Marketing: the Primitive, Technology and Horror

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The primitive, technology and horror – why do three seemingly unrelated elements come together in marketing images to express new paradigms of life? Based in theories in postmodern biology, this paper argues that such elements express the polymorphic structures of identity in a technocultural world. Using poststructural literary and film criticism on dirt, horror and abjection, we analyse a 2005 advertisement for Audi entitled Spider. We find that through the themes of metamorphosis and primal technology, emergent identities are visualised that exceed the limits of the human body and traditional signifying practices, encouraging debate as to what counts as living in the 21st century.

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Marketing the Primitive, Technology and Horror
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
How do the seemingly unrelated elements of the primitive, technology and horror come together to produce new identities and conceptions of life in marketing communications? Are all advertisements, which produce a type of “anti-aesthetic”, unintentional mistakes on the part of the producer and repellent to the visual consumer, as dominant interpretations of advertising would suggest (Shimp et al. 2004)? This paper argues that marketing images can present the consumer with an ambivalent visual encounter, one in which the very notion of the aesthetic is thrown into question. Some research in marketing has recognised the fascination and dread, the marvel and the horror that encounters with such images produce (Schroeder and Borgerston 2003; Toffoletti 2003; Goulding, Saren and Follet 2003). Many of these images incorporate a strange blend of the primitive, technology and horror, integrating themes of pre- and post-modernity, science and sorcery, progress and decline. This paper argues that such “strangeness” has led to the production of an aesthetic which combines the seemingly contradictory elements of the primitive, technology and horror to produce alternative paradigms of life—and new identities—in an age of technoculture.

The paper first considers the role of technology in disrupting “human” being and creating phenomena for which traditional discourses find it difficult to account. We are at a time in history when our acquired perceptions of the subject are being radically questioned, especially by new technologies (Braidotti 1994, Braidotti 2005). According to the feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti, we live in the times of the “postmodern Gothic” (2005:173) where the social imaginary of post-industrial societies produces teratological, monstrous formations—monsters precisely because their technological character transgresses conventions of taxonomical description.

We then discuss the interrelations of the primitive, technology and horror. Technological progress is not a force that is unique to modern “civilised” society; it is intimately bound with art and antiquity—the primitive and the technological arise from the same logic (Heidegger 1977). Further, many subcultures of high technology incorporate primitive icons of shamanism, esotericism, the occult and mythology into their philosophies, exhibiting a strange aesthetic of “technological primitivism” (Davis 1999; Kozinets 2001). Horror is sometimes conceived of as a liberatory, avant-garde, or even postmodern genre because its function is to disturb cultural and ideological categories we may have taken for granted, leading, like technology and the primitive, to a sense of ambivalence (Carroll 1990; Halberstam 1995). Illustrative examples of images and figures in marketing communications that stage the primitive, technology and horror are then presented. Here, ambivalence and liminality become manifest. We argue that postmodern perspectives of biology may provide a useful way for thinking about existence in a technocultural era. Biology as the science of life and the study of living organisms has been extremely influential in shaping the borders of existence—where life begins and ends. The idea of postmodern biology offers an alternative perspective of the subject in late modernity. Contemporary theorists such as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (2004) and Scott Lash (2001), as well as literary writers such as John Updike and William Burroughs, and film directors such as like David Cronenberg have attempted to invent paradigms of life in the interstices of the organic and machinic. What is created is a type of “posthuman biology”, with the potential to demonstrate that concepts such as “biology” and “anatomy” are not essential, a priori categories, but are themselves products of technoculture (Shaviro 1995:38). This leads to a paradigm of life where “no objects, spaces, or bodies are sacred in themselves; any component can be interfaced with any other if the proper standard, the proper code, can be constructed for processing signals in a common language” (Haraway 1991).

We use poststructural literary and film criticism to analyse in detail Audi’s 2005 advertisement Spider, relating its visual aesthetic to the film work of Ridley Scott and David Cronenberg. Drawing on the literary work on dirt, horror and abjection by Mary Douglas, Julia Kristeva and Judith Halberstam, as well as poststructural film analysis of the Alien trilogy (1979, 1986, 1997), we present how the technocultural imagination can be identified in the forms of horror it produces.

We contend that this advertisement combines elements of the primitive, technology and horror to introduce alternative ideas about identity. Metamorphing and primal technology emerge as important concepts in this advertisement. When something transgresses its boundaries, such as the ‘morphing’ spider-machine we see in this advertisement, it horrifies because it undermines conventional binary constructs and the natural humanist order. Both Donna Haraway (1997) and Rosi Braidotti (2005) have noticed how contemporary technologies have caused many systems, objects and bodies to exceed their boundaries—the “gene”, the “ecosystem”, the “database”, the “cellular automaton” or the “computer” seem unencapsurable, unbounded, difficult to capture, a symptom of the western era of high-technology. Further, in the Spider advertisement, the viewer is encouraged to contemplate a seemingly paradoxical scene of technology as a primal, instinctual force, something which seems to contradict and undermine its signified “progress through technology”. Primal technology implies that technology is not a sterile, inanimate instrument that the human has mastery over. Rather, the dirt and dampness of primal technology suggests an animate, sweating, breathing life-force; a concept which works to disrupt our normal, humanist instrumental perspective of technology.

This paper highlights how concepts in science and technology are used in philosophy and literature, and drawn into visual texts such as film and advertising. We conclude that “darker” advertisements not only disrupt advertising convention, they inaugurate a new kind of ambivalent aesthetic, one deserving of further study. Sometimes in visual culture we are presented with concepts that disrupt the classic humanist view of technology associated with progress, the primitive with pre-technology, horror with fear. This can result in the production of entities which are “ontologically confusing” (Haraway 2000). Spider collapses the ancient into the high-tech, reflecting attempts in the cultural imagination to understand technology in a longer line of forces and fantasies in the cultural imaginary.

Reference


The Carnal Feminine: Womanhood, Advertising and Consumption
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ABSTRACT
This is a study of the identification of women with carnality and nature in contemporary television advertisements, and the age-old social and cultural values that underpin this association. A selection of current UK television advertisements--for food, toiletry and cosmetic products--are discussed in relation to this conflation, under three key themes: the erotic, the carnivalesque and the pornographic. The paper concludes by speculating on why this identification remains ubiquitous in our culture, and whether this should be a matter of concern, from a feminist perspective, or whether it should be viewed as a harmless, ironic, postmodern trope in our culture.

INTRODUCTION
Advertisements are myth carriers in our culture, rich with symbolic and metaphorical content (Hirschman, 2000). They are also a mirror reflecting the beliefs and values of the wider socio-cultural milieu within which they are situated, reiterating and sustaining the norms and values of a culture. These values are conveyed through the language, imagery, rhetoric and symbolic signs used in advertising texts, and such texts communicate with us at a profound, emotional level, drawing on deep-rooted cultural meanings that are embedded in our collective cultural consciousness (McCracken, 1988; Thompson, 2004; Holt, 2004). This is a study of the identification of women with carnality in contemporary television advertisements addressing women, the socio-cultural values that underpin this association, and the wider implications of this age-old identification of womanhood with nature.

In order to unravel the complex strands of meanings and signs embedded in advertisements, we will discuss a selection of current television advertisements in the UK that, we argue, provide examples of three key aspects of this overarching conflation of womanhood and carnality. These we describe as the erotic, the carnivalesque and the pornographic. We will conclude by speculating on why the identification of womanhood and carnality remains ubiquitous in advertising texts in our culture, and whether this should be a matter for concern, from a feminist perspective, or whether it should be viewed as an ironic, postmodern, post-women liberation trope that no longer has oppressive power in our culture.

THE CARNAL FEMININE
According to the Oxford English Dictionary, carnal means ‘of the body or flesh; worldly’. Its secondary meaning is ‘worldly, sensual, sexual’. Carnal is from the Latin carnalis, from caro carnis meaning ‘flesh’. Traditionally women have been identified with the body and nature, and men have been identified with the mind and culture. Whilst the binary opposites of man/woman, mind/body, culture/nature, subject/object, and so on, have been challenged by postmodern thought, nevertheless these Cartesian opposites continue to provide a reference and indeed an underpinning for contemporary cultural texts such as advertisements.

The context in which we use the notion of carnality in this study is to discuss advertising narratives that depict women in a carnal light, namely advertisements that show women behaving in a sensual or sexual way, and that represent women as being controlled by their bodily desires. The notion of carnality is particularly interesting in the context of advertising, of course, in that it is commonly supposed that advertisers appeal to such wants and desires in order to entice us to consume their products or services. It is also widely accepted that increasingly marketers use experiential appeals to consumers’ emotions and senses, rather than factual appeals to consumers’ rational and practical sides.

From our perspective as consumer behavior researchers, there are two relevant aspects to the nexus of womanhood, advertising and carnality. One is postmodernism, and the other is feminism, and indeed the so-called return to the body in cultural and social studies has been attributed to both. Postmodernism and feminism, their contribution to our understanding of consumer culture and, specifically, advertising texts, and how concepts of womanhood are produced and perpetuated by them, is now discussed.

THE CARTESIAN LEGACY, POSTMODERNISM AND CONSUMER CULTURE
From time immemorial, the mind and body have been conceptualized as a man/woman split. Marina Warner, for example, writes about women’s ‘ancient associations’ with ‘carnality, instinct and passion’, in contrast to men, who are ‘endowed with reason, control and spirituality’ (in Schiebinger, 2000, p. 287). Camille Paglia (1992) also offers a full and eloquent account of women’s historical association with nature as distinct from culture. What we now refer to as the Cartesian split of mind and body, associated with the French philosopher Rene Descartes, is deeply rooted in a more distant past, and it is one of a number of binary opposites perpetuated and re-presented through time. This split is closely identified with a split between masculinity and femininity.

For the past decade or so, there has been an inter-disciplinary surge of interest in the body across the academy. This contrasts with a previous privileging of the mind in modernist thinking, and a concomitant privileging of the masculine over the feminine. The shift in emphasis from the mind to the body is usually attributed to postmodernism and the rise of consumer culture in the latter half of the twentieth century, whereby the Protestant work ethic gave way to a postmodern, secular emphasis on leisure, pleasure, and unrestrained consumption (see, for example, Featherstone, 1991; 1993).

The body has until comparatively recently been a neglected subject in our discipline. This is not entirely surprising, of course, given the privileging of (masculine) mental processes, cognition and rationality over the (feminine) sensory processes of instinct and emotionality. Indeed Joy and Venkatesh (1994) argue that consumption itself has been conceptualized and described as a disembodied phenomenon in traditional consumer research. They also observe that whilst in general terms the body, in all its complexity, has been largely ignored in consumer research, there has nevertheless been a preoccupation with colonizing and spectacularizing the female body. This is a perspective that is entirely consistent with a modernist discourse, they note, but it is one that is challenged in postmodernist discourse, as the male body becomes increasingly commodified and scrutinized. The growing interest in the body in the consumer behaviour discipline is thus regarded as symptomatic of postmodernism’s celebratory and liberatory emphasis, which addresses the complexities and interconnectedness of the body and the mind in consumption (Joy and Venkatesh, 1994; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). According to Joy and Venkatesh (1994), the binary opposites of man/woman, mind/body, culture/nature, sub-