Bertram Brooker’s Practice-based Advertising Theory

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Introduction

This paper examines the marketing writings of the inaugural Governor General’s Award-winning author and modernist visual artist Bertram Brooker (1888-1955) as a rare historical example of practice-based advertising theory in Canada. In hundreds of articles published during the 1920s in trade papers including *Printers’ Ink*, *Advertising and Selling* and the Toronto-based *Marketing* (the latter of which he owned and edited from 1924 to 1927), Brooker proposed innovative strategies for harnessing the sensory effects of media to engage consumers in ways that anticipate the synesthetic communications theories and participatory media experiments of Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan, whom he likely influenced indirectly. Brooker’s prescient media analyses were developed in dialogue with his parallel practice as a graphic designer and copywriter for clients including the retailer Eaton’s and *The Globe* newspaper. This paper situates Brooker’s today largely unknown multi-modal approach to theory in relation to previously unseen examples of his commercial design. Taken together, the artist-advertiser’s practice and theory instantiate a recognizable discourse on media and the senses that would later coalesce under the umbrella of the Toronto School of Communication.

Brooker’s interdisciplinary achievements are all the more remarkable given that, as Russell Johnson (2001, p. 56) notes in his meticulous history of the early development of advertising in Canada, *Selling Themselves*, “instruction in advertising was not offered until the late 1920s” at either McGill or the University of Toronto. In this context it would have been typical, then, for an advertising professional of Brooker’s generation to acquire skills through “on-the-job” training (ibid.). It was, rather, the artist-advertiser’s
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relentless auto-didacticism and simultaneous experimentation with multiple media and genres that fostered his maverick approach to the practice and theory of advertising. In particular, Brooker’s early exposure to the multi-modal media of theatre and cinema proved decisive in shaping his subsequent synesthetic concerns and time-based critique of conventional publication models.

**Biography and Literature Review**

Brooker was born in Surrey, a suburb of London, England, in 1888. His early experiences singing in Anglican choirs—first in Surrey, and subsequently in Portage la Prairie following his family’s immigration to Canada in 1905—proved enduring inspiration. Brooker’s auditory interests are reflected in the musical allusions of his abstract canvases of the 1920s (see Williams 2000), the first to be exhibited in a solo show in Canada, as well as the aural themes explored by his writings for *Marketing* magazine. Brooker’s interest in music, and, indeed, virtually all the other arts, only intensified after he dropped out of school to support his family at age 13 (Brooker 1937, p. 2). Early sketches and manuscripts for plays and works of short fiction document the future artist-advertiser’s voracious hunger for self-expression in every available medium. Art historian Joyce Zemans’s groundbreaking 1989 study of Brooker’s personal papers challenges the portrait of the artist painted by Dennis Reid’s influential 1973 text as a Theosophist in the mold of Lawren Harris and F.B. Housser. Zemans’s close reading of drawings and manuscripts dating from as early as 1912 underscores the independent vision of the nascent artist—his original fusion of diverse thinkers including Nietzsche, Herbert Spencer and the British theatre designer and theorist Edward Gordon Craig into an
original artistic creed that he dubbed “Ultimatism” (p. 19). Zemans persuasively argues that Brooker’s return trip to England to visit relatives during the 1910-11 holiday season likely served as the catalyst for the drawings and writings that followed.

In addition to participating in the Little Theatre Movement as both an actor and playwright (see Grace 1985; Wagner 1989), the early 1910s were also marked by the artist’s authorship of a number of scenarios for photoplays that were adapted into silent pictures by the Brooklyn-based Vitagraph Company of America—the largest American film producer in its day (see Lauder 2010, p. 104n93). This unlikely stint as a cinema innovator may have grown out of Brooker’s co-management of the Neepawa Opera House with his brother, Cecil, following the family’s relocation to Neepawa, Manitoba in 1912 (Betts 2009, p. xv).

These multi-disciplinary artistic explorations formed the backdrop to Brooker’s simultaneous work as a journalist and commercial artist for prairie newspapers stretching from Winnipeg to Regina. His earliest experiments in advertising remain, for now at least, a matter of speculation. But the regular humour column that he maintained upon assuming his role as Promotion Manager with the Winnipeg Free Press sometime after 1915, “Gasograms by Honk,” displays the trademark fusion of literary citation, original artwork and against-the-grain readings of contemporary theory that would characterize his later writings for Marketing.

It was following his move to Toronto in 1921 to take a position with Marketing that Brooker steadily developed an international reputation as a highly original, and highly contentious, voice in advertising theory. A 1951 commentator noted that his aesthetic approach to copywriting “was strongly felt in international advertising” (qtd. in Betts
2005, p. 231). Richard Cavell (2002, p. 15) reads Brooker’s advertising textbooks as “an artistic credo”: an ambitious foray into art theory under the guise of advertising in a country then lacking a robust theoretical tradition in the arts. I want to shift the focus, however, onto Brooker’s grappling with the pragmatic dimensions of advertising as instantiating the “pre-McLuhan body of Canadian media theory” studied by Paul Tiessen (1993). While unquestionably coloured by Brooker’s knowledge of art theory and criticism, as well as his multi-disciplinary artistic practice, I want to argue that his advertising writings grew in equal measure out of technical problems arising from his relatively neglected career as a commercial artist. It was Brooker’s dual experience as a modernist innovator and imaginative graphic artist that fuelled his distinctive discourse on media and the senses—a discourse that, as Cavell (2002), Betts (2009; 2013) and Willmott (2000) have variously argued, cleared a path for the analyses of Marshall McLuhan three decades later, but which I will liken here to the more chronologically proximate communications texts authored by McLuhan’s mentor, Harold Adams Innis.

**Practicing Theory**

Brooker’s distinctive brand of advertising theory can be summarized as a rejection of the then-dominant behaviourist and statistical paradigm associated with the innovations of John B. Watson for the New York mega-firm of J. Walter Thompson (see Johnston 2001). In place of the hyper-rationalistic principles and techniques promoted by Watson and followers, Brooker advocated the tools of the artist. In Brooker’s (1931, p. 44, emphasis in the original) visionary forecast, the businessman of the future, “won’t be a business man, in the strict sense, *He will be an artist!*” The Canadian artist-advertiser
appropriately dubbed his critique of American models “Humanics”: a precursor of the Consumer Movement of the 1930s that prioritized consumer demand, and a more dynamic and qualitative psychology, over the manufacturer’s stock lists and assembly-line schedules (see Bartels 1962).

Brooker’s humanistic critique of the quantitative priorities of American competitors drew in part on contemporary French theory, particularly the writings of Henri Bergson. A 1926 article for *Marketing*, “Are Statistics More Convincing than Words or Pictures?,” declared that, “Advertising is alive! And being alive its development is in accord with those principles of ‘creative evolution’ which Bergson has postulated of all living things. It is in flux, it is in a constant state of becoming” (p. 115). Brooker’s adaptation of the process philosophy of Bergson to pragmatic problems in advertising significantly challenges the received portrait of the artist as a follower of esoteric doctrines elaborated by Ann Davis (1992) and Gregory Betts (2005). Brooker’s first published monograph, *Subconscious Selling* (1923)—previously believed to be lost, but a copy of which I discovered at the British Library in 2010 (and report for the first time here)—further underlines the Canadian’s debt to contemporary French thought. Published as a stand-alone title by *Marketing, Subconscious Selling* applies the principles of induced autosuggestion developed by Émile Coué, whose mantra, “Day by day, in every way, I’m getting better and better,” remains a fixture in popular culture to the present day (Brooks 1922, 28). Given the extent to which the psychology of Coué became indissociable from Bergsonian theories of “memory” in the writings of disciples such as Charles Beaudouin (1920), he emerges as something of a missing link between Brooker and the Toronto School of Communication. Beaudouin would have been an important resource for
Anglophone readers of Coué such as Brooker. In turn, the temporal discourse of Bergson establishes a common link between Brooker and later communications thinkers in Canada—the French philosopher being a relatively unexplored source for the space-time speculations of the Toronto School of Communication according to Cavell (2002), Darroch and Marchessault (2009) and Marchessault (2005).

If names like Shakespeare and Dickens are front and centre in Brooker’s arguments for a literary approach to copy modeled on the dialogical qualities of speech in a fashion foreshadowing the defense of time and the “oral tradition” subsequently articulated by Innis (1951, p. 190), his graphic designs draw attention to the extent to which these concerns and strategies simultaneously responded to the workaday problems of the graphic artist. The artist’s personal Account Book facilitates a reconstruction of his work as a freelance copywriter and graphic artist during the period 1927-1930. Through careful analysis of issues of Marketing magazine dating from these years, I have been able to identify the corresponding artwork and copy for several of the projects registered in the Account Book. The remainder of this paper will examine one of these—a series of ads for The Globe newspaper (today’s Globe and Mail), that ran in the summer and fall of 1929—in addition to Brooker’s extended analysis of the unique challenges to traditional print advertising posed by the new medium of radio that he elaborated concurrently.

Turning first to Brooker’s series of ads for The Globe (Figs. 1-3), we find a remarkable sequence of stylized clock faces deployed by the artist-advertiser to visualize the unique problems posed by selling morning newspapers—or, rather, of selling space
to potential advertisers targeting the then smaller circulation market of morning readers. Brooker’s solution involves a highly unorthodox conception of the newspaper as a medium that looks forward to Innis in imagining a dialogical and time-based alternative to the static and visual bias of American print culture epitomized by the theories of Watson. In these ads, Brooker reimagines the newspaper as an “event” that offers advertisers multiple opportunities for reaching potential consumers throughout the day (Surrey 1929a, p. 174). In part, the dynamic conception of print advertising implied by Brooker’s *Globe* ads was an extension of his earlier application of the time-based philosophy of Henri Bergson to concrete problems in advertising (see Lauder 2012; Lauder 2014; see also Zemans 1989; Luff 1991): an attempt to capitalize on the French thinker’s opposition of the qualitative multiplicity of what he dubbed “duration” to the spatial models of positivist science and classical Western metaphysics as a means of effecting a time-based renovation of print media.

Such an invocation of non-rational temporality conceived as pure heterogeneity emerges forcefully from an ad in the series (Fig. 4) featuring superimposed clock faces displaying a diversity of numeral systems (Arabic and Roman): a vertiginous ensemble whose opposition to the linear conception of time enforced by Watson and other neo-Taylorist efficiency experts recalls the spatial critique of Bergson and looks forward to the “plea for time” subsequently elaborated by Innis (1951, p. 61). But what I want to underline here is the decisive extent to which Brooker’s theorization of these themes grew out of precisely the type of practical problems addressed by *The Globe* ads. The necessity of visualizing the commodity value of time for potential clients, it should be recalled, provided the immediate springboard for Brooker’s temporal experiments. Only
by reading the ads in parallel with Brooker’s theory-based writings do we arrive at the holistic picture of a dynamic interplay between theory and practice that alone adequately accounts for his innovative conception of advertising.

I want to trace the temporal counter-reading of print advertising brought into vivid representation by Brooker’s Globe ads to an earlier and parallel series of articles, also published in the pages of Marketing, that address the unique problems posed by marketing radio in print media as well as potential means of simulating synesthesia—the simultaneous stimulation of two or more of the senses—as a compensatory strategy for translating the unique auditory qualities of radio into the “cold type” of print (Surrey 1929a, p. 52). These articles are poised mid-way between the “straight” application of theory found in such texts as “Making Orders Flow Downhill” (Surrey 1924) and “Are Statistics more Convincing than Words?” (Surrey 1926), which adapt the philosophy of Bergson to practical problems in advertising, and Brooker’s original graphic designs, exemplified by The Globe series. In these articles, we follow Brooker as he develops original speculations on the changing character of media, inflected by theory, but informed in equal measure by his concurrent graphic design practice.

Taking stock of the synesthetic advertising methods that he had explored in the pages of Marketing from at least 1925, Brooker recollected in 1929 that, “I debated, of using ink and paper to stimulate the palate or to cause the mind to ‘auditionize’ unheard sounds in the same way that it ‘visualizes’ unseen sights” (Ting 1929, p. 212). Brooker’s 1930 commentary on an advertisement for Philco radio batteries (Fig. 5) carried forward these themes. The artist-advertiser points to its ingenious use of a distorted photograph of a musician playing a harp to generate a synesthetic “talking point”:
[T]he distortion idea, as pictured in these twisted photographs, ingeniously duplicates the feeling a radio listener has when he hears a voice that is familiar to him—a singer he has heard on the concert stage, for example—distorted by bad reception. Instruments stretched into thin and monstrously warped shapes, with curious unnaturally bulges where they shouldn’t be, do somehow correspond to the effect produced on one's hearing when the radio starts to ‘act up.’ These thematic illustrations are perhaps as close as it is possible to go, pictorially, in representing an auditory experience. In other words, as a friend of mine remarked recently—not intending a pun—they constitute a ‘sound idea.’  
(Spane 1930: p. 102)

It is probably not coincidental that Brooker’s exploration of the marketing potential of what he dubbed “‘sonorous’ words” paralleled the “radio craze” that seized Canadians beginning in 1922 (Surrey 1929b, 39; Weir 1965, 2). Rejecting the false dichotomy between radio and print advanced by peers, Brooker advocated an integration of both media into a synesthetic whole, thereby generating new possibilities for revenue for the canny synesthetic advertiser. Brooker’s multi-modal approach to marketing radio suggests that a diverse media ecology generates something approaching Kittler’s (2004, 245) more recent description of a “complete media system.” In Brooker’s earlier formulation of this notion, synesthetic techniques are needed to address new markets. Clearing a path for Marshall McLuhan’s subsequent motto “the medium is the message,” this strategy foregrounds the medium itself as opposed to its content.
Like the roughly concurrent series of *Globe* ads featuring clock faces discussed earlier, Brooker’s analysis of the latent auditory and time-based potential of print advertising in relation to radio suggests a number of parallels with what Toronto School of Communication scholar Judith Stamps (1995, 77) has dubbed the “spatial condition of modernity” subsequently critiqued by both Innis and McLuhan. The resemblance is not fortuitous, as Brooker’s writings for *Marketing* would have been an invaluable resource to Innis during the formative period of the junior economist’s early research on “staple” commodities, when reliable data on the Canadian market was scarce (see Watson 2006, p. 147). Moreover, a 1931 article by Brooker, “Idolaters of Brevity,” anticipated arguments subsequently developed by Innis on the relationship between media and social perceptions of space and time as a consequence of his research on the pulp and paper industry (see Buxton 1998). Brooker’s and Innis’s paths intertwined through their parallel contributions—and those of Innis’s wife, Mary Quayle Innis—to the socialist magazine, *The Canadian Forum*, for which Brooker at one stage also served as an advisor. In the case of McLuhan, Brooker would have remained a figure to reckon with in the Winnipeg scene of the future media theorist’s youth. During his studies at the University of Manitoba from 1928 to 1934, while McLuhan’s father was active in Winnipeg as a salesman, Brooker kept up an active presence in the prairie city’s art and business circles through regular visits with relatives.

Perhaps it was anxieties stemming from the very connections between practice and theory that I have been re-tracing above—particularly given the unequivocally commercial bent of Brooker’s professional activity—that accounts for his omission from later bibliographies. Whatever the case may have been, Brooker’s graphic designs and
advertising theories represent a significant, if largely overlooked, precursor to Toronto School of Communication theory and its attempts to wrest an “oral” and time-based potential from a (predominantly American) newspaper culture steeped in the spatial mindset fostered by statistics and the imperial ambitions of nascent “information industries” (Innis 1951, p. 83). Like those later theorists, Brooker’s graphic designs and marketing texts alike imagine the possibility of regaining the qualitative experience of temporality theorized by Bergson.

References


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Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.


ON: Brown Bear.


**Figures**
After 3 P.M.
Buying Declines

The shopping curve rises steadily from nine till noon, dips during the lunch hour, soars again, and reaches its peak about 3 p.m., when tired housewives start for their homes. Your advertising appeal should reach prospects before this tiring day of shopping starts, not after it is over.

The Globe—reaching Ontario's leading families in the morning hours, often before buying impulses are formed—provides advertisers with the latest possible opportunities of reminding prospects of their wares before buying begins.

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The Buying PEAK Is At 3 p.m.

Your advertising in daily newspapers should reach and appeal to people before the day’s buying starts, not after it begins to decline. The object of using dailies is to make your appeals as timely and up-to-the-minute as possible. The nearest newspaper appeal to the public before each day’s buying peak—about 3 p.m.—is provided by morning newspapers.

Use the Globe in Ontario—with its wide influence among the leading families of the province—to reach shoppers before they begin telephoning or making trips to the stores.

The Globe

TORONTO Canada’s National Newspaper CANADA

Largest Morning Circulation in Canada Built Without the Aid of Premiums