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album, *Rebirth*, to at least 15 brand-tie-ins. When you hear her dancebeat singles, I promise you will start feeling urges for some products you haven't even heard of yet. Even the past has been mined—with dead icons like Elvis and Marilyn Monroe appearing in commercial efforts.

Of course we've been living with product placement for years—or at least since Drew and ET shared some Reeses Pieces. But nowadays, it's common for products to be flung in front of our faces. We've accepted the constant barrage the same way we accept acid rain and Code Orange alerts—they are just another part of our days and nights, having reached into us so deeply that we don't even notice the numbing botoxic effects upon our souls.

If you don't think that all this brand dancing hasn't deeply affected you on a cellular level, you should check out the recently published scientific studies that purportedly show how brands and marketing actually cause notable brain activity, and, possibly, permanent influence.

This new field, called neuromarketing, uses MRI scanners and other brain imaging machines common in the work of cognitive neuroscience to study the reaction of the brain to certain cultural images. The repercussions are pretty skeezy; brands may have a way of imprinting upon the brain.

Read Montague of Baylor University applied MRI technology to the "Pepsi Challenge." He monitored subjects when they drank Coke and Pepsi in blind taste tests and then again when they drank it knowing the brand beforehand—finding that Coke, above all, caused high amounts of activity in the part of the brain associated not just with memory and recall, but with self-image. In other words, when people *knew* they were drinking Coke they felt cooler.

Another study by the ominously-named "Bright-house Neurotechnologies Group" hooked viewers up to brain scanners, and registered their reactions to a mix of familiar logos and famous people along with more mundane imagery. Blood flow was again heightened in the brains prefrontal cortex when seeing modern icons like Madonna, Coke, Bill Clinton, Ford Trucks.

These experiments suggest two things—that the

brain reacts to brands on an emotional level, and that famous people are like brands. Coke and Madonna both cause the brain to flood with blood in the same way as when you see your mom, or remember that time you were bullied in junior high, or recall your first orgasmic love. And if this is remotely true, it starts to make sense why our stars have been used like psychic Goodyear Blimps to get our attention. And why our stars are beginning to look so flat and vacant and why there are so damn many of them now. They are being used as branders.

Although neuromarketing hasn't really led to anything specific besides trendy MRI conjecture, it's easy to imagine our imagery becoming more and more arresting and attuned to our brain activity in order to hit that prefrontal cortex g-spot. In fact, that process seems already to be in the works: At the recent Toy Fair in Manhattan, an estimated 70 percent of new toys were interactive. Using microchip and video-encoded invisible light (VEIL) technology, a new breed of wireless toys become activated by receiving digital signals from an encoded TV show. Mattel's new VEIL-enabled Batman action figure and Batmobile will respond to the new Warner Bros. *Batman* series out this fall. While watching the show, the toys can be activated to receive the encoded signal. So the Batmobile toy revs up at the same time that the cartoon car is ready to go on the screen, and the Batman action figure interacts in real time with the cartoon. Give that toy to a child and watch his head explode.

It's like our products are becoming more human, and not just for kids. Online websites like Netflix, Amazon, and iTunes have evolved into intuitive best friends who constantly give you suggestions of what else you should be digging—actively "learning" our tastes so they can market "similar" novelists, movies and musicians to us—literally becoming us, entering our headspace.

It's clear that our "Arts and Sciences" are now tangled up with commerce to such an extent that there is no turning back. We live in a bubble of conditioned hit-makers—always bouncy, always accessible, always with Clay Aiken-style emotion. Our current landscape of music and imagery is only getting more eye-catching.

This accelerated pace takes a lot of work, both for the viewer and for the creators. To keep up the high production value our eyes are addicted to, it's like the entire country is going to have to turn into a Galliano show.

Entertainment itself seems to be experiencing a kind of transduction of the creative spirit; instead of an advertisement attaching itself to a work of art, the ad is becoming the artistic whole. The blurred boundary between art and commerce is producing a refined, dizzying world around us. What will the future be like? Take a look at the kaleidoscopic imagery of motion graphics used in ads for products such as Nike and Bombay Sapphire and imagine that happening *all the time*.

I'm just as freaked out about all this as you may be, but the old ways of retaliation don't seem to be effective. During the WTO protests, rioters in Seattle threw rocks at Starbucks while wearing Levis and Nikes. And, anyway, the last time people got all anti-establishment, their anger was co-opted and turned into marketable nostalgia in the form of Hippie chic and VH1 shows.

The real revolution seems to be in the mind. It's like you are being chased in your head for the key to your deepest desires. One way is to be constantly vigilant of your tastes and to stay slippery. The next time some website suggests a product you would like, say: "Fuck You! I don't want to buy that Norah Jones album!"

I guess that doesn't seem so revolutionary. I wonder if there is any way to escape. Maybe it's just the next step in human evolution. And anyway, I don't think our gooey huge consumer machine is going to slink back into the swamp anytime soon. We have become tolerant of embedded messages and hybrid forms of entertainment. We love Christina Aguilera, read magalogs like *Lucky* and *Cargo*, dream of being *American Idols*. Perhaps we should accept our product-cyborg lives. Let's get neuromarketed!

Maybe when we have become fully integrated with our brands and every flare of our cortexes have been studied, we won't need to use entertainment to advertise, and we can once again enjoy a sponsorless song or work of art. What will happen when the brandworld inhabits our bodies? Maybe then we will all be free—or at least get more free stuff.



he Big Sell

story Mike Albo illustration Jonathan Williams

Just look at our stars—always a good litmus test of the times. They have become preened, depilated alien lifeforms saturated in brands

□ Funny, but just the other day I became a product whore.

I was writing copy for the smoothie franchise Jamba Juice, which is introducing new locations in Manhattan. They wanted to send fun, snappy letters to hotel concierges, fashion editors, and personal trainers (people they considered "influencers") who would create buzz and help turn their product popular and profitable. Along with the letter, each influencer received loads of free Jamba coupons to hand out to his or her well-appointed tastemaker friends. As part of my payment, I got the coupons, too.

Pretty soon I was handing out those fuckers like nobody's business. The power of bestowing upon my friends a free smoothie gave me a populist, Johnny Appleseed thrill. I would see cronies and colleagues and slip them a free smoothie with a smile. The brightly colored coupons became the friendly capper to any conversation—"Hey, have a free Jamba Juice! It's the pizza slice of the new millennium! Talk to you later!"

But you must be used to this kind of stuff. As a savvy reader of *BlackBook*, you are probably a demographic that marketers cream their distressed jeans over—doing anything they can to get your cool-kid stamp of approval for one of the estimated two million products launched every year into our already clogged consumer atmosphere.

But for me it was like I had superpowers. Within a week's time, I became one of those weird hypesters you may have read about—people employed by new, extremely successful firms with names like BzzAgents

or Tremor to turn their friends on to Clairol hair color or Valvoline Oil by just casually bringing it up in conversation and handing out free samples.

What scares me is that I had absolutely no problem doing it and I would do it again, because I actually love Jamba Juice, no joke. Or did it make me love it? It's hard to tell the difference these days.

My Jambagasm is but another example of our current state of constant marketing. From the rise of hypesters to recent studies on how advertising affects the brain to the gaudy, logo-laden look of our celebrities, this year it has become more obvious than ever: Those shiny brands intend to insinuate themselves into almost every crack and crevice of our lives, including our minds, and there is no turning back.

Each time commercial efforts seem satisfied with their presence, a sliver of previously ad-free space gets turned into a pop opportunity. Time and time again, I am freshly startled at the creative new ways that advertising shows up in my daily routine. E-mails are being "datamined," airline seats are rigged with telescreens, coffee cozees are covered with ads, your laptop is scattered with pop-ups, and now I have become a human sandwich board for a smoothie. In fact, just this month a patent was approved for a new toothbrush that transmits music right into your mouth while you brush your teeth.

Nowhere is this acceptable relentlessness more apparent than in the entertainment industry. Branding has invaded television shows, video games, movies, and novels to such an extent that it's no longer scandalous. A simple night out at a Cineplex, for example,

has become a major ordeal—you have to sit and stare at ten minutes of loud, visually arresting commercials before the trailer even starts (which is not only irritating, but really screws up the delicate timing of your pot buzz). Then you sit there for the feature, like last season's straight-to-Jet Blue masterpiece *In Good Company*, and watch Topher Grace talk into his Starbucks or Scarlett Johansson fingering a slice of Domino's pizza and try your best to feel a private emotion.

Branding seems to have reached the very root of our entertainment culture, which is pretty much all of culture these days.

Just look at our stars—always a good litmus test of the times. They have become preened, depilated alien lifeforms saturated in brands—geared up with their Coach spots and iPod appearances, mouthing "It's Versace" to photographers, and then leaving their premieres and awards shows piled high with gift bags full of Sprayology products and certificates for free Lasik surgery. Our stars have become indelibly linked to their sponsors. I see Hilary Swank and suddenly Calvin Klein underwear is dangled in front of my face.

Our stars look like ads, our songs sound like jingles, and our imagery is bright and invasive. It's difficult these days to listen to a piece of music or look at an image without imagining its present or future commercial self. Now you can't even "Pull into Nazareth..." without aching to switch your cellular coverage to Cingular. When Gwen sings "If I were a rich girl," you start salivating for a Pepsi. And watch out—it's probably safe to assume that J. Lo already has licensed her new