultimately plays on the theological-political classic of the good Pastor leading his flock to happiness. So Dominique Quessada reminds us “the performances (of the brand) are today measured by its capacity to carry out an integrating aggregating function which is part of all human organisation: making the subjects subject to power. In order to do so they must calm the anxiety that is part of every human subject (a talking subject but one that can always be won over by a

unifying power speech) with a two-sided discourse, one threatening and one reassuring⁸.

This faculty for projection into an ideal universe can be taken as the capital transforming political act of any big brand name. In this way the brand attempts to mould and model the consumer in his very being enabling him to better define himself while dictating the rules by which he must live. They would appear tempted to recuperate the political notion of the common good by extracting it from the public arena and containing it in the sphere of the brand’s merchandise. All brand master plans are buttressed on the creation of a sort of common good (one of the founding principles of the French State) in which the word good must be understood as a theological term, especially in French culture, to do good from the point of view of God who is the good sovereign to which all notions of good are linked⁹.

So there is an eminently religious character to this violence as the brand takes up the idea of a powerful “benevolent” entity and rationalises the religious idea that is at the origin of this power and which gives meaning to our existence. There is a political edge in that the linking function of brands sets up a two-way system: between particular individuals and a brand on the one hand (according to a principle of segmentation), and on the other hand between individuals themselves, giving the impression of a community; giving rise to notions of relational marketing, tribal marketing or brand communities. However, the idea of community promoted by brands does not reflect a positive vision of community as a vaster subjectivity, but more like the Latin *communitas* linked to the notion of *munus* intimately linked to the idea of “duty” (obligation, charge, office, function)¹⁰. The *munus* is a particular gift which denotes an exchange; it is the gift we give because we must give something and we cannot not give. It is a tithe or a forfeit paid under obligation which is not unrelated to the etymology of symbol (the *simnolon* comes

from *sumboleo*) which besides notions of closeness, adjustment, cross roads, confluence or even junction, meaning also convention, contract, but also the idea of a due, meaning debt¹¹. The common is not characterised here by owning, but by the improper, or more radically by the other. It involves a sort of de-proprietation which takes over and destabilises the consumer, forcing him to come out of himself, to change. Thus brands are the direct rivals of religion and politics as they never cease to think of themselves as a means of organising and regulating the social fabric. From this point of view, they orchestrate a veritable political project in as much as politics is the art of unification - trying to create unity from a group. Violence becomes emblematic here taking the origins of the term emblem from the Greek “emballo” meaning “throw inside something”. Far from any spectacular effect, this violence illustrates the strong ideological power of brands which goes way beyond commercial life, changing our relationship with the world, with others and even with our own bodies.

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1. This paper is the written version of a talk given during the “Perspectives Internationales 2005” day at the IFM.

2. See the Dictionnaire Historique de la langue française.

3. Extract from a report by Monique Dagnaud quoted in *Le Monde*, March 5th 2002, p. 21.

4. Example quoted in *Le Merchandising. Techniques Modernes du commerce du détail* by André Fady and Michel Seret, Paris, Vuilbert, 3rd Edition, 1994, p. 92.

5. François Jullien, *La propension des choses. Pour une histoire de l'efficacité en Chine*, Paris, Le Seuil. Republished by le Livre de poche, p. 206.

6. Serge Tisseron in fact proposes the emblematic and mythological analogy of the Holy Trinity in order to understand these three complementary facets of symbolisation. Symbolisation harks back to the figure of a two-sided God (as a figure of sensorial, emotional and motor symbolisation), of Christ made in his father's image (as the prototype of all images), of the Holy Spirit (as the word) in *Petites Mythologies d'Aujourd'hui*, Paris, Aubier, 2000, p. 42.

7. As Dominique Quessada proved so completely in *L'esclavemaitre*, Paris, Editions Verticales, 2002.

8. Dominique Quessada *La consommation de soi*, Paris, Editions Verticales, p. 140.

9. Alain Guéry, “L'Etat. L'outil du bien commun” in Pierre Nora (dir.), *Les lieux de mémoire*, 3, second edition 1997, Paris, Gallimard, p. 4552.

10. Here, we are following the analysis of Roberto Esposito, *Communitas*, Paris, PUF, 2000.

11. Régis Debray, “Truismes” in *Les Cahiers de Médilogie* 12, Automobile, 2nd semester 2001, Paris, Gallimard, p. 30-31.