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in Advertising and Pseudo-counterculture

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“You say you want a revolution” – Music in Advertising and Pseudo-counterculture

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Abstract

Using the example of the song Revolution by the Beatles and its use in a TV ad for Nike, this paper explores the conference theme of the impact of marketing and marketing systems in society from the sub-theme of art and aesthetics in markets. We consider the role of music in advertisements as the appropriation and negation of counterculture against Adorno & Horkheimer’s critique of the commodification form of the music itself independent of appropriation. The paper considers these research problematics from the perspective of the musicians themselves.

Introduction

*You say you want a revolution
 Well you know we all want to change the world
 You tell me that it’s evolution
 Well you know we all want to change the world
 But when you talk about destruction
 Don’t you know you can count me out
 Don’t you know it’s gonna be alright, alright, alright.*

Lyrics from *Revolution* by John Lennon

In 1987 Nike achieved a watershed when they became the first company to license a Beatles song from Capitol Records when they used the song *Revolution* as part of their \$7 million TV ad campaign (Weiner, 1991) incurring, as Phil Knight Nike CEO recalls, “a ton of criticism” (McCarthy, 2003:pp1). The Beatles record label Apple, sued Nike and the surviving musicians issued the following statement: “The Beatles position is that they don’t sing jingles to peddle sneakers, beer, pantyhose or anything else. Their position is that they wrote and recorded these songs as artists and not as pitchmen for any product” (Dowling, 1989:pp208) Angry Beatles fans wrote letters to Nike objecting to the co-optation (Scott, 1994). In a recent article in *The Nation*, former drummer for the Doors John Densmore said it “cut me to the core when I heard John Lennon’s *Revolution* selling tennis shoes... and Nikes to boot! That song was the soundtrack to part of my youth, when the streets were filled with passionate citizens’ (Densmore, 2002:pp3). Whilst songs were regularly being used in advertisements, this was a special case as Weiner wrote at the time “Does anyone care

that the Fifth Dimension's *Up, Up and Away* has become a TWA commercial? But the *Revolution* ad is different. The song had a meaning that Nike is destroying" (Weiner, 1991/1987:pp293). He regarded the ad as "the most outrageous example of a familiar aspect of pop culture in the later Age of Reagan" (pp292).

Whilst the instance of Nike's appropriation of *Revolution* is peppered by the unusual dynamics involved in the relationship between Yoko Ono, Paul McCartney and Michael Jackson (who owned the copyright and gave permission to Nike) (Scott, 1994; Weiner, 1991), the outrage mostly referred to the song's socio-historical meaning and the inferred intention behind its use, using the "revolution" to sell shoes (Scott, 1994). This introduces discourses of "sell-out" defined by Hesmondalgh as "the abandonment of idealism for financial reward" and the appropriation of music for advertising is an instance where the label of "sell-out" often exists in its most intensive and emotive form (Englis and Pennell, 1994) with many musicians purposefully refusing to allow their music to be used in ads (Weiner, 1991). However Adorno & Horkheimer (1947/1998) have asserted that the production of music within the culture industry tends towards the process of commodification and hence cannot be considered as oppositional and therefore discourses of sell-out become a sham debate. This leads back to the questions raised by Desmond et al regarding what constitutes counterculture and what it implies about culture and consumption (Desmond et al., 2000).

What is counterculture?

According to Adorno, culture and administration exist dialectically; "whoever speaks of culture speaks of administration as well" (Adorno, 2002b:pp107). The relationship therefore is one of oppositions co-existing uncomfortably, "culture would like to be higher and more pure, something untouchable which cannot be tailored according to any tactical or technical considerations... no half-way sensitive person can overcome the discomfort conditioned by his consciousness of a culture which is indeed administrated" (pp108). The clash of culture and administration could be applied to music and commerce and the discomfort described by Adorno is similar to the anger incurred when certain pieces of music are used in advertisements - as USA comedian Bill Hicks once warned musicians "do a commercial and you are off the artistic roll call for ever!" (Mueller, 2002:pp4)

Based upon their reading of Hegel's lord-bondsman's tale, Desmond et al chart three instances of counterculture: the first seeks to establish itself as being *real, true and authentic*, the second is the mediation

of counterculture as mainstream-culture seeks to reproduce and re-integrate it, thirdly that the driving tendency behind counterculture is not identity or sameness but othering or difference (Desmond et al., 2000:pp244). If certain pieces of music such as *Revolution* are to be regarded as counter-cultural then the three instances of counterculture as reported by Desmond et al can be witnessed; the song is regarded by the musicians as authentic (we “wrote and recorded these songs as artists and not as pitchmen for any product”), the appropriation of the song by Nike is certainly a case of mediation between the supposed counter-culture and the mainstream, thirdly the song is different to the mainstream (“The song had a meaning that Nike is destroying”). This interpretation holds that the advertisers seek to channel the legitimacy of the music into semiotic markers that can be attached to a commodity brand name. This process mirrors Goldman et al’s study of the portrayal of feminism in advertising which they concluded represented a single aspect of an internally contradictory hegemonic process through which oppositional discourses become re-routed in accordance with the logic of commodification (Goldman et al., 1991).

Problematising *Revolution* as Counter-Culture

Yet there is a paradox in considering a song like *Revolution* as counter-cultural or indeed oppositional. Firstly the lyrics of the song itself (written by John Lennon) were based on a pacifist criticism of radical opposition at a time when student uprisings were a world-wide phenomenon (Quantick, 2002); as the song says “count me out”¹. Upon release the song incurred controversy amongst left-wing writers, *Ramparts* declared the song to be a “betrayal” and in particular objected to the line “you know it’s gonna be alright”: “It isn’t”, they wrote “you *know* it’s *not* gonna be all right” (cited in Weiner, 1991:pp289-90). *New Left Review* denounced the song as a “lamentable petty bourgeois cry of fear” (pp289), the *Berkley Bard* stated “*Revolution* sounds like the hawk plank adopted in the Chicago convention of the Democratic Death Party” (pp290) whilst the *Village Voice* wrote “It is puritanical to expect musicians, or anyone else to hew the proper line.

¹ It is important to note that there are three versions of the song, *Revolution*, *Revolution 1* and *Revolution 9* [Quantick, D. (2002). *Revolution - the making of the Beatles' white album*. London: Unanimous Ltd]. In the lyrics in *Revolution 1*, Lennon sings “count me in”. According to Beatles member Paul McCartney “He (John Lennon) doesn’t really get off the fence in it. He says you can count me out, in, so you’re not actually sure. I don’t think he was sure which way he felt about it at the time” [Miles, B. (1998). *Paul McCartney - many years from now*. London: Vintage]. This paper addresses the single version which says “count me out” and was used in the Nike commercial.

But it is reasonable to request that they do not go out of their way to oppose it. Lennon has and it takes much of the pleasure out of their music for me” (pp290).

Secondly there is an irony in considering the Beatles, given their mass popularity, to be anything other than mainstream culture. Whilst the Beatles may have objected to their song being tied with profane commodities, they could reflect on the commodity form of their own music. According to Adorno & Horkheimer (1947/1998) art that exists in the domain of the market is a commodity produced in a culture industry whereby the details are interchangeable “with ready made clichés to be slotted in anywhere”; “in light music, once the trained ear has heard the first notes of the hit song, it can guess what is coming and feel flattered when it does come” (pp125). *Revolution* conforms to the standard 12-bar blues form and hence can be regarded as a highly predictable piece of music. The outcome of such standardised composition where the whole and the parts are alike, according to Adorno & Horkheimer, is that there is no antithesis and hence Adorno & Horkheimer would not consider the song as oppositional but rather a piece of music that called for regressive listening habits and ultimately led to reification (pp126). The political message contained within the lyrics – conformist though they may well be – would not impress Adorno who argued that politically committed art that exists within the commodity form is a mere “pantomime” as art can only resist by its form alone (cited by Kellner, 2002:pp92). The reverence in which the public held the music of the Beatles that led to the Nike controversy would be accounted for by Adorno by fetishisation in which consumers start to revere the commodity; “before the theological caprices of commodities, the consumers become temple slaves” (Adorno, 2002a:pp39). In this case the fetishised reaction of the Beatles fans to the music has become isolated from the music itself (which in any case is already a commodity), as Adorno put it: “where they react at all, it no longer makes any difference whether it is to Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony or to a bikini” (pp37).

Within this context Adorno & Horkheimer would have viewed the controversy surrounding the Nike ad as a sham debate because the song *Revolution* exists so much in the commodity form that it is already interchangeable with Nike products. Worse, the debate acts as a deception because the viewpoint of *Revolution* as counter-cultural to Nike fails to acknowledge its commodity form; “Those who succumb to the ideology are precisely those who cover up the contradiction instead of taking it into the consciousness of their production” (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1947/1998:pp157). Adorno described the process of pseudo-activity as

where people, who not yet fully reified, seek to distance themselves from the mechanism of music reification by becoming more active consumers and exploring musical alternatives however all they succeed in doing is further integrating themselves into fetishism (Adorno, 2002a:pp52). Applying the Adornean perspective, the outrage surrounding the Nike advertisement may therefore be considered as a pseudo-activity.

Other Aesthetic Perspectives

As opposed to the inherent cultural pessimism of Adorno & Horkheimer's thesis, Hesmondalgh has argued that the relationship between art and commerce takes the form of a continuing struggle and hence can be regarded as more *ambivalent*, *contested* and *complex* than were allowed for by Adorno & Horkheimer (Hesmondalgh, 2002:pp17). Kellner has criticised Adorno's approach for focusing on the ideologies and retrogressive effects of music upon consciousness without analysing the work's contradictions, critical or oppositional moments or potential to provide insight into social conditions or to elicit a critical response (Kellner, 2002:pp101).

A criticism of Adorno is that their role of aesthetics is anachronistic and tied to romantic ideologies which themselves are rooted to a specific historical context, most notably the French revolution which saw the destruction of the nobility and the loss of aristocratic patronage for artists (Heath and Boreham, 2002). It has been argued that it was out of this context that the "Bohemian Ideology" emerged which demands artists to be antinomianist and at war with civil society (Griff, 1960). A character who clashed with Adorno was Benjamin (1999) who argued that Bohemian Ideology was a bourgeois reaction to the approaching crisis of socialism and therefore represents a negative theology of art. In this context mechanical reproduction of art made possible in the early twentieth century reversed the total function of art away from ritual and towards politics and a new sense of aesthetic was required. Modernist writers such as De Monthoux have argued that, rather than being an antithesis, commerce itself *is* an aesthetic endeavour whereby businesses are beginning to look at their firms as works of art operating on an aesthetic space in which the managers are the artists managing the development (Guillet de Monthoux and Strati, 2002). Meanwhile artists who have been described as postmodern such as Andy Warhol have challenged the convention of art and commerce as oppositional to each other (Frith and Horne, 1987; Whiting, 1997). The postmodern condition tends to reject the perceived

elitism of Adorno & Horkheimer's text (though Steinert (2003) has argued the case that the perception of Adorno & Horkheimer as elitist can only be based on a mis-reading of the text) and favour a more 'free-for-all' consideration of both 'high' and 'popular' art (Holbrook, 1995).

Research Issues

This leads back to the question posed by Desmond et al, what constitutes counter-culture and what it implies about culture and consumption? Can a song such as *Revolution* be regarded as counter-cultural and antithetical to a company such as Nike, as has been suggested (Densmore, 2002; Scott, 1994; Weiner, 1991) or is it a case of the Adorno & Horkheimer view which sees *Revolution* as existing in the commodified form and hence the ensuing debate over the ad is a pseudo-activity?

Methods Used Within the Present Study

Whilst Scott explored the issue from the perception of the consumer, Frith & Horn argue that in an era that is increasingly dominated by signs and images, artists are in a unique position to understand the co-optation of art by commerce (Frith and Horne, 1987:pp8). Hesmondhalgh argues that "symbol creators" have been pretty much ignored in recent thinking regarding art and commerce because of a reaction against the fetishisation of their work as extraordinary and this has led to a balance in favour of researching the audiences (Hesmondhalgh, 2002:pp5). This paper seeks to address this imbalance by considering the question of what constitutes counterculture from the "unique position" of the musician. Accepting the viewpoint that the instance of music in advertising represents one of the more controversial uses of music (Englis and Pennell, 1994), this paper explores the perspective of the musician to using music in advertisements.

Drawing on existing hierarchical research into musicians' values into the commercial exploitation of art (Becker, 1963/1991; Griff, 1960), this text employs an interactionist framework which allows a consideration of the attitudes of musicians towards the phenomenon within the context of their self-conception as an artist. A series of in-depth and non-directive interviews were sought with musicians from diverse demographic and musical backgrounds who had experience with dealing with advertisements in numerous contexts ranging from jingle writers, session musicians who have performed in ads to musicians who have both declined and given permission for their music to be used in local, national and multi-national advertising cam-

paings. Unlike the instance of *Revolution* where the composers allowed the publishing rights to pass out of their ownership (Weiner, 1991), the musicians interviewed in this study own their own copyright and are able to decline permission to advertisers seeking to license their material. Seeking musicians from diverse musical backgrounds follows Adorno & Horkheimer's approach which did not differentiate between musical styles, genres or classifications of high versus low music and instead seeks to subject all musicians to the same methodological questions as was called for by Shepherd (1987). For the purposes of this paper the data is organised into three emergent themes; attitudes towards licensing music, reflexivity and music as ideology.

Analysis

Theme 1 – Licensing music

Some musicians stated an outright rejection of using their music for any form of advertisement for a variety of reasons. One common reason was the reluctance to link their music (the sacred) with commodity products (the profane); *"I'm always resistant to my music being used to sell product, to sell petrol or chemicals or fucking holidays"*. Another musician stated that advertisements were so ephemeral and period specific that they did not stand the test of time and therefore were unworthy for his music; *"I'm interested in music that lasts and ads are disposable"*. A very common viewpoint was that the meaning of the piece of music would become hijacked by brand association which one musician described as being *"dishonest"*. This also relates back to the argument of authenticity in counter-culture as musicians saw using music in ads as refusing to mix their song (regarded as being authentic) with the ad (not authentic): *"its about taking whatever integrity your music is perceived to have and associating your brand with that and its in the hope of some of that integrity reflecting on their brand and that's kind of a, its not a, it doesn't sit well with me"*.

Other musicians saw no moral qualms regarding using the music in advertisements, only an opportunity to make money and gain exposure in the process: *"We'd never refuse to do an ad, money was money and an ad was promotion, we were being promoted."* With regard to the commodity form of the music, one musician argued that *"you've got to look back as to why it was composed and why it was written and mainly it was written and composed to exploit it, to commercially exploit it, to make money from it and to make the public hear it so therefore whatever methods are needed or used to, eh, achieve those objectives, they're the ones that we should go for"*.

For the most part musicians found themselves in a position where saying ‘no’ to advertisement offers was not a realistic financial option. A common justification was that with the arrival of family resulted in a changing of values, one musician quoted Warhol; *“Morals, I can’t afford them!”* This instance lends support to the popular notion of the uncomfortable relationship between music and advertising, in many cases the musicians would prefer not to allow their music to be used but feel compelled to do so which returns the discussion to the literature of co-optation and discourses being re-routed in accordance with the dominant logic of commodification.

Theme 2 – Reflexivity

By way of contrast to the often uncomfortable relationship that exists between music and advertising explored in the first theme, other musicians identified aesthetic and creative value in using music in advertisements. Many musicians referred to advertisements which used music in a way that they admired and, as one suggested, often the most creative people in television work in advertising. Often musicians engage in the production of the advertisement itself which can offer a creative process in its own right; *“the creative people are working with you, you know, that’s amazing because then you’re actually making something together”*. One musician spoke with pride of music that he had composed for advertisements and compared the process with composing for film.

Sometimes musicians showed how they would be selective and discriminatory in deciding to allow permission to license their music. The same composer who would write new music for ads would refuse to allow music he had composed for other purposes to be associated with products. Another musician allowed one company to use his song only after he had seen the way that company had used other songs in the past and believed that advertising with this particular company had *“credibility”*. Other musicians spoke of how they would discriminate between different advertisements on the grounds of the artistic merit; *“so it’s great when it works but a lot of those offers that are made to you are just people who want to abuse your song rather than use it in any tasty or good way, so I wouldn’t always accept those offers”*. The above is evidence that the musician community, under certain circumstances, will regard using their music in advertising as a legitimate form of artistic production and in other circumstances as an illegitimate use. This suggests that the relationship between music and advertising is more complex and contested than simple discourses of sell-out

purport. Clearly the musicians quoted above do not regard their involvement in advertisement as a loss of artistic integrity but rather as an opportunity to find new creative possibilities.

Theme 3 – Music as ideology

A number of musicians had strong beliefs that music had an ideological role. One described musicians as carrying the “*voice of freedom*” in a society, a voice which was threatened the influence of corporate interests in broadcasting. One musician stated that the ideology of music was to “*make the world a better place*”. In this domain he saw music as occupying a separate dimension to consumer products which he objected to on environmental and geo-political grounds and associated the fuel-uneconomic Hummer car with the war in Iraq; “*it’s a poisonous, immoral, disgusting, shameful, immoral situation and the Hummer is a manifestation of it and to go back to what you feel about your music, does it make the world a better place? Is the Hummer making the world a better place?*”

One musician argued that the genesis of most musical traditions is opposition and that music is profoundly ideological: “*I think the very enactment of something musical involves people somehow collectively identifying with something that’s theirs’, even though that that can sometimes be used for very cynical purposes like in right wing regimes. Like you think of militaristic regimes like the German regime in the Second World War where political song was used as a very negative rallying point. For the most part, when I think of music, I think of it as a power against evil and a power against the forces of oppression*”. In this instance music is both identified as an oppositional counter-culture but also has its reifying role stressed; it can be used to transform individuals into a unified mass. As the musician stated, this role can have both positive – resisting colonialism - and negative effects – serving fascism. In this sense the possibility of using music to reify an audience and then encourage them to buy your product has obvious attractions for advertisers.

Discussion

The debate regarding the use of music in advertising can be regarded as highly complex where there is little consensus amongst musicians. For some musicians it is a good opportunity for promoting their music which in any case is a commodity too, for others it is a regrettable case of economic necessity and for some there are artistic merits to be found in some form of advertising but not in others. What is perhaps most relevant in the context of counter-culture is the belief that music should remain aloof from advertising and expla-

nations here ranged from not wanting the meaning of the music to be married to a product, regarding music as being more sacred than a profane commodity and finally regarding music as being oppositional.

This debate adds a further dimension to what has been described as the societal conundrum of intellectual property rights. Further to the political and economic interests which Schultz and Nill (2002) addressed are the emotive nature of various pieces of copyright. In European Union law the intellectual copyright for music composition expires after fifty years which means that the Beatles' music will soon enter the public domain in which case advertisers will be free to use the music at will meaning that a new generation will be exposed to the songs of the Beatles via advertisements.

The musician who laid claim to music as being counter-cultural but also of having powers of reification draws attention to an important paradox, can counter-cultural be reifying? According to Adorno & Horkheimer commodified music lends itself towards reification and it is reification that art is supposed to oppose: "This promise held out by the work of art that it will create truth by lending shape to the conventional social forms is as necessary as it is hypocritical. It unconditionally posits the real forms of life as it is by suggesting that fulfilment lies in their aesthetic derivatives. To this extent the claim of art is always ideological too" (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1947/1998:pp130). Whilst music as commodity counter-culture could possibly lead to political upheaval², this would not be a meaningful liberation. According to Horkheimer post-Marxist analysis, the bourgeois struggle for liberation is marked from the beginning by the deception of the masses. Under this view the bourgeois use the masses as an ally in their struggle against the ruling structure deploying them as a kind of battering ram (Steinert, 2003). Counter-culture music which is reifying carries the danger that it could commit the masses to a struggle that ultimately is not in their interest (Adorno uses the example of Wagner and its inspiration upon the German populace) and hence is a pseudo-activity or a deception. Therefore art can only be oppositional if it helps people to recognise and criticise the distortions effected by social domination. As Adorno & Horkheimer maintained, reifying culture can be deployed in a variety of ways; "One day the edict of production, the actual advertisement (whose actuality is at present concealed by the pretence of a choice) can turn into the open command of the Fuhrer" (pp160).

² To be sure consumers can interpret music in wildly different ways. An example is how *Revolution* and the rest of the white album has been described as indirectly responsible for murder because of the bizarre interpretation taken by Charles Manson [Quantick, D. (2002). *Revolution - the making of the Beatles' white album*. London: Unanimous Ltd]

This paper argues that what is considered to be counter-cultural is not necessarily oppositional to the dominant social order leading to the term “pseudo-counter-culture”. Opposition to music in advertisements may therefore be based upon a certain naivety as it denies the commodification form of the music itself. However as Griff (1960) and Hesmondalgh (2002) identified, often creative people are engaged in a continuing struggle with commercial interests. Indeed this paper has showed that musicians often find engaging in advertisements to be a rewarding venture from a creative perspective suggesting that the relationship between music and commerce may be more ambiguous than the dogma purported by Adorno & Horkheimer. The degree to which such acts can be regarded as a pseudo-activity which only seeks to further integrate people into dominant mode returns the issue to the familiar paradox of consumer counter-culture.

Implications for Macromarketing

If the role of music in society is compromised by commerce then this should be considered as an important macromarketing issue as it ties together cultural, political, legal and commercial dynamics into an interesting spectrum with which to view the impact of marketing in our society. As Holbrook (1995) has stated our current social scene poses “crucial issues for social policy and reflect profound questions concerning the temper of the times, the consumer’s place in the culture of consumption, and the role of marketing in encouraging the more – or less – elitist forces in the world around us (163). It is worth noting that at the time of the Nike controversy, Paul McCartney suggested that in twenty years time it might be possible to use music in advertisements without scandal (Dowling, 1989) suggesting that there is a softening regarding people’s concerns regarding the clash of music and commerce. As we approach that time it is possible that he will be proved correct. According to one remaining bastion of the campaign to keep music out of advertisements, the musician Tom Waits, the process is such that “Eventually, artists will be going onstage like race-car drivers covered in hundreds of logos” (Waits, 2002:pp1). The question is, at what cost?

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