FRUIT FLIES LIKE A BANANA (OR, WHEN RIPENESS IS ALL): A MEDITATION ON MARKETS AND TIMESCAPES

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ABSTRACT

This essay uses Reeves-Ellington's discussion of the timescape as a departure point for describing one way in which marketing managers have responded to consumers' lived experience of time. It focuses on the retail theatrics of the retroscape as a source of meaning for beleaguered consumers. It then extends the notion of the liminal to account for the temporal orientation that consumers display with regard to both clock time and cosmic time. It concludes with some observations on pluritemporality in postmodern culture.

I wasted time, and now doth time waste me.
—Richard II, V.5.112

At a formative point in my own very strange career, I recall recapturing refracted bits of Shakespeare and Vonnegut from the prism of Bob Textor's notion of the tempocentric – our tendency to view the world from an

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impoverished temporal perspective that discounts the future – and refocusing them in repurposed fashion to imagine that one goal of the ethnographer might be to become unstuck in time. If, as business strategists claim, corporations are chiefly (if not solely) vehicles for implementing plans in the service of colonizing the future, then time travel must be part of the job description for any anthropologist attempting to understand such organizations. Whether negotiating the frenetic nanoculture of high-tech firms or the geological pace of academic departments, the ethnographer must account for the quality of time that informs emic experience and etic analysis.

In his treatment of corporate timescapes, Richard Reeves-Ellington provides us with a template for such ethnographic time travel – or rather a *templait*, if the pun be accepted. For anthropologists, context is the *sine qua non* of understanding. Context is a joining or weaving of experiential strands, the creating of a structure. Context is shaped and reflected by duration, bracketed on each end by reverie, either retrospective or anticipatory. The ethnographer apprehends the lived experience of others through prolonged engagement and immersion. The longitudinal study is an account of that experience unfolding, the story of the braiding of multiple experiences of time (from empirical to mythic) into a templait, a pattern or mold much like the part of the loom that keeps the cloth of context properly stretched. The plait that such timeweaving produces is of such a piece with the patchwork quilt of culture that it typically goes unexamined in our analyses (the work of Textor, Geertz, and a few others being the remarkable exceptions).

Reeves-Ellington's privileged position as a corporate insider, abetted by his ethnographic penchant for holistic comparison, permits him to inhabit the chronotopes of his informants as if these zones were temporal worlds, in a way that reveals the heterochronic nature of the complex organization. He demonstrates the theoretical value of his templait as he unravels the temporal filaments of formal and informal social organization within the firm, and illustrates the practical value of his templait in the reproduction of ever more effective Proctoids. It is by dwelling in the moments of his colleagues at all levels of the firm that Reeves-Ellington is able to convey so compellingly the timescapes that limn the firm at large.

In my own recent work in consumer research, I have practiced an analogous dwelling, albeit in more nomadic fashion. Along with my colleagues (most notably, Rob Kozinets and Stephen Brown), I have tracked brandscapes across commercial culture and counterculture over the past decade, seeking to understand local accommodation and resistance to the global forces of consumption. As retail theater in commercial culture and spectacle

in counterculture increasingly converge and give rise to hybrid forms, consumers find the heterotopias available to them distinguished ever more precisely along temporal lines.

Given the time famine experienced by consumers in the United States, and the inherent inefficiencies and dissatisfactions of multitasking, it comes as no surprise to discover that few of us ever actually live – in the sense of an embodied dwelling – in the present. Rather, American consumers more commonly inhabit the future. This aspirational erehwon is configured by a reconfiguring of the past; the undiscovered country is simultaneously skirted and visited. We're always going back to the future.

The term my colleagues and I have used to describe this nostalgic (re)turn is "retroscape." Corporations of private, public, and nonprofit cast, ever eager to emplace and embody their brands in ways that consumers will introject, have used the evocation of times past to create an experience in the present that consumers, in turn, use to negotiate their futures. These sites are temporal portals, part high tech and part nostalgia, that reassure anxious contemporary consumers of the inevitability of the updated eternal return, and afford brand stewards the chance to forge a product life circle.

The retrofuturism of clicks-and-mortar telematic flagship brandstores such as ESPN Zone and of paraprimitive cyber-utopian temporary autonomous zones such as the Burning Man Project, represents consumers' Mobius strip grasp of time that meaning managers – marketers, designers, artists, politicians, and so on – are desperate to manipulate. They invite us to a tamed "there," encourage us to dwell in a reprised or redacted "then" and offer us identity renewal in the bargain. By transforming our sense of the present from a discontinuous flow of fragmented immediacy into one of future possibilities that collectively signify the fruition of the past's unrealized promise, experienced engineers give the retroscape the aura of authenticity. We move forward into a familiar future, comforted by its continuity with a past that never was.

The retroscape is the edifice complex of a more pervasive phenomenon in consumer culture that my colleagues and I have labeled retrobranding. To the extent that brands are our contemporary household gods, and to the degree that brands constitute a principal symbolic and material screen through which we apprehend and build the world, the entire marketing effort that sustains brands – product design, advertising, distribution systems, and pricing decisions, at the very least – is subject to these pressures of time famine, future orientation, and fungibility. In a marketplace of functional parity, those brands that embody and convey the most compelling story (about the meaning they enable consumers to harness) rank among the

most competitive and successful. Increasingly, that story is nostalgically utopian, and the channels that deliver it, though bleeding-edge relevant, are absolutely beholden to a romanticized past apotheosized.

The retrobrand promises the benefits of an idyllic past that never was to contemporary consumers who are besieged by threats from all quarters that make the present so untenable. Retrobrands are portals to the good old days of the future. They commute the devolutionary premise of hyperindustrial life and make the postmodern palatable. The names of the retrobrand are legion: American Girl, Nike, Volkswagen, Coca-Cola, Alka-Seltzer, Guinness, Cunard, Las Vegas, Celebration, Willow Creek, Black Rock City, Colonial Williamsburg, Chuck Taylors, Beeman's chewing gum, and Schwinn bicycles. The retrobrand spans all manners of fast-moving consumer package goods and quick-service restaurants, museums and megachurches, services and festivals. It comprises the personae of media and civic celebrity alike. I'll return to this Janusian theme of portality in just a moment.

The complex organizations that market the retrobrand must synchronize the internal timescapes that Reeves-Ellington has described, and synchronize them in turn with those of their supply-chain partners. Such balletic chronography must be choreographed still further to harmonize with the calendar of commercial culture, which itself is often, ironically, tied inextricably to a liturgical cycle (which itself, again ironically, in a multicultural marketplace is becoming increasingly commoditized, as in the accelerating assumption of the commercial ethos of Christmas by Chanuka and Ramadan). All the while, these firms are steering a course by looking in the rearview mirror. Achieving effective time management in a corporate context is clearly no mean feat. Nor is it merely logistical in nature. As individuals in ever greater numbers seek the experience of immanence and transcendence in the realm of consumption, corporate engagement with time moves into the eschatological.

This brings us back to portals. As William Gibson has reminded us, the future is already here – it's just not evenly distributed. Like Janus, consumers surmount a temporal doorway, from which they are able to regard the future as well as the past, arguably at the expense of the present. While anthropologists as a rule have not been attentive to this vantage point from the lintel, one in particular has paid close attention to the view from the sill. Victor Turner has masterfully unpacked that eternal moment of the threshold, or limen, in his study of the rite of passage, itself the quintessentially temporal dimension of place. His analysis of the liminal phase – the antistructural juncture between fixed states that is both the engine of cultural stability and change and the barometer of cultural health – is the source of

my understanding of the way in which marketing firms bridge the gap from Reeves-Ellington's logistical chronotopes to eschatological time.

In returning to my anthropological roots to theorize about the significance of spectacle to consumer research, I have explored the role of ludic agency in the evolution of liminality. In Turner's view, the ludic arises in tribal society in a liminal setting ultimately to affirm the status quo, and in modern society in a liminoid setting as a potentially subversive and independent source of innovation. The liminoid is a peripheral zone of independent, genred, optional activity outside the culture's central political and economic processes. I have argued that postmodernity gives rise to the liminate, as the ludic, manifesting itself through spectacle, abets the collapse of the liminal and the liminoid into absolute political and economic centrality, then re-emerges as an uncritical – if provocative – reinforcer of the status quo. The play is now the thing. Retail theater epitomizes the liminate and becomes the play space of the consumer bent upon creating an idiotopia from the do-it-yourself materiel the marketer provides. Thus is the brand animated, and thus does it animate in turn.

These marketized liminate spectacles – of which the retroscape is a particular example – lie at the heart of brand relations in the twenty-first century. And, as much as they satisfy, they also alienate, by inviting consumers to seek similar resonance in ostensibly more authentic countercultural venues. This emigration is only apparently spatial; it is more properly understood as temporal. Nomadic consumers are pilgrims, intent upon returning to the source. They seek to abandon clock time (whatever its former ties to natural cycles) and embrace cosmic time. They pursue a taste of final things, the fullness of time that only a mythological charter can endow. They push the liminate back to the liminal, to sacred time officially recognized, and not merely bootlegged or skunk-worked into the pluritemporal corporation.

As I complete the writing of this essay, I am acutely aware of my (meta)physical surroundings. The business school at Notre Dame is situated strategically between a mammoth, new performing arts center (a twenty-first-century technological wonder encased in a collegiate gothic megastructure) and a refurbished football stadium whose hallowed confines have been preserved in the updating (imparting a 1930s feel to the millennial-class infrastructure and amenities), on a tract of land some of my colleagues disparage as the "entertainment quad." From a stairwell window, I can see both the spire of the basilica and the Golden Dome; with a little bit of craning, I can also view the Touchdown Jesus mural on the library. Once Studebaker country, this is now Hummer territory. Built and driven locally, these high-tech stagecoach skeuomorphs (part atavism, part anachronism)

are visually stunning as they motor past the horse-drawn buggies in nearby Amish country.

Spring break beckons, and while many students will head to China to witness the Middle Kingdom wrestle with consumer culture, many others will make a pilgrimage to Cabo to reenact some ancient ritual of excess. I'll go home tonight, hunker down with the dogs in front of my 40" LCD electronic hearth, and watch some of the Bard's best, updated for my Pomo sensibilities. I write from the heart of a retroscape whose identity I help to craft even as it largely crafts my own identity. I like to imagine that the progressive/conservative dialectic driving our academic enterprise is fundamentally anthropological in character, and that the thrum of the retroscape is music to our ethnographic ears.

Whither our proleptic paradise? Let me conclude by returning to the occult title of my essay. My early training as a business anthropologist entailed an immersion in the workplace so prolonged that a sense of humor became less an adaptive strategy than a literal survival skill. This experience will be familiar to every ethnographer who has ever done fieldwork. An ardent Groucho Marxist in my appreciation of koans, I came across one of the master's gems that I have used as a mantra ever since the sleep-deprived days of my apprenticeship: "Time flies like an arrow. Fruit flies like a banana." Serendipity synergized this saying, as I read concurrently in the literature of the sociology of work.

For a doctoral student yoked to corporate offices, conveyor belts, assembly lines, foundries, and the sundry servicescapes of manufacturing communities, a periodic rereading of Don Roy's essay on "Banana Time" was a life-affirming exercise on the order of a plenary indulgence. His description of the appropriation and re-parsing of wage time by workers striving to reduce boredom – a ritual of rebellion now refined to an art form at all levels of the corporation in an era of globalized markets – coincided with my own observations and practices in the moment. It became a portent of my current research pursuits as well.

Arrow time begets banana time. Corporate timescapes beget consumer time famine, which begets a market-mediated future orientation. Our ludic impulse follows a reframed past as a lodestar, even as it steers by a utopian beacon. Structure inexorably summons antistructure as a playmate. Stressed-out consumers prefer nostalgic comfort brands that exude the contemporaneity of shrewd updating. The retroscape is the dwelling of choice of these beleaguered consumers, who are all struggling to return home for the first time. If there is a call of the mall, it is this siren song of sweet surrender.

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