Crouching crisis, hidden metaphor

Five years ago, I wrote a book chapter on marketing’s “crisis of representation” (Brown, 1998a). In it, I argued that the concept of crisis was in crisis. Far from being a temporary state of fear and trembling, as dictionary definitions of the word imply, marketing’s crisis was continuous, ceaseless, chronic. A never-ending crisis, no less. The history of marketing reveals that there’s always some kind of conceptual crisis brewing, bubbling or bursting forth, and there’s always someone bellowing “crisis” from the crenellated rooftops of the ivied ivory tower (Brown, 1995). Regardless of whether there’s a real crisis of representation “out there” – stricken scholars unable to put pen to paper – there’s no doubt that the discourse of crisis is always with us, late and soon.

Our starter question, then, is what scholarly purpose, if any, does crying crisis serve? Something to frighten impressionable students with? Perhaps. A weapon to wield in internecine scholarly conflict? Possibly. Face cards to play in the liar’s poker of professional self-advancement? Patently. It is arguable, however, that crises’ principal function is performative. They raise the pulse. They rally the troops. They place people on their mettle. They persuade those confronting the alleged crisis to strain every scholarly sinew, so to speak. Crying “crisis” may be the intellectual equivalent of shouting “Fire!” in a crowded theatre, or “Man the lifeboats!” on the Titanic, or “Osama for ever!” on Capitol Hill. But it works. Or at least it used to.

Contemporary crises, it seems to me, are not what they were. The good old days, when the currency of “crisis” bought a complete academic career and left change out of a professorial chair, are long gone never to return. Call me a hopeless nostalgic, if you must – a throw-back to the pre-postmodern epoch when a crisis was worth the paper it was written in – yet it is undeniable that crying crisis loses its impact after the first couple of times. When, as is currently the case, the cacophony of competing crises makes any individual crisis difficult to discern, when the cavalcade of crises segue imperceptibly into one another, when marketing is allegedly beset by a crisis wrapped in a panic inside an emergency, when we have developed an immunity to
crises, as our ever-escalating dosage suggests, and when crises are even more interminable than one of Stephen Brown’s orotund sentences, then it is time to call a halt, to give the discourse of crisis a rest, to consider the metaphorical corner that crisis has painted itself into.

Indeed, the root of the problem is that marketing is hoist by a hidden metaphor, a camouflaged conceit[1]. The concept of “crisis” distorts our thinking. The word carries connotations of impotence and angst, of fearful academics following Wittgenstein’s famous injunction “whereof one cannot speak thereof one must remain silent”. However, one only has to replace crisis with a word like “revolution” or “transformation” or “eruption” – the representation revolution, the transformation of representation, the representation eruption – to completely reconfigure the scholarly agenda. Fear and foreboding amidst the academic ruins suddenly becomes a rousing chorus of different voices, a discourse of new and improved, of onward and upward, of boldly going where no marketing man has gone before. The metaphors we unthinkingly employ, as the post-structuralists constantly remind us, insidiously shape our worldview, our attitudes, our actions. We are constrained by tropic trammels, we are prone to linguistic laziness, we are in thrall to hackneyed expressions (like “hackneyed expressions”) and long-dead metaphors (the very idea that language is sentient).

At the end of the day, hackneyed expressions, dead metaphors et al. are the comfort food of thought, and marketing’s appetite is insatiable. As a congenital couch potato, marketing consumes crises of representation like crispy buffalo wings and washes them down with carbonated scholarly citations from the Coca-Foucault factory, our beverage of choice.

I’m a couch potato, too, I hasten to add. A two potato, three potato, four potato couch potato, don’t you know. I’ve conjured crises, wrestled with rabid representation devices and had my necrophilic way with recently deceased similies. Yet, despite my personal debt to the crisis-breaking business, especially now that the market is flooded and prices are falling, I’m duty bound to admit that there is no crisis of representation in marketing. None whatsoever.

**Croesus? What Croesus?**

What there is, rather, is a Croesus of representation. Like the legendary king of Lydia, whose wealth was far beyond measure, we’re living in a golden age of representation. Marketing has never been so richly represented. Every mode of representation you can possibly imagine – poetry, photography, videography, netography, performance, painting, autobiography, fiction, faction, installation art, music, dance – has been embraced or attempted by the academic marketing community (see, for example, Stern, 1998). By many members of the academic marketing community, what is more, many times over. These are not one-off, avant-garde experiments. A considerable body of work is now in place, though it remains to be collected, consolidated and catalogued. Morris Holbrook, to name but one prominent marketing aesthete, has been publishing “experimental” articles for 20-plus years. He has published these experiments in diverse academic outlets; he has experimented with many forms of representation; he has proselytised ceaselessly on behalf of experimental approaches; he has even published an anthology of his greatest experimental writing hits (Holbrook, 1995). Granted, Morris likes to weave a crisis-transcending, battling-the-philistines narrative around his compendious corpus, as do many researchers on the “radical” wing of the interpretive school[2]. But when you set aside the self-serving rhetoric and generic conventions – an artist’s gotta struggle, right? – it is blindly obvious that marketing representation is richer now than it has ever been.

In fact, if you look beyond the representational bullion stockpiled in bulging vaults of business schools worldwide, the picture is even more impressive. Marketing and consumption, for example, are now extremely hot topics throughout the social sciences and the humanities are not far behind (see Lee, 2000). The vast majority of these representations can be considered “qualitative”, broadly speaking, albeit empirical research is the exception rather than
the rule. While marketing’s interpretive community doffs its cap much too readily to ostensible elders and betters – please take us seriously, please read our stuff, please cite our articles, pretty please! – there is no doubt that some (but not all) of this extra-marketing marketing research is deeply impressive. For every Ritzer (1998), whose over-rated McDonaldisation thesis is little more than Marketing 101, or Miller (1995), who may be a leading anthropologist but who can’t write to save his life, there is a Campbell (1987), whose “romantic ethic” framework is a milestone in marketing thought, and a Baudrillard (1998), who brilliantly illuminates all manner of marketing phenomena from fads and gadgets to shopping malls and theme parks. As crises of representation go, marketing’s is not exactly in I-can’t-go-on, I-must-go-on, I’ll-go-on territory.

The spectre of Samuel Beckett raises another representational issue. Namely, the postmodern plethora of non-academic marketing representations. Today’s book stores are bulging with novels about shopaholism, gift-giving, eccentric advertising executives et al. (e.g. Beigbeder, 2002; Flusfeder, 2003; Kinsella, 2000). Art galleries routinely mount exhibitions pertaining to marketing, branding and the de luxe lifestyle (Manolo Blahnik at the Design Museum, MoMA’s Harley Davidson extravaganza, Shopping at Tate, Liverpool etc.). Television programmes on consumerism, shopper psychology, rough traders, hidden persuaders, discarded possessions, self-marketing makeovers, and quirky commercials from around the world are all the rage. Glossy magazines are replete with articles on fashion designers, store atmospherics, chic bistros and exclusive holiday hide-aways. Hardly a weekend goes by without some Sunday supplement splash about the latest marketing manoeuvres, machinations or malfeasance. Movies set in commercial contexts are two a penny – What Women Want, Crazy People, Clerks, High Fidelity, Scenes From a Mall, You’ve Got Mail, Working Girl, Soul Man, Pretty Woman, Jerry Maguire, The Good Girl, How to Get Ahead in Advertising – and, while the content is undeniably exaggerated and melodramatic, their status as representations is not in doubt. If, indeed, all this is a crisis of representation, then I can’t wait for the irretrievable breakdown, complete with pillow chewing, hair tearing and suits-you-sir straitjacket.

A brilliant example of marketing’s representational imperialism is The People’s Choice by the Russian émigré artists Komar and Melamid (Wypijewski, 1999). In 1995, the merry pranksters hired Martiila & Kiley, a respected market research agency, who polled a representative sample of 1,001 US citizens about their artistic likes and dislikes. The results, significant at the 95 per cent level with a 3.2 per cent margin of error, were used to develop two composite canvasses, America’s Most Wanted and America’s Least Wanted. The former was a big, bright blue landscape, featuring lakes, people and wild animals in their natural setting. The latter was small, dark, stark and abstract, a riot of sharp overlapping triangles. An exhibition, featuring the nation’s preferred choices, subsequently toured the country; public meetings were held in towns and cities en route; the artists advertised their findings in newspaper free sheets and similar pennysavers; and the research generated an great deal of debate, discussion and controversy, especially among the disdainful artistic community, who objected to the commodification process and the artists’ complicity with the demands of the marketplace.

However, such was the interest in the exhibition to say nothing of the publicity value that Komar and Melamid repeated the experiment in China, Denmark, Finland, France, Iceland, Kenya, Russia, Turkey and the Ukraine. Incredibly, the results were pretty much the same, despite vast national differences in culture, history, geography, religious belief, social structure and economic development. More incredibly still, the polling produced paintings that are almost indistinguishable from the work of Thomas Kinkade, the best selling artist in the USA and “schlockmeister” supreme (Brown, 2001). Just as King Croesus’s stupendous wealth attracted the best artists and intellectuals of his day, such as Aesop (the fable guy) and Solon (one of the Seven Wise Men), so too the rampant marketisation of the twenty-first century is drawing every academician, commentator and representeur into its gilded cage, its merciless maw, its little black hole.
Who moved my market?

Croesus, of course, is remembered for more than his illimitable riches and the glittering court his resources underwrote. He is remembered for an illuminating encounter with the Oracle at Delphi. When he consulted this notoriously equivocal soothsayer about the likely outcome of an impending war with the Persians under Cyrus the Great, he received the answer *Croesus Halyon penetrans magnum pervertet opum vim* (When Croesus crosses the River Halys, he will overthrow the strength of an empire). King Moneybags took this to mean that he’d roundly defeat the enemy and so he marched merrily to war. However, it was his own empire that got destroyed in the fateful encounter.

There is a parallel here with the state of marketing scholarship. In terms of representations, marketing is richer than rich. Rich beyond belief. Russ Belk is directing videos by the dozen; plays and poetry readings take pride of place at our annual conferences; and Jack Trout (of “positioning” fame) has even written a feeble marketing fable, somewhat akin to Spencer Johnson’s multi-million best-seller *Who Moved My Cheese?* (Trout, 2003). Yet, for all these representational riches, there is something awry, something amiss, something not quite right. We’re misreading the signs, I fear, a bit like Croesus’s Delphic debacle. Careful examination of marketing’s treasure trove reveals that the representations are manufactured from base metal rather than gold. Far from mining the mother lode, marketing academicians are sitting on a mountain of fool’s gold. It looks and feels like the real thing. But it ain’t.

It’s time, I believe, to ‘fess up to the fact that our representations aren’t very good. The videos we make are amateurish at best and embarrassing at worst. Our creative writing is either crass or clichéd or both. The playlets that punctuate our annual conferences are, almost without exception, utterly abysmal. The performers are hopelessly under-rehearsed, they don’t know their lines – surely the most basic prerequisite for any kind of thespian endeavour – and, as they spend the entire time with their heads down, trying to read the so-called script, their stagecraft is completely non-existent. Whatever the experience does for the performers, the audience experiences nothing but toe-curling mortification. I know whereof I speak.

Worse, there seems to be a mistaken assumption among marketing academics that the very act of writing a poem, or making a video, or putting on a show is a good thing in itself, something we should applaud and be eternally grateful for. Similarly, there seems to be an assumption that audiences suspend their critical faculties when faced with the output of our very own amateur movie-makers, wannabe actors and I-wandered-lonely-as-a-poet self-admirers.

This is incorrect on both counts. A bad play is a bad play, even when allowances are made for the performers (often established scholars keen to “let their hair down” or show their human side). In certain respects it’s worse than bad, because it bespeaks contempt for those forced to watch the narcissistic, self-indulgence of “tenured radicals”, as Tom Wolfe famously described them. Ask yourself, what PhD student is going to tell their supervisor that his video sucks? What assistant professor, if he/she has any political savvy, will disparage the stagecraft of those who may end up as a reviewer of their career-establishing, make-or-break manuscript? What editor of an edited text will convince Morris “crank-em-out” Holbrook that less is sometimes more?

Far from suspending our critical faculties, experimentation actually heightens them. In order to appreciate the good, we must experience the bad, since it provides the necessary basis for comparison, and, even if we wished to set aside our critical judgment, it’s not something that can be done to order. True, most people are incapable of spelling out what their personal aesthetic criteria are, but having watched countless movies, listened to myriad albums and read novels beyond number (or flicked through them at least), most people have internalised some sense of what’s good and what’s not. They don’t know much about aesthetics, but they know what blows chunks. Academics blow chunks at the best of times. However, they shatter the Beaufort Scale when they try their hand at artworks.

Think about it. Professional performers wouldn’t dream of putting on a show without weeks and weeks of rehearsal. Yet academics labour under the illusion that we can knock it off in an afternoon or nail it first take. We can write as creatively as we like, but it simply
doesn’t stand comparison to the work of “proper” writers, journalists, or poets. Poetry, admittedly, is something of an anomaly, primarily because most of us have no idea how to read or evaluate a poem nowadays. Hence, we are inclined to be impressed by almost anything that looks like blank verse or is assembled in six line stanzas with lots of surrounding white space. In most pop-cult spheres, however, most of us have some idea of what works and what doesn’t, and we bring these inchoate criteria to bear on the bumbling efforts of our fellow scholars. When interpretive marketing researchers have the temerity to intrude on the territory of professional playwrights, successful screenwriters, Pulitzer Prize-winning authors, or celebrity newspaper columnists, we are on a hiding to nothing. Consider A.A. Gill’s (2003) recent critique of Starbucks (see Appendix). What academic, no matter how “creative”, could better his assassination of the cultural logic of latte capitalism?

The sanity clause

Lest these remarks appear unduly churlish or sound like the vitriolic viticultural outpourings of a sour grapes sommelier, I should stress that Stephen Brown is not exempt. As a self-appointed auteur and long-time logorrhoea sufferer, I have happily wallowed in the malefic mire of scholarly self-indulgence, snout-deep, hippo-like, little legs a-thrashing. However, I also appreciate the perils of intruding on the professionals’ patch. Many years ago, I wrote a short case study on Santa’s marketing strategy (Brown, 1987). It was just a bit of fun that I used in the last class of the Christmas term, when my marketing research students were more preoccupied with the impending party season than the difficulties of drawing a representative sample, designing an effective questionnaire or undertaking any other pressing research requirement.

Anyway, my Santa case always went down very well with the students and, encouraged by a friend who worked for the BBC, I rewrote it as a little radio play. The storyline was developed, professional actors were cast, the programme received prominent billing in The Radio Times (complete with cartoon of Santa Claus CEO!), and graced the airwaves the week before Christmas. It was dire. Truly dire. I have never been so ashamed. The dialogue, which looked fine on the page, sounded awfully clunky when spoken. Awful, full stop. Granted, clunky dialogue hasn’t stopped George Lucas. As Harrison Ford famously observed during the making of Star Wars, “You can write this shit, George, but you can’t speak it”. But at least Lucas has special effects to fall back on. Stephen Brown’s Santa didn’t and although I drew some comfort from a subsequent Hollywood movie based on the same basic premise, my sideline as a scriptwriter ended then and there[3]. The BBC didn’t call me and I was too embarrassed to call them. The moral, if there is one, is that there’s a world of difference between words on a page and words in the mouth.

Words are just the start of it, moreover. At one stage, I had the “brilliant” idea of writing a murder mystery set in a university marketing department. Entitled “Kotler is dead!”, it was a cross between a campus novel and Hercule Poirot. In keeping with the-butler-did-it-in-the-library genre, it hinged on mistaken identity, insofar as Phil, the eponymous protagonist, wasn’t the sainted Philip Kotler but Philippa Kotler, his psychotic doppelganger (Smiteeth, 1997). I sketched the whole thing out and, just as it was beginning to dawn on me that there’s much more to novel writing than wordplay and plotting (characterisation, mise en scène, point of view, etc.), I came across a detective “novel” by the much-published postmodern theorist A. Arthur Berger (1997). Inept doesn’t begin to describe it. So bad was Berger’s hapless effort that it gave me serious pause for thought. It made me realize that the real challenge isn’t writing a novel, as such, it’s writing a novel that’s good enough to stand comparison with the real thing. Because that is how it will be judged. Just as local, cheaply produced TV ads are broadcast alongside polished, semi-cinematic, money-no-object commercials for Nike, Pepsi or Guinness – and inevitably look desperately amateurish – so too academic “artistes” must accept that they’ll be measured against their chosen genre’s best practice. I hate to use the word benchmarking, especially about something as unquantifiable as art, but that’s what it boils down to.

Now, in fairness, we’ve all got to start somewhere. Artistic endeavour is a craft, a knack, a facility, if you will, that improves
with practice. There’s no doubt in my mind that several marketing scholars have genuine talent. Craig Thompson and Chris Hackley, for example, possess real stage presence. They can, and do, act very well. John Sherry is an accomplished poet – he has the prizes to prove it – though the untutored majority must take his status on trust. Susan Dobscha has made several impressive appearances on *Good Morning America* and, given the present paucity of “public intellectuals” (Posner, 2002), she could doubtless establish herself as a prominent TV pundit. Jonathan Schroeder has contributed to numerous museum exhibitions and could become an excellent curator, should he choose to follow that route. Bob Grafton Small is blessed with an amazing literary gift, one that matches many me-too exponents of chick-lit, lad-lit and does-my-bum-look-big-in-this-lit. Robert Kozinetz, likewise, is a cinematographer at heart. He has an unerring eye for arresting images. His first videography of the Burning Man Festival was extraordinarily powerful. It consisted of a series of eerie, washed-out vignettes, which brilliantly conveyed the otherworldliness of the setting, a desiccated river valley in the intermontane deserts of Utah. Regrettably, Rob reworked this initial rough cut and the resultant “official” video is much less compelling than the original. Better looking, yes. Burnished almost. But, sadly devoid of authentic aesthetic impact.

The key point, then, is that the raw talent is there. With sufficient practice, marketers could produce non-traditional representations – plays, movies, short stories, whatever – that, if not quite within spitting distance of the real thing, are certainly less than a stone’s throw away. However, this is highly unlikely to happen. It won’t happen because there are several very serious barriers to implementation. In theory these barriers are surmountable. In practice they aren’t.

**Songs of the humpback scholar**

The first and perhaps the most serious barrier is that “experimental” marketing representations don’t count. They won’t get included in Research Assessment Exercise submissions. They won’t help secure tenure or promotion. They won’t enhance the creator’s reputation (outside the small, secluded, self-referential interpretive research community). On the contrary, they can actually impede an individual’s career path. Academia is a conservative place, business schools especially so. Marketing is widely regarded as a low-life academic discipline and its guardians, gatekeepers and kingmakers—general are not well disposed to those who subvert the discipline’s serious scholarly aspirations. By all means present a PhD thesis in the form of a Platonic dialogue or bells-and-whistles Web site, just don’t expect the external examiners to look kindly on it[4]. By all means spend a year of your life writing a serio-comic research monograph, as I have done, just don’t expect to find a publisher for your neither fish nor fowl experiment (Brown, 1998b).

In this regard, it is no coincidence that the discipline’s leading “creatives” are those who have already got tenure, or whose academic bona fides were well established before they went walkabout, or who treat their artistic endeavours as a sideline, as a safety valve, as something they do in their spare time.

Beth Hirschman’s early articles were very conventional, verging on positivistic, as were Russell Belk’s. Morris Holbrook, arguably the foremost aesthete in the academic marketing community, bends over backward to stress his traditional scholarly accomplishments (Holbrook, 1995). Morris has thrown off more scales than a molting dragon and keeps carefully in step with the conjoint chorus line. For every weird and wonderful excursus on catoptrics or stereography, there’s an MDS ms in his humming paper hopper.

To be sure, there’s no reason why creative work can’t count. It counts in the liberal arts and analogous academic disciplines. But the reality of B-school life is that it doesn’t count at present and won’t be counted for the foreseeable future. Ambitious academics, frankly, are wasting their time attempting non-traditional forms of representation, since there is no significant professional payoff.

That being the case, they simply can’t give it the time and energy that’s needed, whether it be the weeks of rehearsal for a play, the innumerable drafts of a poem, or the long days and nights in the video editing suite. Even if they possess the requisite talent, as some do, the scholarly reward system militates against them and, given the countless hours of practice that virtuoso performances require, they can’t compete with the professionals. Short of abandoning
academic life – not an easy option in our winner-take-all society (Frank and Cook, 1995) – the odds are stacked heavily against B-school-based wannabes. Art for art’s sake is rare at the best of times, expecting it from marketing professors is totally unrealistic.

Double or quits

Alongside careerist concerns, there is the double-bind of double-blind review. Even if academics desire to be creative – to rattle the iron cage of representation – they are thwarted by the mechanics of the peer review process. Much has been written about reviewers, most of it unkind (Brown, 1998c). Each and every one of us has a stock of submission shockers, horror stories of maltreatment at the hands of ignorant, capricious, vengeful reviewers, who lurk behind the double-blind smokescreen while venting their spleen on an innocent author. Morris Holbrook (1993), for example, takes perverse pleasure in quoting his hostile reviewers, presumably to better highlight their manifest ignorance and overwhelming pomposity. Consider also the following reviewer’s remark which was flung at Craig Thompson (2003) a few months back: “Do you wish to make a contribution to the humanities where you and your fellow travellers are intoxicated by artful prose or to the sciences with its standards of objectivity, validity, and evidence?” Better yet is something I read in a recent review: “If, as they say, ignorance is bliss then the authors of this manuscript must be in a permanent state of euphoria”. Yes, friends, I was that soldier. Not the recipient of the review, I hasten to add. The writer. Hey, you gotta fight fire with fire!

Double-blind review is a dirty business. The market for academic articles must be one of the most competitive on earth, strange though that sounds. Hundreds of thousands of ‘identikit producers, all trying to stand out from the clamouring crowd, all of whose output is vetted by direct competitors before being made available, via very narrow channels of distribution, to the ultimate “consumer”. The inevitable outcome of this ruthless winnowing process is that really radical pieces are butchered (Daniel, 1993). The contributions that make use of unusual modes of representation are either rejected or rearranged in a more “acceptable” manner. The authors who dare to eschew the standard article structure of Introduction → Literature Review → Method → Findings → Discussion → Conclusion are given very short shrift. Where’s the Limitations section? What are the managerial implications? A model might be helpful! Marketers, ironically, often condemn consumers’ innate conservatism, the fact that they “envision their future needs in terms of existing products, processes, markets or prices” (Hayes and Abernathy, 1980, p. 232). Yet the same is true of academic articles. Reviewers find it difficult to think beyond the conventional. Non-traditional representations are discriminated against.

Now, this doesn’t mean that radical research goes unpublished. It means that radical research goes unpublished in the top journals. An article about poetry might sneak into jCR, but an article in the form of a poem has very little chance. As a rule, radically different works are confined to lower tier journals, edited texts, conference proceedings, personal Web sites and suchlike. While publication of any kind is to be welcomed no one wants to see their short story collection gathering dust in a drawer, after all there’s a professional imperative to publish in the principal journals. Tenure, promotions, RAE rankings, etc. all rest on hitting top-notch outlets and questions will be asked if highly paid superstar scholars strike out. In order to get into major league journals, however, aesthetic compromises have to be made. Retaining one’s artistic integrity by concentrating on lower tier communication channels is certainly possible, and in many ways commendable, but it doesn’t cut much ice in the job market or with professorial remuneration committees. Purism doesn’t pay. Radical is risky. Ossification obtains, sadly.

Wild thing, I think I loathe you

Above and beyond the savagery of reviewers – low-lifes one and all – another species of vicious man(uscript) eaters stalks the scholarly Serengeti. Editors. I don’t know what the collective noun for editors is, certainly not pride[5], but as a group they have a significant influence on the great chain of academic being. Many editors, admittedly, like to hide behind their referees. Skulk
rather. It is with deep, lasting and, yes, tearful regret that they must reject your “interesting” manuscript. However, the reviewers are unanimous that it’s a loathsome piece of crap and, therefore, it has no place in the august organ they’re obliged to protect and serve. Until the death. In reality, of course, reviewers are chosen by editors; editors have the right to ignore referees’ comments, which are purely advisory; and editors are rarely reluctant to take their organ in hand and do with it what they will. If proof of editors’ power is required, one need look no further than the scholarly politicking that transpires when a new editor is chosen for a top tier journal like JIM, JCR or JMR. The Vatican’s conclave of cardinals has nothing on the marketing academy in editor nominating mode. Blessed be the editorial board. The positivists shall inherit the earth. The lake of fire awaits representations that fail to adhere to the manuscript submission guidelines. Amen.

Just as everyone has a story about reviewers, so too editorial caprice is the stuff of legend. A couple of years back, I submitted a paper about Philip Kotler to a top-ranking marketing journal. Months and months of work had gone into it. Along the way, I devoured and internally digested everything our great white chef had ever rustled up, which is a meal and a half in itself. My laboriously assembled dish, however, was promptly sent back to the kitchen. It received an immediate desk reject. That’s right, it wasn’t even allowed to enter the review process. Why? Because an article about Kotler doesn’t qualify as “marketing”. A paper on the Venerable Phil has no place in a marketing journal, apparently. Disappointing as that was, the distinguished editor then kindly informed me that “the basic problem with your work, Professor Brown, is that it gets our readers all excited. They want to comment on your articles and I have to allocate space in the journal for their remarks, valuable space that is needed for other contributors”. It thus seems that, far from welcoming a bit of controversy, the honourable editor prefers to let sleeping dogs lie. Rather than get people talking about the journal, the field, the discipline, he’s more worried about the periodical’s pagination. Perhaps he was trained as an accountant.

Meowwwww! Catty? You bet. A cheap shot? I know. Something I had to get off my chest? Yes! Nevertheless, it’s an experience we’ve all had and it represents a real impediment to the revolution in representation that we’d all like to see. A lot of unorthodox marketing works are being produced – no question – but they aren’t getting into the top journals thanks to reviewer intransigence and editorial caprice. Accordingly academics are unable or unwilling to give non-traditional representational forms the dedication they need. Who can blame them?

**Midas marketing**

When all is said and done, and it’s time to resort to cliché, the interpretive research community is in a situation similar to that of legendary King Midas. As you’ll recall from your youthful grounding in Greek Myth – that unreadable Robert Graves (1957) book you remember wrestling with on holiday – King Midas befriended Silenus, a debauched, befuddled satyr and former mentor of Dionysus. Touched by the king’s voluntary hospitality, Dionysus rewarded Midas with a single wish, which the pleasure-loving, high-maintenance monarch eagerly accepted. “Pray grant that all I touch be turned into gold”, he asked the sybaritic son of Zeus, and Dionysus the trickster complied. Not only did stones, flowers and pottery transmute instantly into gold, but food, wine and extended family members did likewise. Driven half-mad by hunger, thirst and loneliness, Midas begged to be relieved of his haptic gilded burden. Dionysus, having had his fun with the foolish emperor’s misbegotten avarice, did as he was bid.

Marketing, it seems to me, is in a profoundly Midasian position. We have been granted the wish of untrammelled representational freedom. Whereas a decade or so ago, interpretive researchers were effectively confined to the written word and quasi-positivistic methodologies, these days all manner of modes are in evidence. Poetry, painting, performance – you name it, somebody’s doing it or dabbling at least. The artistic imperative, if it can be called that, has never been as evident in marketing as it is now. One only has to look back at the breakthrough article, Belk et al.’s (1989) “Sacred and profane”, to get a sense of how far the field has come. What was once astonishingly innovative now strikes us stiff,
formal, hidebound and stuck-in-the-mud methodologically. These days, if someone announced that they’d composed a marketing score, a research symphony in three movements, the overwhelming response would be “go for it”, “well done”, “about time” or “why don’t you write a libretto and turn it into a marketing opera?” Indeed, I’m currently serving as an external examiner on a “creative” PhD thesis which would never – repeat, never – have passed muster when I started out.

The real problem is that our golden opportunity is being wasted. Far from producing priceless scholarly treasures, our academic artefacts are cheap, gaudy, worthless. They are tawdry trinkets, costume jewellery, paste rather than pearls and anything but cultured. Representational freedom has been a curse not a blessing, the proverbial poisoned chalice. Dionysus must be rubbing his hands with glee. Sure, we can write racy introspective accounts of our egregious experiences in motorcar showrooms. But it has already been done much better by Cheever (2002) and Donegan (2002), among others. Yes, we can assemble striking photoessays about consumer bricolage, the incorporation of commercial artefacts into everyday life. However, Walker Evans was doing the same thing 70 years ago and his snaps still say more than Pentax-wielding academics ever could. Hell, we can take up easels and paintbrushes if we want to – nice smock! – even though artists like Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons and Barbara Kruger have already said all there is to say about contemporary consumer society. The same is true in domains as close to home as radical critique. Academics’ acknowledged role as disinterested observer, tenured subversive and professional pain in the posterior has been usurped of late by the likes of Klein (2000), Schlosser (2001), Lasn (1999) and Frank (2001), crusading journalists who have not only confronted socially irresponsible corporations but also used their PR-savvy to make organizations alter their exploitative behaviour. If, as Marx famously observed, the objective is to change the world, not interpret it, then the right-on, left-leaning wing of the marketing academy must be deemed sorely wanting.

So, where do we go from here? Push on? Turn back? Change course? Introduce a creaky plot device that extracts us, Jack London-, Jeffrey Archer-, Barbara Cartland-like from a tight narrative corner? With one bound they were free! They were twin brothers separated at birth! A chance inheritance gives her the necessary marital wherewithal!

Would it were that simple.

The Famous Five go bananas

Reluctant as I am to set out a representational agenda, especially one that appertains to anything as incorrigible as academics, it seems to me that five things are clear. The first is that going back is not an option. Having worked so hard to escape the tyranny of the traditional academic article, we would be unwise to give it up as a failed experiment, if only on account of the individuals that follow in our wake. By proselytising on behalf of interpretive research, by radicalising the postgraduate student body, by enticing aspiring scholars to take our ideas and develop them, by encouraging others to challenge conventional marketing wisdom, we are making an implicit commitment, a contract, to keep on going and going, like B-school Energizer bunnies.

My second point is that we have to raise our game, barriers to artistry notwithstanding. We can’t continue to dabble. We are dilettantes at present, well-meaning amateurs at most. Our half-baked endeavours are nowhere better illustrated than in the works of Russell Belk, perhaps the most published interpretive researcher of the late-twentieth century and someone who has turned his hand to many non-traditional representational forms. Russ’s articles invariably start with a radical, highly creative piece of writing – the theme park from Hell, the call of the mountain men, the sacred festival of Ronald McDonald, etc. – but after the first couple of pages his pieces quickly slip into standard, all-too-standard interpretive prose. In cinematic terms, a brilliant pre-credits sequence, almost “James Bondesque” in its intensity, is belied by the rest of the ho-hum movie. It’s almost as if Belk lacks the courage of his aesthetic convictions and, bearing in mind that he is better placed than almost anyone to follow his muse – secure professional reputation, leader in the field, publications record to die for – Russ’s reactionary stance speaks volumes about the
state of our sub-discipline. We’re all dressed up with nowhere to go. We’re standing at the side of the dance-floor, afraid to get down and boogie or trip the light fantastic, lest we make fools of ourselves. Where are marketing’s mosh-pit divers when you need them?

Russell Belk, it must be stressed, is the best in the business. I’m not singling him out for disappprobation, much less picking a fight with the textual titan (credit me with some political smarts). However, my carefully qualified, self-protective remarks only serve to illustrate the third important point. Namely, that we are insufficiently critical. We greet every poem, every playlet, every novella, every home-made video like it’s a masterpiece of avant-garde effrontery, an attempt to épater the positivists, another brick in the wall of the bullet-point brigade. However, the reality, as previously noted, is that there’s no shortage of new representational forms nowadays and some of the stuff that’s being produced is pretty feeble, to put it politely. We’re not doing ourselves any favours by waxing lyrical about third-rate contributions. Forget crisis of representation, we need a critic of representation, someone who is capable of separating the wheat from the chaff, the mediocre from the meritorious, the formulaic from the fantastic. We need someone to tell it like it is. Except, of course, when she’s dealing with my polished, peerless, practically perfect publications.

My fourth point is somewhat perverse in that it requires us to recognize the hegemony of the written word. At present, the academic game boils down to published articles in reputable refereed journals. Videos, Web-art, stand-up comedy routines and suchlike are unlikely to be recognized as legitimate academic output for some considerable time to come. It behoves us, therefore, to work more creatively within the constraints of the written academic article. At least in the short term. Academics, remember, are writers first and foremost. We write articles for a living. It follows that honing our literary skills is a sensible and eminently attainable objective. This does not mean that non-traditional marketing representations should be abandoned, but it does suggest that we shouldn’t allow the ready availability of new communications technology (digital cameras, Javascript, easy editing software, etc.) to trigger a mass movement into areas where the scholarly rewards are few. Marketing’s so-called crisis of representation, I fear, will be exacerbated not alleviated by staring through a viewfinder. Our time would be better spent in creative writing classes. But then I would say that, wouldn’t I?

The fifth, and perhaps most imperative, action that’s well worth considering involves the old blue pencil. We need to edit ourselves more ruthlessly. The biggest single problem with our plays, poems, short stories and so forth is that they are too self-indulgent, too long-winded, too stuffed with unnecessary adjectives, adverbs, qualifiers, modifiers and super-duper superlatives. Real writers hone their material, as do artists generally. The key to writing creatively is cutting out not putting in. King (2000), in his excellent little book On Writing, explains that it is necessary to “kill your children”. Those particularly fine turns of phrase, the lines you’re especially proud of, must be expunged from the final text[6]. Without doubt, this is the hardest task in literary life, one that most of us are reluctant to undertake. Except me. The foregoing essay, as you must have noticed by now, is a lean, mean piece of writing, with nary a superfluous noun, verb, conjunction or punctuation mark. Indeed, the penultimate draft was so sparse – “Hemingwayesque” almost – that I felt obliged to add a couple of subclauses, stretch a sentence or two, and pad the occasional paragraph. But not this one. No siree. Really.

Prose pruning, to be sure, is easier said than done. Forgoing digital cameras, Photoshop, Protools and analogous boytoys is also asking a lot. In this regard, however, the legend of King Midas is once again instructive. The only thing most of us remember about Midas is the agony of his aural touch. We forget that he was a judge in the celebrated musical contest between Apollo and Maysus. Apollo won easily but Midas dissented from the jury’s verdict and he was rewarded with ass’s ears, signifying his inability to tell good from bad[7]. Marketing academics, it seems to me, are in this invidious position. Admirable as our artistic endeavours are, we remain unable or unwilling to separate the sheep and the goats. We are up to our asses in asses’ ears. We are content to howl “crisis”, just as Peter did in his fabled vulpine encounter. We are suffering, I fear, from crisis fatigue.

Rather than end on a negative note, however, I draw comfort from perhaps the most important parallel between Midas and
marketing. Midas was a fun-loving sovereign, a playful emperor, a generous tsar who revelled in music, dance and storytelling, who planted celebrated rose gardens and who created a sybaritic heaven on mundane earth. Midas marketing should be driven by fun, revelry and telling tales of roses and romance. Let’s stop crying crisis. Let’s enjoy ourselves. Let’s let our hair down. Let’s dance the marketing mambo. Let’s do the time warp again – and again – and again. Practice, remember, makes perfect.

Notes

1 Pardon my mixed metaphor. Mixed metaphors, as you know, are generally regarded as a very bad thing. They are something to avoid like the plague. They are something to snap out of, tip-toe past or steer carefully around. They are literary faux pas on a par with dangling participles, split infinitives, misused possessives, pathetic pros, profligate pleonasm, affected alliterations, placing prepositions at the end of sentences, and so on. Yet it is evident that mixed metaphors perform an important rhetorical function. Space, sadly, doesn’t permit an explanation. Another time perhaps.

2 Clearly, the romantic archetype of selfless artist struggling manfully in a fetid garret is alive, well and domiciled in the proverbial ivory tower (dank and draughty, no doubt).

3 The movie was called – get this – Santa Claus: The Movie. It starred the late, great Dudley Moore, if memory serves. Naturally, I’m not for a moment suggesting that the movie was based on, or adapted from, my radio playlet. Get real! But it was nice to know that the same basic idea could carry a big-budget Hollywood production.

4 In reality, it would never get as far as a viva, since most supervisors would nip such foolishness in the bud. Their own reputations and academic ambitions are on the line as well, remember.

5 Herd? Perhaps. Wrath? Sounds apt. Covet? Better not go there! Incidentally, the “great chain of being” is an ancient classification system, which posits that all creatures in the natural world can be arranged into a single line – or chain – from the lowest life form to the highest. In academic terms, marketing would be a single-celled organism, or algae possibly, compared to the homo sapiens that is quantum physics and astronomy.

6 I should add that King is quoting Hemingway, a giant of less-is-more modernism. The postmodern turn in literature is much more effulgent, efflorescent, effervescent and, indeed, effing generally.

7 What we today would call “cloth ears”. Actually, we are also inclined to forget that the reason Midas rescued Silenus, the sozzled satyr, was on account of the lascivious deity’s storytelling abilities. Apparently, the half-man half-goat regaled the fun-loving king with wonderful tales of Hyperborea, a blessed land beyond the Gates of Hercules, where the weather was perfect, the soil was fertile, wine flowed like water, there was no want and happiness, longevity and promiscuity prevailed. In order to get there, however, travellers had to navigate a fearful whirlpool. Two channels bypassed the maelstrom, one lined by trees bearing fruit that instantly killed all those who ate it, the other fringed with trees that rendered immortal all those who dined on their delicious bounty. I think you can guess where this allegory is going . . .

References


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Appendix. Starbucks fizzle out

Have you ever been to a Starbucks? . . . Of course you’ve been to a Starbucks. Starbucks is your second living room. The question I should have asked is: why?

I’m not a habitué of these West Coast coffee shops. Not for any snobbish reason – just because I like coffee . . . Anyway, I did go to a Starbucks recently. I’m still reeling. I can’t remember the last time I was served something as foul as its version of cappuccino.

I say “version”, but that’s a bit like saying Dot Cotton’s a version of Audrey Hepburn.

To begin with, it took longer to make than a soufflé. I was the only customer, and asked the girl for a cappuccino. There followed an interrogation that would have impressed an SS scientist. What size did I want? Did I need anything in it? Was I hungry? By the time she’d finished, I felt like sobbing: “You’ve found Tom, and Dick’s under the stove in D Hut, but I’ll never give away Harry – he’s got Dickie Attenborough up him”.

Suspiciously, she passed the order, written in Serbian, to another girl standing all of three inches away, who, in turn, slowly morphed into Marie Curie and did something very dangerous and complicated behind a counter, with a lot of sighing and brow-furrowing.

An hour-and-a-half later, I was presented with a mug. A mug. One of those American mugs where the lip is so thick, you have to be an American or able to disengage your jaw like a python to fit it in your mouth. It contained a semi-permeable white mousse – the sort of stuff they use to drown teenagers in Ibiza, or pump into cavity walls. I dumped in two spoonfuls of sugar. It rejected them.

Having beaten the malevolent epidermis with the collection of plastic and wooden things provided, I managed to make it sink. Then, using both hands, I took a sip. Then a gulp. Then chewed. I had the momentary sense of drowning in snowman’s poo, then, after a long moment, a tepid sludge rose from the deep. This was reminiscent of gravy-browning and three-year-old Easter eggs.

How can anyone sell this stuff? How can anyone buy this twice? This was only a small one – a baby. The adult version must be like sucking the outlet of a nuclear power station.

I slumped into a seat. There was a pamphlet about fair trade, and how Starbucks paid some Nicaraguan Sancho a reasonable amount for his coffee so that he now had a mule to go with his 13 children, leaky roof and 15 coffee bushes. It made not screwing the little no-hope wetback into penury sound like the most astonishing act of charitable benevolence. And they just had to print a pamphlet about it, so we all know the sort of selfless, munificent, group-hug people we’re dealing with (Source: Gill, 2003, pp. 46-7).