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Surrealists, and Provocative Images

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# The Machinery of Design: Playing with Brecht, the Surrealists, and Provocative Images

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*Abstract: This paper proposes that print ad designers have usurped Brecht's style of epic theater and the Surrealists' affection for paradox and irrationality and offers an analysis of three contemporary ads. Brecht used techniques to remind theater audiences that they were watching a play rather than observing a representation of reality. He found that the machinery of theater, opera, and the press is no longer "a means of furthering output but has become an obstacle to output, and specifically to [intellectuals'] own output as soon as it follows a new and original course which the apparatus finds awkward or opposed to its new aims." I apply this theory to ad design and discuss how the "machinery" that generates design affects its output and how unveiling that machinery for the reader/audience creates new meaning. As well, I address how the machinery that produces this article affects its meaning.*

Keywords: Brecht, Surrealists, Surrealism, Narrative, Design, Collage, Epic, Theater, Paradox, Irrationality, Machinery, Production, Form

A good propagandist  
makes a vacation resort out of a manure pile  
If there's nothing to eat, he argues  
That a slim waist improves everyone's appearance.

Brecht, "The Necessity of Propaganda"

**C**ONTEMPORARY PRINT AD designers, using a Surrealist aesthetic, have usurped the principles of Brecht's epic theater to re-imagine the commercial dialectic, exposing the apparatus of economic production to better conceal it within the capitalist enterprise. The ads mock their own form. Fourth wall ruptures acknowledge that the reader/audience sees through the medium—as well as seeing the medium itself—giving them a sense of empowerment, while advertisers still control the show with their real agendas hidden behind the ink. [The agenda of this author results from a need for tenure and her desire for publication in a peer-reviewed journal. I am not cynical or jaded; I am only asking that readers consider the theater in which they sit.]

As Brecht looked to the machinery of theater to create art that made people aware of the artifice, here we look at the machinery of print ads, and how designers have adapted Surrealist methods for production of art and embodied Brecht's theory of performance, derived from a Marxist tradition, to sell cars, cameras, and Web sites, and propagate the machinery of consumption. [The machinery that generated this presentation has shaped its content, too ... machines of many faces, including word processing technologies that enabled constant, un-

remitting revision of the text, and communicative technologies that enabled far too many stretches of tangential online “research,” as well as the economic machinery of the university system that demands a certain product, and on and on.]

It should be noted that this discussion is not a condemnation of or endorsement for any particular political or economic philosophy and that the author appreciates the free market economy that allows her to own a nice home in Florida, and as well, she supports the idea of universal healthcare and the liberation of the working class. [She supports the idea of her own happiness, wish fulfillment, and affirmation of her self-worth through professional recognition.]

Existing research of Brecht and the Surrealists helps us interpret design in terms of Brecht’s belief that the nature of reality is economic, and further examine how designers have adapted his techniques to create ads that suggest to invite reader activism and a higher understanding of the nature of reality, but also undermine the original principles of Brecht and the Surrealists by maintaining the ostensible purpose of the ad—to persuade the reader to buy (or buy into) something. [The author wants you to buy into the ideas presented here, but her machinery of production continues to limit her. She has neither the time, resources, nor inclination to exhaustively understand what Brecht or the Surrealists really did. She cites them begging for credibility; she bends the ideas of others to suit her needs and hopes you buy it.]

Brecht developed the concept of epic theater and the alienation-effect in the early 20th century to help, in his words, “form the ‘ideological superstructure’ for a solid, practical rearrangement of our age’s way of life” (*Brecht on Theater* 23). Describing epic theater, Brecht states: “The essential point of the epic theatre is perhaps that it appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator’s reason. Instead of sharing an experience the spectator must come to grips with things” (23). The alienation effect was to transform the experience of watching a play in the theater by making it more democratic. John Elsom describes that the “spectators should be reminded that they were in a theater, a place of work, and not encouraged to escape from their daily lives by dreaming about polite society and other fairy tales” (par. 12). The audience was constantly reminded of the medium—the theater—by which they were receiving a message, and forced to discover, according to Benjamin, “the conditions of life” (150). For Brecht, politics and art were indivisible.

[Brecht’s alienation effect is also the model for me: the voice of reason. I serve to remind the you of the reality of the text. This article purports to be one thing, but really it has an agenda and is the product of the apparatuses that produce it. It’s the product of an idea but not the idea itself; it’s an image of an idea articulated through marks on paper.]

To accomplish the alienation effect, Brecht used performance devices such as placards, montage, interruption, and direct address by actors to the audience to remind the audience that the play itself was only a representation of reality. Philip Glahn describes epic theater and the strategy of estrangement as “anti-illusionism” of “jolting the complacent spectator into a self-conscious state of perception” (29). The audience experiences unremitting affirmation that they are part of the experience of the theater, and by extension, the larger (i.e., political) issues at the crux of the story.

For the Surrealists, collage and disparate juxtaposition of images were techniques designed to create artwork and images that transcended moral and aesthetic pretense. However, when these same techniques are applied to commercial rhetoric, they do not transcend but rather establish an aesthetic pretense as well as help achieve Brecht’s alienation effect. The Surrealists appropriated collage as a way of visual and textual artistic expression. A collage is an

assembly of diverse fragments that come together to produce meaning. The more diverse and seemingly disconnected the fragments are, as well as their sources, the more random and unpredictable is the result, and the more alienating to the reader/audience. [This text is a collage of ideas.]

Borrowing from Surrealism's use of incongruous imagery to illuminate, in Breton's "deep night" of the unconscious, advertising activates desire by surfacing buried or dormant consumerist impulses. Ads bridge the real and imaginary. The image of a bar of soap, like a dream melting time, joins scent to a simulacrum of memory, presenting the consumer not with a commercial argument culminating at the point of sale, but with an affirmation of what she already knows. As the instrument of that awakening, the ad transforms the surreal into the hyperreal. The subconscious--reintegrated, made whole--sleeps peacefully with the impossible: to be forever young, rich, thin, loved. [This is all that the author of this text wants as well.] The Surrealists valued randomness and chaos, but ad designers use these methods to achieve the more Brechtian ideal of interruption. [I am an interruption, a reminder for you not to suspend your disbelief.]

Brecht used techniques to remind theater audiences that they were watching a play rather than observing a representation of reality. He found the machinery of theater, opera, and the press was no longer "a means of furthering output but has become an obstacle to output, and specifically to [intellectuals'] own output as soon as it follows a new and original course which the apparatus finds awkward or opposed to its new aims." Contemporary ad designers (as well as visual artists, musicians, and actors) have appropriated this technique to highlight the machinery of their production for the reader, establishing a tacit acknowledgement that They know We know we are being manipulated by the visual rhetoric, and letting readers be part of the inside joke. However, in doing so, they create another layer of manipulation and meaning and effectively undermine the reader's potential for activism and understanding the real nature of the rhetoric.

The "machinery" that generates advertisements affects its output, and unveiling that machinery for the reader/audience creates new meaning.



Image 1: Mercedes-Benz ad

This Brazilian ad for Mercedes-Benz (see Image 1), published in December 2008, is representative of Brecht's tradition of placards reminding the audience of reality of the theater--the letter E being an explicit, typographic acknowledgement that the mode of production spits out a printed page and no amount of vivid imagery of throbbing diesel engines propelling shiny red cars over the Pacific Highway will compensate for the magnitude of real gravel, metal, and pistons. The E/F visual makes the car the difference between being empty and being full. The ad also contains elements of extreme surrealism, combining two disparate images and creating a surprising juxtaposition of text and object. [Perhaps this is what the Surrealists meant by auto-writing.] It further acknowledges that this is a page meant to influence the reader, but actually the reader can take control and affect her own reality by purchasing the car incorporated into the E. While the E may act as a placard to point out the "theater" in situ, to reveal the mythos surrounding the "American dream = car," the ad speaks more of maintaining the fourth wall, rather than disrupting it. Here, theater is the hyper-reality of the distended symbol. Autos themselves are distensions of reality--rarely do we mediate our experiences with them through their use and place, but rather through their act as conspicuous consumption and symbolism of the bourgeoisie. [This sounds like overly didactic, bombastic writing that the author would have a difficult time justifying with Joe the Plumber.] Since autos are a mediating figure between people's social relations, the placard, the E, distends that one step further: fuel efficiency is itself now a new angle to the American dream. We can meet as people--no mediation between us; or we meet through a distension of our vehicles. They are a facade of what we wish ourselves to be, and so I/my car meets your car/then you. Thus, we experience another distension from reality, which sharpens the hyper-reality of a symbol, making the symbol become its own referent. If we can say that art is art when it breaches the fourth wall, reduces or exposes hyper-reality, and lessens levels of distension, then the ad works in both ways: maintaining the fourth wall and blasting through the fourth wall, building hyper-reality and lessening hyper-reality, forming more distensions and lessening distensions. [The concept of *distensions* doesn't seem adequate here, but the author is too invested in the term to change it.]

Gerhard Fischer describes a short prose text by Brecht, "the City Builder." This story is set in a generic, fairy tale setting of a city in ruins, with no geographical or historical elements that would signal time or place, though it's clearly a parable about rebuilding Germany after the war. There is a contest for best building. The man who "wins" this contest has simply built a doorframe, but he has helped everyone else with their construction.

"Brecht's strategy of *Verfremdung* (alienation, distanciation, defamiliarisation) is clearly at work in this parable ... the abstract setting makes the familiar topic appear unfamiliar, strange and distant," says Fischer (138). The story has a surprising ending and "exhibits the same philosophical *gestus* that points to a new kind of thinking." (138). Fischer points out that "to be astonished at the way things are makes the familiar seem strange, it begs the question of why things are the way they are" (138). Further, Fischer states that there is no conclusion to the story. "The text creates a gap in the communicative process between author and reader. It activates the readers, makes them participants in an open social process" (139). Ad designers use similar techniques of alienation and defamiliarization, but to different effect. The ads are designed to initially alienate by establishing a sensational or incongruent image comprised of disparate objects, and then creating for the reader the sensation of being a participant. But, in reality, the ads reinforce the role of the consumer.

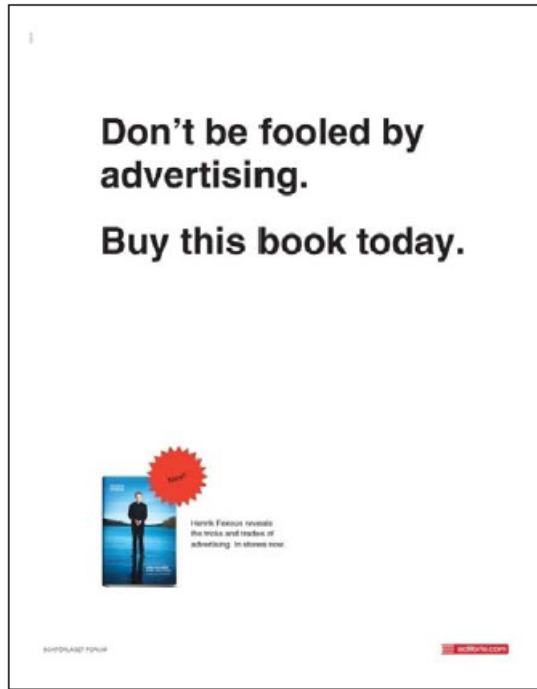


Image 2: Adlibris.com ad.

This European ad for Adlibris.com (see Image 2) explicitly acknowledges the veracity of its own existence as a print ad by the emphasis on typeface and white space—the page itself—as well as the copy: “Don’t be fooled by advertising. Buy this book today.” The designers minimized the objects at the subject of the ad, the advertising book and Web site, with a wink and a nod to the reader/audience, and a tacit acknowledgement that we’re all in this together. We must advertise, and now you must do your job: consume. The ad directly addresses the reader and serves as a printed placard, while simultaneously reinforcing to the reader what it warns against. It’s a “Beware of the Dog” sign when readers should really beware of the dog owner. [Now that’s something Joe could understand: a reductive analogy that makes the author feel clever for having thought of it.]



Image 3: Nikon S60 ad.

This Singapore ad for Nikon (see Image 3) is the image of a potential photograph framed by its “reality,” which is captured in an actual photograph and produced in print. The ad wants to elicit a frisson, making itself memorable, by involving the reader in a transgressive—and morally repugnant—act. The drapes in the room are open, with people in the building opposite invited to witness the shoot, as if there was nothing shameful to hide. It is Brechtian with its overt reminder that what we’re seeing is an image of something that hasn’t happened (yet). Illusion is destroyed. Gained is a certain knowingness and moral decadence that is perhaps more in tune with the times, and perhaps more alluring to Nikon customers. The ad exposes its medium and that of its consumer product as well as mocking the medium itself, and exploiting the photograph’s potential as a voyeuristic tool [in addition to exploiting the pedophilic tendencies of a minority of its customer base]. In the case of imaging technologies, the apparatus that produces the images creates them for their own purposes—the machines justify their existence, affirming Brecht’s idea that the nature of the reality of art and the press is economic. Brecht believes that the apparatuses produce merchandise, “ruled by the normal laws of mercantile trade” and that is not a good thing (35). Imaging technologies are clearly part of a vast and complicated economic foundation for many industries. The ad here confirms that the machines are nothing until they produce an image, and the ad also transcends its function as a signal for consumption. [This would seem to be the only ad that justifies the title of this writing, and therefore, we can only wonder if the author included it to satisfy the prurient interests of the readers and hold their attention through a tedious text.]

Current research has applied Brecht’s theater theories to instructional communication (Perkins), the environmental movement (Davis), “art as a social practice and an articulation of political awareness” (Glahn 29), organizational learning (Driver), and customer participation in retail service (Harris, et al.). On Salon.com, Andrew O’Hehir points out that the term “Brechtian” is often used “as a lazy way of describing any dramatic tactic that violates the conventions of naturalism or confronts the audience directly.” I prefer to view the application of Brecht here as liberal rather than lazy, but acknowledge that Brecht’s ghost may

resist associating his “for the people” theater with a tool for propagating the wealth of those capitalistic bastards. It’s difficult to gauge the direct impact of Brecht on commercial rhetoric; here, we simply use Brecht as a lens through which we view and analyze contemporary advertisements.

Brecht’s theater technique was straightforward in its motives—he wanted to show the audience the ropes and pulleys to distance them from the illusion of the stage, offering perspective on whatever theme he happened to be expounding. The goal was to expose and clarify by activating the audience’s sense of their own responses to theater. As a passionate Marxist, he wanted to shock people into social consciousness. Ad designers of course have different goal in mind. Brecht told lies to show the truth, while advertisers tell lies to obscure it. [The author tells you lies to help her justify her existence at the university and build her tenure application. This text results from machinery that requires constant self-justification.]

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Lynn Koller is an assistant professor of communication at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach, Florida, teaching visual design and professional writing courses. She holds a PhD in Texts and Technology and MA in Creative Writing from the University of Central Florida. Her recent research has focused on how medical imaging technologies have affected the way patients and physicians interact and the broader impact on how we view illness and the human body. In the past, she has worked in the legal field and for a bank technology consulting firm in public relations and marketing.

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