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1998

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Publication Details

Marshall, P. D. 1998, 'Thinking through New', *M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture*, vol. 1, no. 1.

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Thinking through New

Abstract

A friend of mine once tried to capture the feeling that one gets from a new thing. He decided that there was no word to describe the sensation of having an unblemished eraser when you were in primary school, but nevertheless it produced a kind of fascinating awe in the apparent perfection of the new. A similar feeling captures the new car owner in smelling the interior's recently minted plastic. Used car dealers would doubtless love to bottle that smell because it produces the momentary pleasure of new ownership. And I am sure there are certain people who are addicted to that smell, and go test drive new cars with no intention of buying just for the experience of the "new" smell. New clothes produce that same sensation: most of us ignore the label which says "wash before wearing" because we want to experience the incredible stiff tactile sensation of a new shirt. My friend called this gle-gle, and it is a pervasive relationship to New in a variety of guises.

Keywords

thinking

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

Marshall, P. D. 1998, 'Thinking through New', *M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture*, vol. 1, no. 1.

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- P. David Marshall
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Volume 1 | Issue 1 | July 1998

- 1 A friend of mine once tried to capture the feeling that one gets from a new thing. He decided that there was no word to describe the sensation of having an unblemished eraser when you were in primary school, but nevertheless it produced a kind of fascinating awe in the apparent perfection of the new. A similar feeling captures the new car owner in smelling the interior's recently minted plastic. Used car dealers would doubtless love to bottle that smell because it produces the momentary pleasure of new ownership. And I am sure there are certain people who are addicted to that smell, and go test drive new cars with no intention of buying just for the experience of the "new" smell. New clothes produce that same sensation: most of us ignore the label which says "wash before wearing" because we want to experience the incredible stiff tactile sensation of a new shirt. My friend called this gle-gle, and it is a pervasive relationship to New in a variety of guises.
- 2 New implies two kinds of objects or practices: it implies either the replacement of the old or it points to the emergence of something that has not existed before. In both cases, new always heralds change and has the potential for social or cultural transformation. As a result, popular writers and ad copy editors often link new with revolution. For example, the advent of the computer was seen to be revolutionary. Similarly a new detergent which worked in cold water promised cataclysmic change in the 1960s. But these promises of revolution through some innovation have not necessarily led to massive social upheaval; rather they have identified a discursive trope of contemporary culture which links new with rejuvenation. The claim that something is new is the mantra of modernity and the kitsch of the postmodern.
- 3 This double-play of the concept of the new is best untangled through thinking how a once new object becomes the contemporary way of expressing the former hope of progress and change -- with raised and knowing eyebrow. I recently stumbled into one of these double-plays. While searching for bedding for yet another birthday slumber party, I picked up an old mattress which still had its 1950s label, where it proudly announced that the cushioning was the wonderful new revolutionary foam system called the Dunlopillo. The Dunlopillo system was certainly trademarked and no doubt patented for its then unique system of troughs and cones of army green foam; but in its current incarnation the foam was weak and the bed easily crumpled in half. All that was left of the sentiment of newness was the label, which in its graphics expressed the necessary connection to science as the future, and authoritative zeal in its seriousness of its revolutionary potential.
- 4 But seen from 1998, the claims seemed bombastic and beautifully optimistic. Modernity's relationship to the new is to celebrate the potential for change. It is a cultural project that has enveloped the sentiments of capitalism and socialism from their origins in the 18th and 19th centuries, and manifested itself in what Schudson labelled "capitalist realism" in advertising, and what is known as socialist realism as a state-sanctioned artistic movement in the Soviet Union. Both representations provided their systems with the capacity to repaint the cultural canvas with each new product such as Dunlopillo, or in the Soviet system with each new five-year productivity plan for the collective. Maintaining the unity of the cultural project was a challenge to each system's representational regime; sustaining the power of the new as a revolutionary force is the fundamental link between capitalist and socialist systems throughout the twentieth century.
- 5 These representational regimes were in fact connected to the production of new phenomena, new materials, new social formations. However, the message of the new has gradually weakened over the last thirty years. Think of the way in which the Space Race produced all sorts of new technologies of computing, calculation and the integration of electronics into the running of the automobile. It also produced the breakfast orange-juice substitute, 'Tang'. Indeed, the first advertisements for Tang intoned that it was the drink that astronauts enjoyed in space. Tang and its flavour crystals provided the ultimate form of efficiency and convenience, and provided a clear link between the highly ideologically driven space program and the everyday lives of citizens of the "free" world. In the 60s and 70s the link between the general project of modernity and improving everyday life was made evidently clear every time you added water to your Tang flavour crystals. One has to ask: where is Tang today? Not only is it difficult to find in my supermarket, but even if it were available it would not operate as the same representation of progress and the project of modernity. Instead, it would have little more than a nostalgic -- or, kitsch -- hold on a generation that has seen too many representations of the new and too many attempts at indicating improvement.

- 6 The decay of the cultural power of the new is clearly linked to consumer culture's dependence on and overuse of the concept. The entire century has been enveloped by an accelerating pattern of symbolic change. Symbolic change is not necessarily the same as the futurologist Toffler claiming that we are in a constant state of "future shock"; rather it is much more the introduction of new designs as if there were not only transformed designs, but fundamentally transformed products. This perpetually 'new' is a feature of the fashion industry as it works toward seasonal transformation. Toothbrushes have also been the object of this design therapy, which produces both continual change over the last twenty years, and claims of new revolutionary designs. Central to this notion of symbolic change is advertising. Advertising plays with the hopes and desires of its audience by providing the contradictory symbolic materiality of progressive change. The cultural and political power of the new is the symbolic terrain that advertising has mined to present its "images of well-being".
- 7 What one can now detect in the circulation of advertising is at least two responses to the decay of the power of the new. First, instead of advertising invoking the wonders of science and its technological offspring providing you with something revolutionary, advertising has moved increasingly towards personal transformation, echoing the 30-year-old self-help, self-discovery book industry. In Australia, GM- Holden's Barina television ads provide a typical example. No technical detail about the car is given in the ads, but a great deal of information --- via the singing, the superimposed dancers, and the graphics employed -- signifies that the car is designed for the young female driver. Symbolically, the car is transformed into a new space of feminine subjectivity.
- 8 Second, advertising plays with the cynicism of the cognoscenti. If the new itself can no longer work to signify genuine change and improvement in contemporary culture, it is instead represented as a changed attitude to the contemporary world that only a particular demographic will actually comprehend. The level of sophistication in reading the new as a cultural phenomenon by advertisers (or by proxy, their agencies) is sometimes astounding. A recent Coca-Cola radio ad played with a singing style of ennui and anger that embodied punk, but only as punk has been reinvented in the mid-90s through such groups as Green Day. The lyrics were identical to the rest of the "Always Coca-Cola" campaign that has been circulating internationally for the last five years; however, the cynicism of the singers, the bare tunefulness, and even the use of a popular culture icon such as Coke as the object of a song (and ridicule), tries to capture a particular new cultural moment with a different audience.
- 9 Advertising as a cultural discourse on its own expresses a malaise within the transforming promise of the new that has been so much a part of modernity. However, the myths of modernity -- its clear association with social progress -- have never completely dissipated. In contemporary culture, it has fallen on new computer technologies to keep the ember of modernity and progress glowing. Over the last two decades the personal computer has maintained the naiveté of the new that was central to mid-twentieth century advertising, if not post-war culture in general. Very much like the Space Race stitched together an ideological weave that connected the populace to the interests of what Eisenhower first described as a military-industrial complex, the computer has ignited a new generation of optimism. It has been appropriated by governments from Singapore and Malaysia (think of the Multimedia Super Corridor) to the United States (think of Vice President Al Gore's NII) as the rescue package for the organisation of capitalism. Through Microsoft's hegemony there is a sense of coherence in "operating systems" which makes their slogan "where do you want to go today?", in its evocation of choice, also an invocation of unity of purpose. The wonderful synergy of the personal computer is that it weaves the conception of personal desire back into a generalisable social system of value.
- 10 Despite all these efforts at harnessing the new computer technologies into established political and economic forces, the new nature of computer technology draws us back to the reason why new is intrinsically exciting: the defining nature of the new is that it offers the potential for some form of social change. The Internet has been the source for this new discourse of utopia. If we follow Howard Rheingold's logic, New "virtual communities" are formed online. A disequilibrium in who controls the flow of information is part of the appeal of the Internet, and the very appearance of this journal stems from that sense of new access. The Internet is said to challenge the boundaries of nations and states (although English language hegemony and pure economic access continue to operate to control the flow of those boundaries), with regulation devolving out of state policy towards the individual. Transforming identities are also very much an element of online communities: if nothing else, the play of gender in online game and chat programs identifies the constructed nature of our identities.
- 11 All of this energy, and what I would call affect, refers to how computer technology and the Internet have managed to produce a sensation of agency. What I mean by agency is not necessarily attached to the project of modernity; rather it is the sense of being able to produce the new itself, as opposed to just living in the architecture of the new provided by someone else. On one level, the Internet and personal computers do provide a way to make your information look as if it is more significant and of a higher quality. The continuing proliferation of personal websites attests to this narcissistic drive of contemporary culture. On another level, the narcissism also identifies activity and

agency in engaging in a form of communication with others. The Internet then can be thought of as paralleling movements in contemporary music, where the ability to construct soundscapes through computer interfaces has given the musician greater agency in the production of new electronic music.

¹² The new is intrinsically an odd phenomenon. It continually threatens established patterns. What is different about the new and its meaning in the twentieth century is that it has become part of the central ideology of western culture in its characterised representation of modernity. In a strange mix, the new reinforces the old and established. Nonetheless, the new, like culture itself, is never completely contained by any overarching architecture. The new expresses the potential, and occasionally the enactment, of significant cultural change. The fatigue that I have identified in our thinking about the new identifies a decline in the power of modernity to capture change, difference and transformation. That very fatigue may indicate in and of itself something profoundly new.

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Citation reference for this article

MLA style:

P. David Marshall. "Thinking through New." *M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture* 1.1 (1998). [your date of access] <<http://www.uq.edu.au/mc/9807/think.php>>.

Chicago style:

P. David Marshall, "Thinking through New," *M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture* 1, no. 1 (1998), <<http://www.uq.edu.au/mc/9807/think.php>> ([your date of access]).

APA style:

P. David Marshall. (1998) Thinking through new. *M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture* 1(1). <<http://www.uq.edu.au/mc/9807/think.php>> ([your date of access]).