

CREATIVITY IN A CLUTTERED AGE

Information is so thick a “data smog” hangs over our times, as epitomized by this Robert Walker photo of Times Square. But the best artists have the expertise and creative smarts to rise above it and help us understand our media environment, says cultural critic Charles Acland of Concordia University

In an era of near-total immersion in media, artists, advertisers and other creative people face a huge challenge to break through and be noticed — or even to break away from all the media clutter in their own lives, says Charles Acland, a professor and Concordia University’s Research Chair in Communications Studies.

“Our media environment is too cluttered for us to pay attention to all of it, and in many ways the modern age can be understood as a battle for people’s attention.”

It’s a battle marketers know well. “The number-one goal is to get attention for brands and the amount of advertising in the world today is at its zenith,” says Terry O’Reilly, who has spent his career in advertising, and also produces and hosts a CBC Radio series, *Under the Influence*, on advertising’s impact on modern culture.

Professor Acland and Mr. O’Reilly will be featured in the Concordia University Thinking Out Loud conversation series on creativity, held in partnership with the Globe and Mail. The opening session, on March 6, will focus on strategies for living with media clutter.

The superabundance of information isn’t new, both say. People have worried about the onslaught of sensory appeals in urban life for decades. For about as long, others have sought to navigate this new ecology. Fifty years ago, when fears about “information



overload” were widespread, Marshall McLuhan wrote about the power of electronic media to create new possibilities for human expression and experience.

Advertisers have long struggled to find and use those new means of connecting with consumers. North American marketers began to hit a steady stride with a Cadillac ad that suggested in every man lurks the man he wants to be — a leader. It was an epiphany for all other brands that saw how psychology could be used for marketing purposes, Mr. O’Reilly says. Later, advertising agency Leo Burnett discovered that blindfolded smokers couldn’t recognize the brand they loved, and realized that a brand was an idea, and ideas could be influenced by the frequency of repetition.

These examples show that efforts to rise above clutter may in fact produce more of it. But new forms of expression will emerge that work with and challenge media clutter, Professor Acland says.

“We often have a conception of the artist as someone who makes these grand individual leaps of creative thought. In fact, the best creative innovators of any period

work with the material that’s available. In our context, it’s the vast stores of visual, written, and auditory texts. The work of the curator, the collector, the archivist, who all comb through and help organize those materials, is going to stand out as a much sought after and highly valued expertise.”

Creative people, however, are obliged to be more entrepreneurial, as they try to survive, and thrive, in a busy economy in which both opportunity and competition are plentiful, Professor Acland says.

“The creative economy is a very big one. Think of one of the high-growth areas in Montreal, the video-game and digital effects industry. Opportunities for skilled talent in that sector are expanding quite phenomenally. The downside is a lot of these jobs are very precarious — mostly short-term contracts on extremely tight deadlines. It’s one of the reasons you see a certain self-managed artistic entrepreneurialism taking over.”

The struggles of writers epitomize the mixed blessings of the digital era, he says. “It’s very easy for writers to get published if we

have a broad definition of what counts as publishing. Yet, you now have an even greater stratification between the crowd of people who are self-published or self-distributing, and those who have the extra prestige of the big-name publishing houses. There are fewer and fewer writers who can make it into that territory. As a result it’s an even more valuable territory.”

Advertisers have been developing new and wilder methods of grabbing people’s attention, Mr. O’Reilly says. “Prankvertising” is one such method; a brand pulls a prank on its customers, videotapes it and posts it on YouTube. LG, which makes high-definition TV screens, replaced an elevator floor with a TV screen. “When people walked in the screen projected a floor; as the elevator started moving, it looked like the floor of the elevator gave way,” Mr. O’Reilly explains. “People freaked out. It was a great execution of how life-like LG’s televisions are.”

But the ad raised questions for advertisers of how far they could and should go to gain attention, Mr. O’Reilly says. “Do you terrorize your customers to get at-

tention? You can’t get noticed by being safe, by being merely polite. You have to be bold, but how does one define bold?”

Another example of how advertisers tried to break through the clutter looked like, well, clutter: “In a park in Boston, people walking on a Saturday morning saw sticks wrapped up in yellow paper, spread all over the park. When they picked them up and unrolled the paper it said something like ‘this stick would be a lot more fun if there was a dog attached to it. Come and adopt dogs at the SPCA.’ What a great idea. The problem is there’s advertising strewn across the park.”

Professor Acland adds that it is difficult to know what new forms of expression may evolve and captivate the public. “We are in a situation where it’s possible to be completely surprised at what the next art form might be, but you can count on the fact that it will be shaped by our dominant technologies and economies.”

To register for the talk by Charles Acland and Terry O’Reilly, visit concordia.ca/talks. The event is free but spaces are limited.

JUST TALKING Living in a digital world

Our machines will be gossiping about us soon, and we may not be able to escape an information onslaught — but our critical and creative capacities persist, say Charles Acland, a Concordia University communications specialist, and Terry O’Reilly, an advertiser and radio host

Q: How new is this sense of being totally immersed in media and information?

Charles: The conditions that we live in, the state of being surrounded and overwhelmed by the presence of contemporary new media, has precursors. The 20th century was in part a story of expanding media forms and the busy environment they created.



Q: Can we escape it? Should we try?

Charles: The most immediate solution would appear to be to turn it all off, but that’s not going to work for a lot of people, given the blending of work and leisure that many of our devices are designed and used for. First and foremost, we need to recognize that our situation is not inevitable. We tend to think of our built digital environment as though it is natural, as though it is without alternative. This view is false, and it limits people’s ability to imagine other ways in which we might live.

Q: How do social media affect human relationships?

Charles: Today, social media are treated as though they are almost an extension or surrogate of all forms of sociality, and as though they are novel. But ‘social media’ is a redundancy. There are no media that aren’t at some level social. Media always have to do with transporting ideas and expressions from one location, time, and person to another.

Q: What is the future of writers when everyone can post work anywhere and everywhere, but old-style publishers are hard to break into?

Charles: There are some who would champion the independence that’s afforded. Most writers are now like indie bands. They don’t have big labels that they’re signed on to. The great mythological story is of someone who is able to rise above and get noticed. The barriers to this success are enormous.

Q: But how do writers eat?

Charles: Now there is a de-professionalization of creative labour which produces more of a bottleneck to a self-sustaining career. It becomes a story of the big getting bigger and the smaller getting hungrier.

Charles Acland is a professor and Concordia Research Chair in Communications Studies, and author of Swift Viewing: The Popular Life of Subliminal Influence.

Q: Can you quantify the clutter?

Terry: People probably see 3,500 ads a day, of which they probably notice six and retain two. Advertising agencies create the clutter and then spend their entire lifetime trying to break through it. It’s all about attention.

Q: How is all that ad clutter influencing modern life?

Terry: There are enormous invasion-of-privacy issues. I have three daughters who give away a tonne of information about themselves online. It drives my wife and me crazy. We’re of the generation that we give almost nothing away. The reason they do is they want to get relevant advertising back at them. The ads that get sent to them are targeted to their interests. When brands collect data on you, one reason is to be more relevant. The bad side is there’s a lot of information about you out there.

Q: What’s next, as advertisers try to break through and be noticed?

Terry: The objects we buy are going to be sending as much information out and back to the manufacturer as they’re sending to us to use the thing. Does that mean there’ll be no need for creative people in advertising? If the brand knows you’re shopping for a car, and then Ford sends you an ad for a car you’ve been looking at but with a great money-back rebate, they don’t need to be creative with that. They just need to know you and be exquisite in their timing.

Q: To what extent do our wants and needs become shaped by this constant advertising?

Terry: Especially in fashion, there is a certain standard that all advertising uses which is the beautiful body, the ‘ideal body type,’ and I think that has a big effect, especially on women in our culture. Advertising has a big role with children growing up. When I grew up, advertising sure had its hand in selling tobacco. But I have to say that I think movies were as big an influence on smoking and maybe more. I smoked in my teens into my 20s. I was trying to be like Sean Connery.

Terry O’Reilly is host and producer of CBC Radio One’s Under the Influence, about advertising’s impact on modern culture, and co-author of The Age of Persuasion: How Marketing Ate Our Culture.

