

Shadowdance:

Transcendental metaphor in Apple's iPod Advertisement Campaign

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The transcendence of being is fundamentally this nothingness. When an object appears in the beyond of nothingness—in a certain sense, as a given fact of nothingness—the object transcends us... A real or unreal existence (a person, a god, or a state), by threatening others with death, heightens within itself its transcendent nature. Its essence is given to me in the nothingness that my limits define.

-Georges Bataille: On Nietzsche, pg. 188

Floating in empty fluorescent space, a shadow taps, nods and thrusts to the sound of a tame amalgam of formerly subversive pop genres. This sound is apparently entering the shadow through the iPod attached to its head via inner-ear headphones. It is impossible to decipher whether the camera is zooming in or the shadow is growing because all that is presented is the shadow and the iPod, and a spaceless space, leaving the viewer without a sense of scale. The shadow is in a restless state of ecstatic expression through movement, the motions of which incorporate the gadget seamlessly as if it were an extension. The twenty six-second song-byte fits perfectly, punctuating the conclusion of the sequence with the last chord of the first refrain of the chorus as the shadow harmonizes with a pose of equivalent punctuation. We realize the shadow had been wearing the earpieces from before the beginning until after the end of the sequence. What would happen if the shadow were to take the earpieces out? We're not allowed to find out.

Apple has stuck to the above template for advertising its iPod with mechanical consistency. After all, a good advertisement is one that can be inserted into a network of repetition while masking its own repetition for just long enough to crawl its way into the consumer's subconscious. However, these commercials are more than effective advertisement. Their imagery is explicitly transcendently themed: it reduces reality to that which is inside the listener, that which is outside, and the iPod in-between. There is some kind of crossing, through the avenue of the gadget, implied by the synchronization of the dancers movements with the music. Through this transcendental imagery iPod commercials re-present an ecstatic state of consumed escape. The iPod is a devise that releases personal freedom and logic amid the contemporary noise of fluorescent glow. However, this devise, which awakens an inner expression of private musical dialogue, is

also a censoring of perception. The experience becomes a controlled and repeated escape, a self-slavery.

The Transcendent:

The relationship between the visual imagery of these commercials and the classical enlightenment conception of transcendence is a complex and contradictory one. In the first section of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, entitled *Transcendental Doctrine of Elements*, Immanuel Kant defines transcendence as divorced from the senses:

I call all representations pure, in the transcendental meaning of the word, wherein nothing is met with that belongs to sensation. And accordingly we find existing in the mind a priori, the pure form of sensuous intuitions in general, in which all the manifold content of the phenomenal world is arranged and viewed under certain relations. [...] These belong to pure intuition, which exists a priori in the mind, as a mere form of sensibility, and without any real object of the senses or any sensation.¹

So, perception makes knowledge impure. To approach the transcendental is to approach the limits of perception, and of the self. Within the confines of perception the main principle of organization is space, so the transcendent must negate space:

Space is nothing else than the form of all phenomena of the external sense, that is, the subjective condition of the sensibility, under which alone external intuition is possible. [...] It is therefore from the human point of view only that we can speak of space, extended objects, etc. If we depart from the subjective condition, under which alone we can obtain external intuition, or, in other words, by means of which we are affected by objects, the representation of space has no meaning whatsoever.²

In other words, to escape external intuition and cross the transcendental boundary into the pure (objective) intuition is to forfeit the laws of space as they are precisely that which confines us to our status quo mode of subjective perception.

¹ Kant, Immanuel, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, (<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext03/cprn10.txt>), accessed 14 March 2007.

² Ibid.

[...] that which is originally a mere phenomenon, a rose, for example, is taken by the empirical understanding for a thing in itself, though to every different eye, in respect of its colour, it may appear different. On the contrary, the transcendental conception of phenomena in space is a critical admonition, that, in general, nothing which is intuited in space is a thing in itself, and that space is not a form which belongs as a property to things; but that objects are quite unknown to us in themselves, and what we call outward objects, are nothing else but mere representations of our sensibility, whose form is space, but whose real correlate, the thing in itself, is not known by means of these representations, nor ever can be, but respecting which, in experience, no inquiry is ever made.³

Kant proposes a project in search of objective knowledge. The path to which is a transcendental bridge from external intuition to pure intuition. The necessary outcome of which would be the abandonment of space. This spatial erasure was gap between perception and pure reason or God.

Shown:

The color scheme of the iPod advertising campaign is restricted to no more than three colors at a time: black for the dancing shadow, white for the iPod, and a fluorescent color for the spaceless backdrop. When put into the context of Kantian transcendence these three visual elements develop interesting relationships.

The featurelessness of the dancing shadow encourages affinity with the viewer. The shadow's gender and ethnicity are vaguely apparent, but nothing else of its identity is revealed. The viewer gets the sense of "insert yourself here." This implied unanimity is both important in making the advertisement effective across cultures and gender, but also as a symbol for the political economy which reproduced it. The iPod commercials have the sense that the dancers are just on the verge of oblivion. If it weren't for the device pumping them into action they would be left floating featurelessly in spaceless space. Perhaps Kant would jump at the opportunity to pull out his headphones and cross over into the eternity of pure reason. But for the shadow it is precisely this state of being on the boundary line that is so ecstatic. A state that is effortlessly maintainable through mobile digital repetition.

³ *ibid.*

While the headphones seem a boundary between the shadow and the spacelessness, they are at the same time represented by that spacelessness. The history of headphone development is a path literally deeper into the consumer's ear. The goal has always been the erasure of space in the name of control. The headphones in the iPod commercials, being literally inserted into the ear, are the end of an era of headphone development, having reached the physical limit of possible spatial erasure. So, maybe Kant would keep his headphones in. If only it were that easy

This spatial erasure was not the expression of some natural transcendental urge but rather the byproduct of a movement towards privatized mass manufactured musical experience. In his essay, *Thinking about Sound, Proximity, and Distance in Western Experience: The case of Odysseus's Walkman*, Michael Bull observes that

Over the past forty years, Western consumers have been provided with a wide range of communication technologies that enable them to transform both the experience of movement and the spaces they move through. These technologies of "movement" are largely aural—the cassette player in the automobile, the personal stereo, and now the mobile phone (Bull 2001; Katz and Aakhus 2002). Much movement through the city is solitary, between destinations and meetings. This is a more literal form of mobile privatization in which sole occupancy is often the preferred mode of travel in automobiles (Brodsky 2002), while personal stereo use is by its very nature privatizing.⁴

The iPod is the latest extension of privatizing mobile technologies that began with the automobile. Several authors have commented on the effect of the automobile on the soundscape, most appropriately R. Murray Schafer. During his discussion of noise legislation he notes that:

When at last the legislators of European towns were able to conclude that the problem of street music had been solved, they failed to appreciate the correct reason for it. It was not the result of centuries of legislative refinement but the invention of the automobile that muffled the voices of the street cries.⁵

⁴ Bull, Michael, 'Sound, Proximity, and Distance in Western Experience: The Case of Odysseus's Walkman,' in Viet Erlmann ed., *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening and Modernity* (New York, NY: Berg, 2004) pg.177.

⁵ Schafer, R. Murray, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the Modern World* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books 1994) pg. 67.

Shafer is referencing the introduction of the car to the urban landscape during the early twentieth century. The conversion of pedestrians to drivers was a serious blow to the economy of the street musician. The street performer took another economic hit with the introduction of the Walkman. Those potential customers that were left still walking the streets had also rolled up their windows. A street performer these days spends much of his/her time watching shadows pass by as they nod inwardly to themselves.

It seems more reasonable to equate iPod commercials with a desire, widely held by consumers, to privatize experience and escape the noise of the than it does to equate them with residual transcendental desire lingering from the enlightenment. Michael Bull quotes an interviewee as saying:

“I think personal space is gone, in town anyway. Everyone’s packed in. I think it’s inverted. Because I think your personal space is inside, in the music. You can be in a crowd in town and everybody’s crunching up. If you listen to the Walkman, it doesn’t really matter that someone’s pushing up behind you” (Paul)⁶

This statement contradicts transcendental rhetoric by privileging a traveling inward. It is a doubly inward trajectory (“personal space *inside, in* the music”), rather than a trajectory outward and over. The surroundings of the listener are undesirably overbearing. But here is where Paul and Kant come in tune: the Walkman provides momentary escape from perception, and an erasure of space. The major difference being Paul is in pursuit of a subjective space of comfort, while Kant is after objective eternity.

Bull’s fieldwork, though deeply insightful, neglects an important demographic by focusing on urban Walkman users. The equal use of the iPod among suburban consumers makes the picture of desire and fulfillment more complex. No longer are listeners pushing up behind each other, and the noise of street performers was never there to begin with. Is there a suburban noise these listeners are escaping from? In her essay *Apocalypse in Suburbia* Mikita Brottman describes a suburban mode of perception:

Since their original conception as a utopian retreat for middle-class families, the American suburbs have come to be seen as increasingly ominous and are now an important annex of that terrifying place known as "out there." This is society's boiler room, the home of rapists, shoe-bombers, pedophiles, family annihilators, snuff movie-makers, internet

⁶ Bull, pg. 185

porn-fiends, and other fashionable demons. Belief in such a place is itself supported by the assumption that it is the evil people "out there" who are responsible for the horrors that occur on a daily basis in American society.⁷

This culture of fear that has become closely associated with suburbia adds an interesting layer to the psychology of an iPod user. While urban claustrophobia is the product of an overabundance of external objects closing in and collapsing surrounding physical space, suburban claustrophobia comes from the amplification of the spaces between objects. Horrible danger seems to be hiding and on the verge of emerging from the fabric at any moment.

If we are to make this leap, from urban claustrophobia contributing to the desire of consumers to privatize space with their iPods to suburban claustrophobia having the same effect, we come to yet another contradiction with the Kantian conception of the transcendental. The suburban fear that Brottman analyzes is a hyperreal external intuition. A mode of perception in which as the spaces between objects expand new hyperreal images emerge. The fact that these images are projections of fear makes them easy to equate to the arrows in Jean Baudrillard's essay *Hypermarket and Hypercommodity*:

From thirty kilometers all around, the arrows point you toward these large triage centers that are hypermarkets, toward this hyperspace of the commodity where in many regards a whole new sociality is elaborated.⁸

The iPod is the new ultimate in a long line of ultimate hypercommodities: a technology designed to escape technology.

Hidden:

Thus far I have discussed what is visually represented in the iPod commercials. However, the sign of any good advertisement is that it can sell you something without

⁷ Brottman, Mikita, 'Apocalypse in Suburbia,' (<http://www.uiowa.edu/~englgrad/ijcs/sub/subfeat.htm>), accessed 14 March 2007.

⁸ Baudrillard, Jean, *Simulacra and Simulation*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994). Pg. 75

telling you it's selling you something. Therefore it is equally important analyze what is not represented, what is hidden.

The most immediately blatant absence is the band. We are not allowed to equate a body to with the production of the sound. These commercials simultaneously glorify digital repetition and suppress performance. We are not even told the name of the band with a quick blurb at the end. All this to the disdain of many viewers: While searching for iPod commercials on youtube.com I noted the most common question under the "question and comments" window was: "Who band is this?"

There are many possible explanations for the erasure of the musician. One would be the practical advertising strategy of not confusing the consumer with more than one product. The subconscious desire of the consumer is displaced onto the iPod, while surface consciousness is being entertained by catchy dance-rock. This seems like a fine strategy for Apple, yet the arrangement seems anything but mutually beneficial. Why would the producers of said dance-rock agree to make their product available without a direct plug?

The days of the hit-parade hierarchy are over, and the use-value of pop music is morphing. In *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* Jacques Attali describes the use value in the hit parade as follows:

For the use-value of a song is not only reflected, but also created by its place on the hit parade: a title that no longer ranks has no use value. It is therefore essential that the consumer believe in the legitimacy of this hierarchy, which reflects and creates value. Thus the hit parade must appear to be both an expression of sales figures... and a prediction of future success. The result is an ambiguous mixture based on sales figures, with listener preference supposedly playing a role in the ranking.⁹

This complex self-generating and self-perpetuating structure that combined advertisement and consumption into one simultaneity would have been impossible without the technology of the radio. But with the mass migration of consumers away from the radio and towards mp3 players comes a change in structure. This new system has more to do with supposed consumer choice than it does with supposed consumer preference. The sequencing of songs is now the responsibility of the iPod user. DJ booths collect dust,

⁹ Attali, Jacques, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press) pg. 107.

remote controlled by higher forces. What else is a producer of radio-friendly pop to do in a post-radio era other than figure out a way to get a plug on TV?

There are two iPod commercials which are exceptions to the template, one of them featuring music by U2 and the other music by Bob Dylan. In both of these examples the musicians are represented performing the music, though still in silhouette amid a spaceless backdrop. (It seems that not even the voice of a generation could escape this spaceless space, nor avoid making the move to the post-radio plug). Why only represent the musicians whose images are common knowledge? Is the obvious silhouette of Bono's huge sunglasses necessary? Why repeat something that is, regrettably in some cases, already branded onto the consumers sub-conscious, an image eternally linked to a sound? These musical celebrities are remnants of a bi-gone era, Dylan representing the beginning and U2 the end of the age of the hit parade. It is this celebrity image created by the now powerless radio that contains marketing power. If you're shelling out the big bucks to get Bob Dylan to play harmonica in a void, you might as well cash in on everything it's worth.

An equally important exclusion is the absence of referential cultural memorabilia on the anonymous dancing shadow. The fact that it is always in silhouette means that we don't know if this shadow dancing to a garage band that sounds like a tame version of *AC/DC* is actually wearing a *Village People* t-shirt.

The more that pop music has been associated with consumable identity the more that musical fashion has become an important indicator of cultural inclusion/exclusion.

Little by little, [mass music] establishes the youth as a separate, adulated society with its own interests and its own culture different from that of the adults, its own heroes and battles. In fact, even the idealized form of the Beatles' docile pseudorevolt, it assured that the young people were very effectively socialized, in a world of pettiness constructed by adults. The cultural universe of this music produced by adults organizes group uniformity. The music is experienced as relation, not as spectacle; as a factor of unanimity and exclusion in relation to the world of adults, not as individual differentiation.¹⁰

Attali's above analysis of the connection between youth culture and mass repeated music is closely linked to the time in which the book was written. In the decade to come this

¹⁰ Ibid. pg. 109-110.

theme of cultural separation and exclusion would multiply and fragment through the youth culture that Attali considers to be singular. The short history of punk is one example of this paradigm. The original punk ideology went further than Attali in proclaiming the “Beatles’ pseudorevolt” a false revolt. Many of these early punks saw themselves revolting against both the adult world and that of adulated youth. Their project was an exclusive return to spectacle. This era saw the rise of the band t-shirt which became more than an advertisement and/or plug, and transcended to a social statement of exclusion/inclusion. The wearer communicates through her/his clothing both a cultural identity that sets them apart from other youths while simultaneously including them in a subculture of unanimity:

What matters now is the difference of the group as a whole from what it was the day before, and no longer the differences within the group.¹¹

Revealed:

The shadow is revealed as more than an invitation to self-displacement; it is the denial of sub-cultural exclusion. Not only are these shadows sympathetic in their ethnic and cultural unanimity, but their sub-cultural unanimity as well. They are apocalyptic symbols of our present and past reality:

Mass music is thus a powerful factor in consumer integration, interclass leveling, cultural homogenization. It becomes a factor in centralization, cultural normalization, and the disappearance of distinctive cultures.¹²

When considered in these terms, the iPod commercials are about inclusion and insertion only on the surface. Beneath is the late-capitalist desire to flatten culture to one homogenous shadow. To reduce culture to that which is inside and that which is not creates the highest economic efficiency. Punk did not frighten the rock n roll capitalists for they foresaw Ashley Simpson wearing a t-shirt that proclaimed in pink lettering: “PUNK.” (See Ashley Simpson’s video for “Pieces”)

If Attali is right when he writes that “power, which in representation is delegated, in repetition is appropriated by a knowledge wielding minority”¹³, then the iPod

¹¹ Ibid. pg. 110.

¹² Ibid. pg. 112.

commercials, as classic examples of the era of repetition, must fit into this paradigm. Even during the hierarchy of the hit parade there was a very vague semblance of differentiation. Songs were linked to iconic musical celebrities, the success of whom seemed more dependent on the craft of the public performative persona than on the craft of the music. The largeness of these icons backgrounded the knowledge-wielding minority. In other words, the representative backgrounded the repetitive. However, these commercials step completely out of the representative and into the repetitive through the disappearing of the performative icon. Suddenly, the knowledge wielders seem more exposed, and dangerously close to forcing the consumer to question. After all, “who is this band?” logically leads to “who chose this band?” Whether over-confidence or blind ignorance, this approach seems uniquely and dangerously self-revelatory.

While iPod commercials can represent the final step out of the residue of the era of representation and into complete submergence in the era of repetition, they also represent a more specifically economic shift to our current era of the digital monopoly. The project of the hit parade was precisely to trap desire in songs and personas it produced:

Contrary to currently fashionable notions, the triumph of capitalism, whether private or State, is not that it was able to trap the desire to be different in the commodity, but rather that it went far beyond that, making people accept identity in mass production as a collective refuge from powerlessness and isolation.¹⁴

Whether said commodity be a performer or her songs themselves, the brilliance of the hit parade was the manufacture of desire through mass repetition. The brilliance being that while the desire seemed to be for a specific song, it was in fact for any song that the hit parade churned out. Attali’s analysis was true, but its reality was hidden beneath layers of repetition pretending to be representation. However, the iPod commercials present a much more simple and lucent set of relationships. A song in the radio era was successful if it could put difference within sameness. However, the iPod commercials are selling a device, which they (ironically) already have a virtual monopoly on. It is not important for them to background sameness by inserting difference. Rather, it is precisely to their

¹³ Ibid. pg. 121.

¹⁴ Ibid. pg. 121.

benefit that the consumer knowingly “accept identity in mass production as a collective refuge from powerlessness and isolation.”

Noise:

These commercials represent the current economy in which power is even more centralized. They are different from Attali’s apocalyptic musicology in that they are the political economic present marked with its past. Apple doesn’t hide its operations of desire displacement because it doesn’t have to. All that Apple has to do is keep finding tame pop-rock. This tameness of the music is perhaps the most important part of the equation. As Simon Reynolds puts it,

If music is like a language, if it communicates some kind of emotional or spiritual message, then noise is best defined as interference, something which blocks transmission, jams the code, prevents sense being made. The subliminal message of most music is that the universe is essentially benign, that if there is sadness or tragedy, this is resolved on some higher harmony.¹⁵

It is this message of promised repeatable return to harmony, not the gadget, that Apple is really advertising. Without music that provides this function the iPod is useless: even with the earpieces in, the shadow would be lost in the rhythmless space that always surrounds it. Reynolds goes on to write that

Noise then, occurs when language breaks down. Noise is a wordless state in which the very constitution of ourselves is in jeopardy. The pleasure of noise lies in the fact that the obliteration of meaning and identity is ecstasy (literally being out-of-oneself).¹⁶

Suddenly the transcendental rhetoric returns, but in the form of opposition to the world presented in the iPod commercials. Reynolds, in line with Kant’s transcendence, sees noise producing a disappearance of spatial relationships that leads to the obliteration of the subjective. However, the end of which is not pure reason, he sees God as total disorder.

¹⁵ Reynolds, Simon, ‘Noise,’ in Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner ed., *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2004), pg. 55.

¹⁶ Ibid. pg. 56.

Perhaps noise reinforces the iPod campaign by making the return to order all the more relieving. The harmonious message that Apple is using to sell its product makes the iPod seem like a medication that the patient may self-prescribe to restore subjective order. This relates back to the Michael Bull piece and his conception of “ontological security”:

Walkman practices of aesthetic colonization appear to be both utopian—and hence transcendent in character—and located firmly in alienating and objectifying cultural predispositions that deny difference within culture (Sennett 1990) “The absence of encounters with different subjects is more restful, since it never puts our own identity into question.” (Todorov 1993: 344) [...] Sound and forms of “ontological security” appear to be closely related in the world of Walkman desires. If consumers are seeking ontological security through consumption, then the consumption of sound is highly successful in operationalizing this desire. States of “we-ness” are indeed states of ontological security.¹⁷

This discrepancy between Reynolds’ ecstasy in the obliteration of meaning, and Bull’s establishment of consumable “we-ness” as a post-modern transcendental quality mirrors the discrepancies between the Kantian and the iPodian transcendental. For Kant transcendence is a willed journey of the intellect outward and over. Like the transcendental of both Georges Bataille and Reynolds, it is a challenge to the self. It is a conceptual impossibility in its sacredness. In the utopia of the iPod transcendence flows in the opposite direction: music is something that happens to you, rather than you to it. This disseminatory power of music connects iPod listeners to each other, they transcend sub-cultural boundaries, and their iPods become tickets to Shadowland: a realm of higher harmonies voiced by overly compressed guitars and spunky vocals accompanied by beats you can dance to.

¹⁷ Bull, pg. 188.

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