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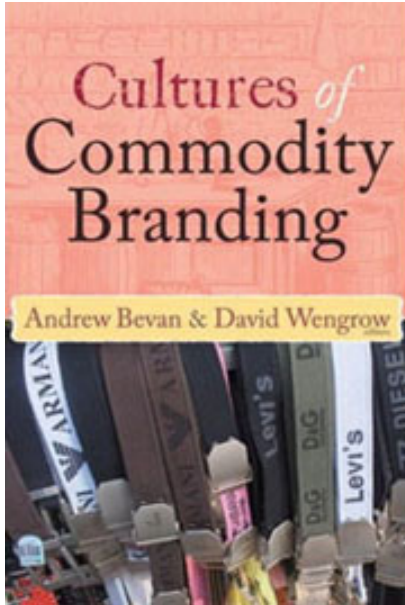David ANDRÉS CASTILLO

Cultures of Commodity Branding

[Andrew Bevan & David Wengrow]

Left Coast Press
ISBN: 978-1-59874-542-9
2010, 267 pp.

"The brand is where you believe it to be."
Rosana Pinheiro-Machado

Cultures of Commodity Branding by Andrew Bavan and David Wengrow presents two different worlds that usually have not been related. This compilation is a refreshing approach to an unusual topic in archaeology: brand marketing and mass media related with the possibilities of public archaeology, understanding public archaeology as a way to study a concrete field in order to improve our knowledge and develop the environment and the community around the object of study.

Unfortunately, archaeology is not a well-known discipline to the general public and sometimes its field of study is confined only to ancient history or prehistoric times. As a matter of fact, the public gets informed about archaeology mainly from films and novels, full of stereotypes, which does not help, and sometimes the latter contribute to creating myths about this science and its specialists.

I began reading this book with the eyes of a semiologist and, to be honest, I enjoyed this work and was introduced to a new point of view about one of my favourite topics: the semantics of branding. The articles in this book are divided in

two categories: the first one consists of the studies about the History of Branding (Ch.1-2-7-8-9) and the second one (Ch. 3-4-5-10) includes articles about the way the brand functions and how the values of the products represented are shown. Completing this selection is the excellent *Introduction* by David Wengrow, who explains why it is necessary to study this topic from an archaeological and anthropological point of view:

> *Contemporary branding strategies should not be studied merely as part of the long-term history of commoditisation, but also as part of its opposite: that is, the history of decommoditisation, on a continuum with techniques of gift-giving, ritual, and sacrifice, which have long been a focus of research in archaeology and anthropology* (30).

The above is followed by a piece of advice which we should take seriously:

> *There is a lesson here for archaeologists who would minimise the role of consumer demand in premodern economies, and equally for experts in contemporary marketing who would identify consumer manipulation of brand values as a recent trend, contingent upon technologies such as the Internet* (28).

The book's starting point is Naomi Klein's *No logo,* with a clear objective: to demonstrate that the origin of brands is not in the 19th century but dates further back, and it can be traced in different periods and far away cultures.

Andrew Bevan reflects on the origin of brands and how the production of standardised objects began in "Making and Marking Relationships: Broken Age Brandings and Mediterranean Commodities". This article proves how brands were a consequence of a regular and regulated market. By the same token, we can also consider "Commodities, Brands, and Village Economies in the Classic Maya Lowlands" by Jason Yaeger**.** This article analyses *utilitarian goods* and *prestige*

goods, and establishes a comparison between the Ancient World and the Mayas with interesting conclusions about their system of values and their point of view of commercial relationships based in local achievements in Central America. It is particularly useful to think about the fact that the Mayas' production and acquisition of goods was different, for example, from that of the Mediterranean cultures, and influenced the manufacturing of commodity products and the mechanism of standardisation.

After this review of Antiquity, we jump to Preindustrial times and the ways of branding explained in the article "Of Marks, Prints, Pots, and Becherovka: Freemasons´ Branding in Early Modern Europe" by Marcos Matinón-Torres. This work shows the Freemasons´ Branding as the link between the industrial era in terms of Branding and merchandising and how a brand that is nowadays popular in the Czech Republic and Slovakia uses medieval symbology to recreate the values implicit in its logo, which is fascinating in terms of the semantics of logotypes and products.

The explanation of the semantic behaviour of the object was a popular topic during the 60's and 70's, and it is possible to find excellent works by Eco (1979, 1992), Baudrillard (1972, 1981), and Barthes (1964, 1970), that incorporated in their theories a critique of the political economy of the sign and the simulacrum of the object. From the 60's until Klein´s new perspective, the critique centred its interest mainly on semantic questions about the object, the target, and the mental impression people had.

This special relationship between the product, the consumer, and the brand has been amply studied following an occidental point of view and sometimes forgetting emerging countries and their position in these arenas. Brands and logos are not only products made by designers but also marketing labs. It has always been a usual reaction to the commercial process: a new product needs to be known, to be desired, and to be sold. Logos and brands can be connected with the idea of magic and irrational thinking because they are not only objects,

but also a way to get the promise of the seller, permitting a transference of the properties located in the advertisement.

Jean-Pierre Warnier gives us an excellent example of how a culture can transform old patterns to new ways in "Royal Branding and the Techniques of the Body, the Self, and Power in West Cameroon". In this article, ancient rituals between the king of small realms and subjects are described through the simple application of lotions and body creams. The *magic* and *power* of these rituals are now included in some popular brands that, thanks to marketing techniques, have gained a social prestige.

We can also appreciate the work by Alison J. Clark: "The Second-Hand Brand: Liquid Assets and Borrowed Goods" refers to the new system of merchandising offered in the Internet era, a new world that challenges the traditional methods of analysis and the typical conception of how the market works and why we are experiencing new habits of consumption.

Another article I found provoking is "The Work of an Istanbulite Imitasyoncu" by Magdalena Crăciun because of the paradox it contains: fake brands not only are not a problem for the Turkish, but they also power the capitalist machine due to the increasing capability of brands to develop power to arrive to a potential target without being a problem for the final target. This happens because the fake not only copies the standard object, legally designed and registered with copyright, but also tries to assume the properties of the original. The paradox is that the standardised model itself makes possible a faster and cheaper fake that can compete with the *real*.

"The Attribution of Authenticity to Real and Fake Branded Commodities in Brazil and China" by Rosana Pinheiro-Machado continues in the same vein. In this article, this notion of real or fake for the countries more specialized in the illegal commerce of fake brands in the world is the main topic. There is a reflection about what makes the brand and its proprieties, and how it is or it is not possible to separate them from the original:

> The important thing was the simulacrum itself, and, in this sense, the fake item was a good strategy to acquire brandy goods. "Look at my Louis Vuitton/Rolex…," some informants told me, pointing at their replicas. In these situations, the question that remains is: Is the brand attached only to the genuine piece? (126)

The common points between the two articles are an evidence of the power of global trends and global advertising, and what's more, an analysis of how an occidental concept is understood in emerging countries where the majority of the population is not familiar with concrete commercial strategies and advertising values.

In this regard, the work "The Real One: Western Brands and Competing Notions of Authenticity in Socialist Hungary" by Ferenc Hammer also offers a vision about this phenomenon in a socialist country and its evolution in the course of decades, using a study based in the relevance of the *jeans* in this historical context and how this type of clothing was loaded with values and social connotations.

To sum up, in my opinion, *Cultures of Commodity Branding* is a complete reflection of the History of Branding and offers a good panorama for new studies in Semantics of the Sign. Last but not least, I also appreciate the fact that this book presents archaeology in an unusual and attractive way, linking the mass media and pop culture with serious and rigorous articles on modern anthropology in order to help us understand better the world where we live.

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