

Josh GREENBERG

Introduction

By Gottlieb GUNTERN

Photographs taken at the beginning of our century show pre-school children dressed like adults. They often look like adults, tired from the struggle for survival - their faces serious, stern and often as stoic as granite. Those pictures suggest that there must have been little room, if an, for daydreaming, unfettered imagination, playfulness and fun. In those days, children walked and talked like adults and imitated them wherever and whenever they could.

Today things have changed dramatically. You can see adults trying to look and behave like adolescents. In snapshots, they make it a point to beam with childlike abandon and exuberance. Older women dress up like puppets, and their hairdos are like those of Barbie dolls. Elderly male TV-speakers try to look like teenagers, provoking famous film star Anthony Hopkins' sarcastic remark in the weekly magazine *Der Spiegel*, "In Hollywood, men are running around with wigs; they look absolutely ridiculous with those dead cats on their head. They have been lifted to a point where they are almost unable to close their mouth". Both sexes, led by Cher, Madonna, Michael Jackson and similar role models, are into scalpel-generated body sculpting, i.e., perpetual esthetical surgery aimed at combating the arrow of time and the traces of age left by the ubiquitous forces of gravity and the impact of their emotions.

Imitation is called the most sincere form of flattery. Today, young people are imitated by the older. Youth culture has become a general pacemaker of social and individual role expectations, styles, attitudes and definitions of identity. And in the field of global youth culture MTV plays a major role.

Josh Greenberg has contributed to the shape and design of MTV in the USA, in Japan and Latin America. He has studied semiotics, the theory of signs and symbols, and he has become a highly competent practitioner in that field. Ladies and gentlemen, in the documentation you have received, there is a brief portrait of a young man as an artist and a nomad, both in physical and virtual time-space. What does not show through in that portrait is that Josh Greenberg is a rebel who seems to revel in breaking established patterns. Whenever you leave the beaten track, you take risks. Every maverick and every gambler knows if you take risks, you win some and you lose some. In the game of winning and losing a temporary gain may well turn into a long-term loss and vice versa. Josh Greenberg will tell us about his experiences in winning and losing in his creative process.

The pianist Arthur Rubinstein once observed that music is the only art that immediately communicates from heart to heart - across the boundaries of age, sex, nation, ethnic origin and cultural background. MTV, launched in the USA in 1981 and in Europe in 1987, is a global leader in the



shaping of youth culture. At the same time it is a huge machinery of communication completely dedicated to music, young people and whatever is more or less directly connected with their mutual relationship. In the process of communication, MTV has developed its own syntax. This syntax influences the semantics of the messages sent. And semantics shape pragmatics, i.e., the meaning of a specific message influences what the receivers will do and how they respond to it. MTV has been accused of turning kids into 'couch potatoes' or primitive hedonists. Bu MTV could play a more constructive role - and, in fact, it does. It activates young people and makes them fight against discrimination and fanaticism of all sorts; it prompts them to combat AIDS, violence, pollution, hunger and war. It teaches them a lesson of tolerance and makes them aware of the fact that today's world is one single interconnected web and that we are all responsible for developing it and keeping this highly vulnerable network of mutual relationships from any harm.

Since youth culture today does heavily influence the culture of older generations, there is some hope that imitation, the most sincere form of flattery, the values of tolerance and mutual understanding discussed and lived by youth culture will positively influence the culture of adults and its leaders in the various domains of society. During the last few weeks I got the impression that the peaceful demonstrations in the streets of Zagreb were influenced by the playfulness, humour and wit of youth culture. The power-greedy, stone-wall face of Milosevic looked old as compared to the glowing faces of the demonstrators, young and less young - and his continuous cheating, backstage manipulations and dirty tricks seemed quite antiquated next to the simple music played, the candles wafted, and the witty slogans and cartoons displayed by the demonstrators.

Josh Greenberg

Speech

I recently moved back to Miami and was looking at houses with my fiancée. I found an ad in the paper describing what sounded like the perfect house, so I phoned and the woman said to come quickly because there were people placing bids down on the house. Her child, however, had chickenpox, which I think is 'varicelles' in French. I didn't know what to do; I really wanted to see that house. So I made an appointment with the doctor for a vaccination and went to his office just before going to see the house. I didn't get the vaccination, though, because there had been some sort of misunderstanding about the date and I was supposed to go back another time. By then I had decided that we would just go and see the house and I would not go near the sick child. We saw the house and unfortunately it was not the perfect house, so we did not buy it, but two weeks later I caught chickenpox.

This is not really a good story because I did not get the house; otherwise it would have been a great story to tell at dinner parties. But it did allow me to have some time off, which was nice, and think



about coming here today and reflect on what I was going to say. I got to watch a lot of television, which I guess was both good and bad, and I wrote a bunch of notes for myself because I have a really bad memory.

I have been working in television for about ten years, most of that time was with MTV in one location or another. I have always found TV to be a kind of an uneasy marriage between art and commerce, between serving the audience and the viewers and at the same time keeping the advertisers and sponsors happy. I have always found creativity to exist and I always considered the work I do to be creative, but, speaking from my experience, risk-taking in television is discouraged. European television might have more freedom than American television, but I'm not entirely sure. Anyway, I was watching a lot of television and drinking tea and I started thinking about risk-taking and creativity, which are the topics here, and I began to think about my career and things that I have done. Surprisingly, I began to think that risk-taking wasn't necessary for creativity. When watching commercials, like Nike commercials and other very stylish ones, or situation comedies or dramas on TV, I find them to be very creative and clever in a lot of ways, but I do not really see a lot of risk-taking. I started to think that creativity could exist using familiar forms and that I had spent the beginning of my career learning about the rules of TV and communication. I had learned to rearrange these rules and methods for signification to create something that was original and new but without necessarily taking a risk. So I got to thinking about products, whether they be toothpaste or a television show or even a television station, and I realized that risk in many cases is unsound as an idea and maybe not really advisable. Products, whether they be a TV station or an object that you are selling, have parameters that creatively define them; when you take a risk, you risk losing the definition of the product or TV show or TV station and you can alienate your audience or lose your market share.

So when should you take a risk? When is creative risk permissible, possible, necessary, advisable? I thought of two occasions. The first is when you have to take a risk, when you are launching something new and you have to make an impact, or maybe you have lost your market share, your product is doing badly and you have to redefine it. Another situation where I think that risk is permissible is when financially there is no consequence to that risk; but such situations are rare. A painter, for instance, might take all the risks he wants because there are no financial repercussions associated with that risk.

This past year, I have been fortunate to encounter both situations. I took on a project in Venezuela that was more like the first situation where risk is advisable or permissible, and another project in Los Angeles that was analogous to the second situation. For a large part of my career I always tried to take risks because to me risk is very important, but only recently have I been able to take real risks. For me, there can be no real invention or creation of something new without taking risks. You can be



creative but I don't think that you can really invent something. I have spent a lot of time in situations which are frustrating because the risks are few and far between. I have been creative, but risk-taking in television has been difficult. You need a certain amount of money to take a risk and if they don't believe in it, if they don't see that it's necessary, it just doesn't happen.

So even though I have spent several years as an MTV emissary, I have quit MTV three times now and probably have as critical a view of MTV as anybody, or even more so because I have been so close to it. I started working at MTV pretty much out of college in 1988, which was about seven years into the channel, so still during its infancy - like a seven-year-old, I guess.

Everybody knows what MTV is, I hope. Basically, it's a music channel that plays a lot of music videos and is very youth-oriented. It is a station that was founded on risk. You have a television station that is basically radio with pictures. It has no inherent value, and MTV makes the videos that you see, but they are submitted by the record companies that pay the production. So, here is a station that chooses the videos but cannot create the programming - at least it couldn't at that time, when it was just videos and presenters. So I think they just took an attitude that was created basically through their promotion department, that is, the way it was marketed. I think the basic attitude, which was very different from that of most television, was that watching MTV was almost a waste of time; that they didn't necessarily need you to watch; and that there was no value in watching MTV. That's what they were telling the viewers and, in that way, they created a demand among youth. I have brought with me a couple of promos from the early days of MTV that I found on a shelf at home to show you how this attitude manifested itself on screen.

(shows tape)

I guess I am optimistic about television and risk. Hopefully there will be more of it in the future. That's it. Thank you.

Part of interview

Guntern: You strike a note of optimism. Let me strike one of pessimism. You have studied semiotics; you have also, in this case, studied semantics. Targets used to be a flat piece of cardboard, an empty bottle or some other object supposed to be hit by a gun, a bullet, a knife, a stone, or whatever device and smashed to smithereens. I felt a little bit uncomfortable with this targeting philosophy, so my question is the following: it is obvious that MTV, or whatever kind of TV, is a huge educator an agent of socialization. It has an impact on how people perceive, what they perceive, how they think, feel, behave verbally and non-verbally, how they dress, etc. What do you think is the risk inherent in a medium that has such huge power? What is the actual risk-taking in terms of responsibility towards all of us, and how should that medium go about it? Television has a great impact and targeting potential buyers and clients is one aspect of TV. There are many others. Where



do you see the future? How will they take care of that social responsibility they have? They have power.

Greenberg: Certainly one of the things I noticed in travelling around the world working under the auspices of MTV is the modernization of the world. As a friend once said, a 'mall-ification': everything is turning into malls. It's that similarity; people are beginning to look the same all over the world. In terms of the responsibility, MTV in its original attitude took a lot of flak from the media, a lot of criticism for being really a marketer of teenage rebellion. There was a kind of recklessness and a lot of sex and drugs, a glorification of the rock'n'roll kind of lifestyle. So they launched a News division where they did a lot of pro-social activities. I always thought it was a little bit hypocritical that a lot of this stuff was created to deflect the criticism from the core business, which is selling clothing or products or music. So I don't know how much they feel the responsibility, as long as they are making money.

Guntern: Young people certainly did react to your kind of TV, the alternative YA TV. What was the response of the young people down there?

Greenberg: Unfortunately I did not get to travel around Latin America while YA was on the air. I was in Venezuela and the reaction seemed to be really favourable. People liked to see themselves on TV, and liked the informality of the channel. I heard from HBO Olé that the cable operators were saying that the response was quite good and that people did not necessarily consider it as a competitor of MTV, which was important for me. They saw it as a kind of a separate channel that had music but also this cultural cross-section of youth.

Guntern: What is the biggest risk you have taken during your career? What was the hardest risk for you?

Greenberg: Creatively or personally? There has always been one thing that I have tried to do: change jobs a lot. As I said, I quit MTV three times and I've probably quit a dozen jobs. I don't know if it is the biggest risk, but it's that I try to do as soon as I am working in a job where I feel comfortable. You know, when I come in the first day and I feel I know what I am doing, I am totally safe, I usually resign in about a week. So it's like a continuous risk where I try to put myself in situations where I do not have a handle on everything. That to me is more interesting.

Guntern: Do you perceive this as risk-taking or just as having fun?

Greenberg: For me it is risk-taking. It costs a lot of anxiety; change produces anxiety. When I quit my job, I do not know what is coming next. I definitely feel anxious. It's not really what I want to do, but I make myself do it. So I guess I feel that is a risk.

