

Brands and Virtual Worlds

by Abel Reis, AgênciaClick

There was a time when publicity brands were just names or labels, a convenient feature helping consumers to distinguish one product from another one.

Brands, in this way, operated as an indication of technical features, provenance and proof of quality, a safe harbor in a competitive and insecure market.

However the world has changed, as has capitalism. Consumption has grown spectacularly and the products, despite being transformed by frequent technological innovations, are constantly under the threat of commoditization.

From cars to toothpaste, food to gasoline, everything “looks alike”. In this context, the economic war for markets tends to put prices under pressure and cut companies profits. Names, labels, and price policies are no longer such powerful tools.

Traditional formats of publicity have being exhausted. Mass communication to anonymous audiences is becoming innocuous. Breaking point: subjectivity has become the new battlefield. Economic wars became aesthetic wars, wars for conquering our modes of perception. It seems that the main issue is about creating references that influence consumers’ options and actions.

Now brands have taken on another role: the manufacturing of our sensibility; which means to spread knowledge, to emphasize values, to propose beliefs and to infuse desires. In this way, brands are not only a reference for our trust in quality; brands have also taken on the mission of building an ideological and cultural atmosphere for the behavior of consumption. And in doing so, brands forge the conditions which make possible economic production.

As a consequence, brands have become abstract machines, effectively oriented to generate meanings, imperative phrases, and signs with the ability to mobilize and catch consumers’ attention, affection and memory.

It's possible to say that, in the new field of aesthetic wars, winning brands will be those that build "worlds". Worlds of coherent enunciations. Worlds of signs organized towards involving consumers in a web of meanings. Worlds within that, the act of consumption is an act of belonging.

Any doubt? Just remember slogans engraved in your long-term memories. Remember how they express opinions, behaviors and interests you believe and propagate.

Aesthetic Wars

In the economy of aesthetic wars, new weapons and new tactics will be required. But, what will these new resources be? How will they drive consumers towards the feeling of belonging? How do they capture the fragmented consumers' attention? How do they surpass the saturation of signs and the consumers' skepticism? How to transmit reliability in a form of consistent, engaging, seamless and unforgettable experiences? Lots of questions, few answers and various trials. It's not easy to be a brand strategist in current days.

Let's ask a question hidden amongst all the other questions. If we live in the middle of aesthetic wars for subjectivity, it will be a requirement to ask the question before taking the action: what are the features of contemporary subjectivity?

Don't think to ask the consumers. Quite simply, they don't know the answer. Nobody talks about your own subjectivity like a marketing professional would do.

Notice that we are referring subjectivity not as "peopleness", things and feelings belonging to each individual, but as processes and formations outside of us, by which we become who we are.

Fictional Life

We live in such an increasingly fictional life. There are several symptoms. The narcissists care for themselves; the body as an open territory for medical-aesthetic interventions; the refusal of anguish; the search for opportunities to affirm and to extend our identity and personal brand;

tribalization as an alternative to diminished kinship; the obsession for fame and even the confessional fever of blogging.

*We are searching for cosmetics for our body and our soul. We appreciate narratives about origins, stories about ancient times, and mysterious plots. Hybrids of fiction and reality attract us. In a certain way, we are looking for our **avatar** and it is suggestive that this word (coming from Sanskrit) is used to designate users in several virtual communities or environments: it's remanent of transcendence embedded within everyday immanence.*

In this sense, 3D virtual worlds such as Second Life (SL) are genuine stages for a fictionalized life, platforms for exercising our subjectivity. This is a significant reason why SL seduces media and brands (global and local).

The vast iconic territory of SL offers us a multitude of images, diagrams and metaphors that, working for the branding abstract machines, generate dematerialized experiences which are unique, immersive, and captivating for the memories and attentions of the consumers.

*There is a “physics”, a “metaphysics”, a aesthetics and a **socius** which are specific attributes to SL, setting conditions for its inhabitants to create courses, adventures and plots. Brands aspire to capture these rich and singular experiences in order to (re)produce subjectivity. That's the reason why SL's way of life seems so fascinating to publicity brands.*

The iconic intensity of SL makes virtual life a fictive transference of the real life – on line and in real time. If the real life persists – we are unavoidably tied to it – the virtual life entices us, because within it we perform like actors and directors of our (second) life plots. Brands have already discovered this creative tension, which produces subjectivity, and now is the time to colonize the future.