

"I Know It When I See It": Style, Simulation and the 'Short-circuit Sign'

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Abstract: The contemporary production of “style” relies heavily on the implementation of the “short-circuit sign” and the relationship of both to the emptiness of fourth-order simulation and to the remediation of successive visual forms. In detailing the “short-circuit sign,” film scholar James Monaco highlights the important role of cultural codes in the naturalization and the reification of on-screen images so that signifier and signified become identical, or are perceived as such. It is the cultural codes, then, that distinguish this mode from the establishment of a sign’s iconicity, insofar as the “short-circuit sign” belongs, as it were, to the genre and also in terms of the privileging of the visual over other means of transmission. If, however, the “short-circuit sign” and its role in the production of verisimilitude exist in and through cultural codes, then the study of this form need not confine itself to the study of moving images exclusively. Yet, the intersection of the visual and the material in such signs remains largely unexplored. Similarly, while Bolter and Grusin’s Remediation updates several of McLuhan’s tenets to arrive at the ways in which visual media repurpose and retransmit other visual media, none of these have really been applied to investigate the particularized and individualized effects of viewing everything and everyone through remediated lenses. Moreover, it is a critical commonplace to suggest that Baudrillard consistently ignores the materiality of sign production. In these regards, then, style presents a unique blend of iconicity, short-circuits, prothesis, remediation and simulation that points to and problematizes the inevitable materiality of the human body as a site of and a surface for cultural production.

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The contemporary production of “style” relies heavily on the implementation of the “short-circuit sign” and the relationship of both to the emptiness of fourth-order simulation and to the

remediation of successive visual forms. In distinguishing the “short-circuit sign,” film scholar James Monaco highlights the important role of cultural codes in the naturalization and the reification of on-screen images so that signifier and signified become identical, or are perceived as such. It is the cultural codes, then, that distinguish this mode from the establishment of a sign’s iconicity, insofar as the “short-circuit sign” belongs, as it were, to the genre and also in terms of the privileging of the visual over other means of transmission. If, however, the “short-circuit sign,” in which “signifier and signified are almost the same” and its role in the production of verisimilitude exist in and through cultural codes, then the study of this form need not confine itself to the study of moving images exclusively (Monaco 1981:447). Yet, the intersection of the visual and the material in such signs remains largely unexplored. Similarly, in their book, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin explain developments in new media by first examining their relationships with previous techniques. The process of rejecting, revising, and reproducing other media, or what they call “remediation,” takes two forms: immediacy and hypermediacy (1999:6-7). Immediacy refers to the tendency of media forms to be transparent, or realistic. The latter concept describes the tendency of a new combination of media to draw attention to its own artificiality, or mediated elements.¹ While Bolter and Grusin update several of Marshall McLuhan’s tenets to arrive at the ways in which visual media repurpose and retransmit other visual media, none of these have really been applied to investigate the particularized and individualized effects of viewing everything and everyone through remediated lenses. In these regards, then, style presents a unique blend of iconicity, short-circuits, prosthesis, remediation, and simulation that points to and problematizes the inevitable materiality of the human body as a site of and a surface for cultural production. Thus, I will argue that style is more than just an aesthetic and is instead a prosthetic, a necessary attachment without which the self cannot exist.

Offering a consideration of the production of materialized short-circuit signs, conveyed in, through, and as style, requires a four-fold process of establishing the means of producing, disseminating, and consuming the signs. First, style comprises an essential facet, without which the bearer cannot “exist.” In this way, style, and especially the elements of style, serve as prosthetic add-ons, and this function enhances the sense that the elements are more than accessories, so that they are, in fact, absolutely necessary (for the existence of the bearer/wearer). Since they are prosthetic, it follows that there will be resultant auto-amputations because in extending the self some attribute of or work done by the self is transferred to the technology. Second, deriving the auto-amputations and their effects can be achieved by locating the media involved in their transmission and analyzing them as such. Here, it is important to distinguish between the media through which style is constructed and the media through which the style is transmitted and consumed. In the logic of remediation, it follows that TV, film, Internet, etc. take precedence because these are the mode of viewing, of sharing, and of authorship. The state, and/or level of mortality, of the author then forms the third step in the present exercise. In other words, for the short-circuit sign to work as such, the authorial intent underlying the encoding of the sign must correlate with the decoding of the sign. This is significant because subsequent analysis of specific examples reveals that each of these is a

simulation in which authorship contains, transmits, and consists of a denial that there is even a precession of the sign, as well as a denial that the sign has a history, or even that a signified (outside of style) actually exists.

The last point becomes more clear when it is recalled that in the remediation enacted and achieved through style the medium is the message. Nowhere is this more observable than in the “retro-chic” of the so-called hipster, in which the collection of style items stand for an identity while completely and intentionally ignoring the precession of the sign. More pointedly, the contemporary gadget lover’s inability to put down the smartphone offers a material and a metaphorical version of auto-amputation, one which is connected to style via the variety of brand images, decorative coverings, and also Internet posting possibilities through which the style is produced, transmitted, and consumed. Thus, all three legs of the circuit of culture reflect the short-circuit sign of style. Proceeding from the notion, then, of style as a short-circuit, in which signifier and signified are almost the same, has the corollary of locating a shift in authorship, a shift in the order of simulation, and the creation of what could be described finally as a closed-circuit sign such that there is a purely *occlusive* reading of the sign. The reading of short-circuit signs requires very little in the way of interpretive work. In fact, those deploying short-circuit signs actively avoid interpretations other than the singular reading they prefer.

Skin deep: Layers of mediation and remediation

Understanding style through the dual logic of remediation requires a consideration of the ways in which style is produced and consumed. In this regard, Marshall McLuhan provides the first and founding entry point for an understanding of style as a technology that reflects the dual logic. In the oft-quoted, but nearly equally often misunderstood, treatise, *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man*, he introduces the concept of prosthesis to define (the function of) media as “any extension of ourselves” (1964:7). This has been taken variously as an indication of the Marxist-influenced worker’s alienation from technology and/or the alienation of labour from distribution and production. Regardless, it requires a first-principles understanding of the definition of technology, as well as the etymology of the word. This includes the direct understanding—knowledge put to practical effect for practical purpose—and the more common understanding of technology as referring (almost exclusively) to the scientific, industrial, and mechanical arts.² This conceptualization of the prosthetic, and its related effect of auto-amputation, help to locate the status of style as a sign and as a technology.³ The resultant auto-amputation not only relates to the bearer of the sign, but to the sign, as well. Of course this presupposes that the body, if not the person, must be a kind of media, one that can be a source and a site for the production of short-circuit signs. Making this assumption does not actually stray too far from the original text, in which McLuhan describes the wheel in relation to the foot and clothing as an extension of the skin. Admittedly, this is not entirely original, given the rise of body modification—through plastic surgery, tattoos, and other adornments—and the industry of critical commentaries that accompany the processes. However, these commentaries tend not to delve into an analysis of the medium as a media. Instead, they show a distinct preference for “media effects,” at least in terms of other media causing people to treat their skin

as one. So, if the skin and/or body and/or clothes are a medium, then what kind of media are they? Said another way, considering these media as such points to which media they reject, revise, reinscribe, or repurpose.

Hitherto, when scholars such as Brett St. Louis or Susan Bordo, to name two of the few who do so, employ the short-circuit sign as an analytical device—acknowledged or unacknowledged—it is in terms of media transmission of images. The former, for example, explicitly cites the short-circuit sign when he considers media portrayals of racialized athletes as part of the perpetuation of stereotypes regarding the perception, performance, and propriety of some sports for some racialized communities (2003:76). Unlike St. Louis, Bordo does not directly cite the short-circuit sign when she highlights the tendency of print and moving images to offer the combination of masculinity and race as a means of conveying a message *via* such a sign (1999:211-2). Here the Clio award-winning composition of an advertisement from the Urban Alliance on Race Relations (1995) employs the very techniques Bordo, especially, finds in media images:

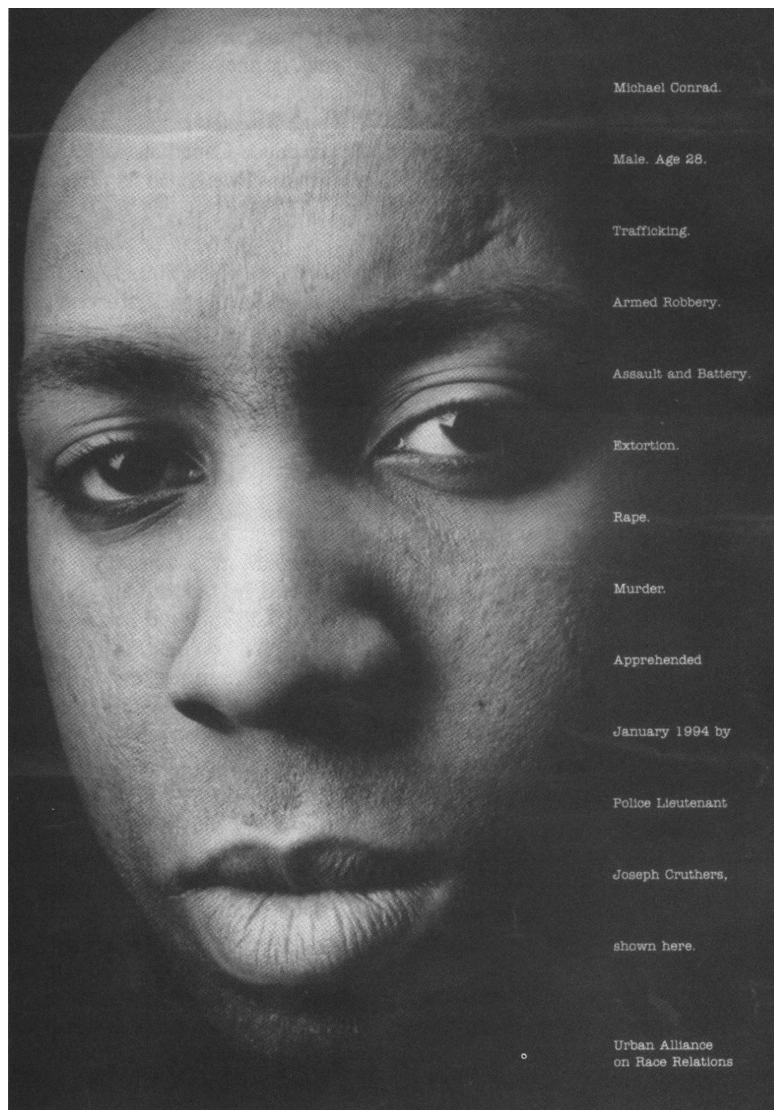


Figure 1. “Policeman” Ad, Urban Alliance on Race Relations.
Full video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JqfqSOM2WFO>.

In the ad, the words and the image work to combine several simultaneously signs—masculinity, blackness, race, and the order of the words—to remind readers of the tendency, of the trap even, of the short-circuit sign. As much as race and masculinity are signs, this kind of consideration stops short of considering the media, the technology, the prosthesis, and the effect of auto-amputation. In this last regard, it is worth recalling that McLuhan adds, “such amplification [by technology] is bearable by the nervous system only through numbness or blocking of perception” (1964:43). This is an auto-amputation and the piece being amputated is (the act of) reading.

Here, the practice of reading refers very specifically to one of Stuart Hall’s under-examined insights in the highly influential essay, “Encoding/Decoding.” While scholars have quite rightly highlighted Hall’s proposal for three modes of reading—dominant (or preferred or hegemonic), negotiated, and oppositional—especially in the teaching of the essay, Hall’s earlier comments regarding televisual codes are tremendously prescient and well worth reconsidering. Hall calls out educators and researchers when he writes, “Formal semiology has too often neglected [the] practice of *interpretive work*” (1999:514). In clarifying the situation further, Hall then posits that, insofar as televisual codes are concerned, the goal and the outcome of the “work” is to “straighten out the kinks in the communication chain” (1999:514). The kinks to which Hall refers are those preventing the short-circuiting of the sign and which might allow for the kinds of negotiated or even oppositional readings to which scholars hopefully cling. In other words, the goal of the televisual cues is to make connotation and denotation operate in a straight line, in a short circuit. This would reduce Hall’s oft-reproduced diagram to just two pieces that are in fact the same: sent sign; received sign. This is not a hopeful—or helpful—diagram. Thus, it should be recalled, too, that Hall’s comments repeatedly refer to “televisual” codes. The three levels of readings have been applied elsewhere without really thinking through what this means. Simply put, applying Hall’s methods to other media means accepting the remediation of televisual codes and the consequences that this entails, including the prosthetic and auto-amputating dimensions of what is inescapably a short-circuit sign for which interpretive work is discouraged, if it is acknowledged at all.

Although the earlier studies circle this issue, they treat the lack of reading associated with the short-circuit sign as a systemic, a structural, and a societal problem. Conversely, they restrict the analysis to media effects that turn the body and/or identity into a medium as a means of deploring the former. This is important because recognizing style as producing auto-amputation also means recognizing the willful and (the) intentional production of such a sign by the individual bearing it. Simultaneously, there is a concomitant acceptance of these signs because, quite frankly, the same kinds of signs are being returned. So, if the body is mediated in and through style, then it follows that the medium is the message. This is not to offer yet another jeremiad on the topics of consumerism, youth, or even the reasons Leavis (1948, 1960) may have been correct. As Bolter and Grusin develop in their reworking and rethinking of McLuhan, any medium is itself a compendium and a compilation of other media. For example, as much as viewers and scholars might want to argue (or to assume) that TV remediates film or the stage, there still remains tremendous evidence of the ways in which television remediates radio, in

terms of its flow, broadcast schedule, commercial interruptions, newsbreaks, segments, serials, soaps, and sports, among others. Yet, any quick look at a contemporary TV broadcast, especially news, reveals the ways in which TV also remediates the Internet. TV screens now include multiple active windows, scrolling messages, pop-ups, “bugs,” and other items lifted directly from web browsers. In the logic of remediation, Bolter and Grusin conclude that the goal and the effect—that is, the rationale and the outcome—of the project is immediacy, which they define as “transparency,” or the absence of any cues or signs of the constructedness of the text and the medium: “Our culture wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: ideally, it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them” (1999:5-6). It just is. At the same time, though, immediacy conflicts with its counterpart, “hypermediacy,” which is the tendency of media to call attention to the very act of mediation (1999:46). The observation has particular salience when the kinds of remediation involved in the affectation of style—as a technology and therefore as a prosthetic—are taken into account, the logic leads to the conclusion that style is transparent. That may seem facile, insofar as style looking unaffected, or natural, seems to be the usual goal. At the same time, though, the outcome relies on style being undefined, ill-defined, and therefore imperceptible.

It is for this reason that a definition or description of style has been avoided, for the understanding of style as immanent still ignores at least two things, for style is neither inherent, nor does it exist outside the limits of culture or convention. First, the bearer wants to be acknowledged as having a kind of style, which requires recognizing and rewarding the signs. Second, stopping at the idea of style as necessarily transparent fails to consider the depth and the diversity of the remediations present. Contemporary style remediates TV, film, Internet, magazines, as well as previous styles. Using computers as an example, Bolter and Grusin offer an explanation of the contradictory logic of remediation, at least in terms of authorial intent. On one side of the dilemma, they argue, “Computer programs may ultimately be human products, in the sense that they embody algorithms devised by human programmers, but once the program is written and loaded, the machine can operate without human intervention” (1999:27). In other words, users are free to operate the program as they wish. However, Bolter and Grusin also stress that those writing the program “may be involved at several levels. [. . .] All of these classes of programmers are simultaneously erased at the moment in which the computer actually generates an image by executing the instructions they have collectively written” (1999:27). Put simply, Bolter and Grusin paradoxically reject authorial intent only to reinscribe it simultaneously. The reach of contemporary technologies plays a large part in the seeming re-birth of the author. Human agency is not deferred *via* style. Instead, it is omnipresent. Moreover, the author of style never lets go of authorial intent, and always wants to be seen and to be appreciated as having an effortless and still carefully executed style. This dual figuration of authorship further signifies the short-circuiting of the sign—I’m hip, I’m cool, I’m trendy, etc.—but each of these is also a simulation. A quick search of “what I wore today” on Google yields more than 65 million results!⁴ This is important because several of the most noteworthy, most visible, and most watched styles and style icons remediate other styles, simulate previous

styles, but actively and even aggressively deny that there is a precession of the signs and simulations in an act of turning a short-circuit sign into a closed-circuit one.

It is necessary, then, to track the ways in which the medium transmits other media through its own combination of signs, or lack thereof. Importantly, the dual figuration of style, as transparent and as affected, maps onto the dual figuration of remediation. One either has style or one does not. However, style infers a reception process and a series of reward or non-reward decisions in the interpretation of the sign. This infers, or instantiates, an intentionality or a hypermediacy in which the style calls attention to its style. Put another way, people do not walk around holding iPhones like tea trays, or thumbing Blackberry trackballs like Queeg's ball-bearings, or talking to their Bluetooth earpieces in order to be unnoticed while so doing, nor do they appear able to put them down.⁵

These devices are obvious prosthetics. Yet, they are also simultaneously style elements. Their ubiquity offers a key element of the relationship among prosthetics, style, and the shared signs of each. It is something of a given that electronic gadgets, even those purportedly for communication, are actually anti-social in terms of their effects. Since the release of the Sony Walkman, this argument has been as much a truism among the manipulationist side of Cultural Studies as arguments about the democratizing potential of the devices have been for the populist camp. It is interesting to note, then, that Ryerson University's Catherine Middleton (2007)—without acknowledging it as such—remediates Paul du Gay, Stuart Hall, *et al*'s quintessential *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman* (1997) to argue that the Blackberry remediates the earlier device and its prosthetic, auto-amputating consequences. Here, social interactions comprise the amputation. More intriguing is the fact that du Gay, *et al*, employ the Walkman as a critical device, an exemplar, an expedient, a vehicle through which to achieve the real goal of “doing” Cultural Studies. Thus, even in the hands of well-intentioned scholars, these gadgets are prosthetics. As style items, though, the effect is slightly, but significantly, different. The gadgets include another sort of anti-communication as one of the constituent parts of the anti-social repertoire.⁶ The block on communication—to use the Twitter, Facebook, and texting terminology—is not, however, the obvious boundary that resists interaction with those in the vicinity of the holder. Rather, the communication being blocked is any alternative reading of the sign that might differ from the one intended by the author of the sign. How else can one explain not only the iPhone *qua* platter, but also the myriad “skins” and ring tones—still downloaded to the tune of \$2.2 billion per year, according to Gartner Research (2011)—that serve as kinds of meta-prosthetics for the prosthetics, like a Snuggie™ *cum* mood ring. The *Now Weekly* “Insight” piece, “The high cost of campus cool,” (Di Matteo 2001) from roughly ten years ago first called my attention to the prosthetic dimensions of gadgetry. The piece breaks down the gadgetry and the cost of looking cool on campus, in the fateful fall of 2001. This was well before Internet capable handheld devices became available! Beyond their usefulness, each and every device is supposed to be read immediately, without question, and as a short-circuit. In addition, the reading is supposed to happen in a very particular and

intended way, one which carries authorial intent beyond the usual limits and turns a short-circuit sign into a closed-circuit sign.



Figure 2. *Now Weekly*, “The high cost of campus cool”

Thus, it is hardly seems worth debating the status of so-called “bagel head” modifications, which became the rage, especially in Asia, in 2012. The process involves saline injections in the forehead to produce a ring that looks like a bagel, but it would not be complete without a photo uploaded to the internet. Beyond the efficacy, ethics, etc. of such a fashion statement, the question still remains regarding the status of the sign as a sign, the history of that sign, and its precession. If the sign is taken as a short-circuit sign, its history and precession become clear. The short-circuit sign has been taken to distinguish film from other (sorts of) “languages,” and in effect as *the* distinguishing sign of difference (Monaco 2009:470-1). However, given the prevalence of remediation, in either species, the location cannot be so privileged or confined. It is well worth invoking a series of discussion points inspired by David Cronenberg’s films, by McLuhan’s influence on Cronenberg, and hence on the multiple and simultaneous layers of remediation therein, including the current one(s). The logic of remediation dictates that the viewing of objects as TV, as film, and as Internet productions, to name only three, never actually ceases. People, and their style, are viewed through these concurrent, contemporaneous lenses.⁷ A symptom of this development appeared during the hundredth anniversary of the Titanic disaster and the roughly contemporaneous sinking of the cruise ship Costa Concordia, in 2012. In an eerie example of the representation of the real preceding and conditioning the real, people turned to Twitter to express that they did not realize James Cameron’s movie was based on an actual event (Knowles 2012). At the same time, survivors of the more recent wreck, and some news broadcast in the U.S., claimed it was like being in *Titanic*, not like being on *the* Titanic (BBC News 2012). However, this is not necessarily the end of the layers of simulation and displacement of the signified produced by the layers of remediation.

“You don’t know me”: Style and reading

Indeed, three figures stand out among the character types that most obviously and directly illustrate the shift in the circuit of signs and in the relationship of signifier and signified. In order, these are “hoodie,” the “harlot,” and the “hipster.” Each of these represents some level of unfortunate turn and invokes a particular level of moralizing, even in the most informed of analyses. At the same time, examining these figures in terms of the composition of signs, and an understanding of the precession of them, offers a more telling critique of what, precisely, is happening. In this regard, I can draw on considerable classroom experience, at the secondary and post-secondary levels, as well as outside-the-classroom experience in hallways, cafeterias, gyms, and elsewhere in the building or on campus. One phrase, almost axiomatically repeated, sticks out as emblematic of the figures, especially the first two: “Don’t talk to me like you know me.” Sadly, this was almost a mantra for those holding vigils and protests following the Feb. 2012 shooting of Trayvon Martin, in Florida, allegedly because he was taken for a hoodlum in part by simple virtue of his hoodie (Glynn 2012). Difficulty arises because, admittedly, the look derives from gangster culture. A few short years ago, when I started trying to understand the proliferation of style as a prosthetic, this character might have been “the hat.” The type usually wore a Red Sox, Tigers, Yankees, or Cardinals hat because a rapper had worn one in a video. The allegiance is to a style and not the team. A student told me his favourite Yankee was Michael Jordan, others had no idea there was a team at all! The hat is rarely removed, further confirming the prosthetic dimension. Many now sport the hat under the hoodie. In Britain, the name “hoodie” refers derisively to an entire cohort of young people and refers in shorthand precisely to their every perceived characteristic.

This is the very contingency of a short-circuit sign, and the same one adopted in the Urban Alliance ad cited above. But, this one has a material, or at least materialized, form. Upon investigation, the statement, “you don’t know me,” or its companion, “don’t talk to me like you me,” actually functions through the paradoxical logic of remediation, in which authorial intent still has purchase, while grudgingly acknowledging the short-circuited readings that such an intent produces. Without getting into the glorification of gang culture among western youth, the remediation alone reveals that this is happening and that this is the intent, regardless of immediacy or hypermediacy. In the first instance, the style says, *via* the short-circuit sign and the transparency of it, “I’m a gangster.” Yet, the baggy clothes and the hoody obscure the identity of the individual in an obviously contradictory move. The low-rise pants offer further evidence of the source of the look. Thus, in the second case, *via* the call to the constructedness of the style, the short-circuit sign states, “Look at me, I’m successfully transmitting or affecting the style of a gangster.” In this way, the defensive, reflexive posture admits rather than contradicts the signifier/signified relationship. Both readings rely on the same short-circuit, but with the important consequences of proscribing alternative readings so that the prosthetic equals identity in the straight line of the sign.

Comedian David Chappelle actually uses the second instance, the (admittedly unfortunately named) harlot archetype, as one of his comedy routines. Chappelle (2004) responds to a woman's invocation of the "you don't know me" defense with the apologetic, "I'm sorry [. . .] You're wearing the uniform of a whore." It is a truism that satirical humour tends to reveal the truth. This is Chappelle's intent in walking a very dangerous line. Yet, it is the same line Ariel Levy (2005) walks in detailing the rise of women's so-called "raunch culture" in *Female Chauvinist Pigs*. In this reading, the terms and behaviours that signified "grrl power" in the previous decade had been co-opted and altered into something very different.⁸ Regardless of one's reading of the sign, this represents a shift in the status of the sign and the availability of readings given the combination of simulation with short-circuit. An infamous *Maclean's* (2007) cover story details the sources and the challenges presented by the social and cultural shifts that occasioned the rise of raunch culture, in proclaiming as much as asking, "Why do we dress our daughters like skanks?" A more interesting story might ask why their thirty and forty-something mothers are dressing like their daughters, in open competition. It would reveal the contradictory belief in style as an ineluctable, prosthetic device, but which also manages to be completely and utterly transparent. So, this means that whether or not the look is "hip" or "skank," the reading is based on a short-circuit. What is most disruptive—and here I mean this in the academic way, as in a kind of "crisis tendency" one finds in sociological studies—is the fact that the only available readings are short-circuits and that (one of) these presuppose(s) an immortal author, one whose own readings neglect and/or exclude the existence of a reader, or other readings. This author and his/her readings are simultaneously immanent and still begging a reading by calling attention to the overall look and its constructedness in and through existing media.

In this regard, the third and final—for the time being—example should bring together the pieces of the argument so far in one singular embodiment of persistent and ongoing denial of the constituent parts of the sign. The hipster, in its purest form, if you will, as exemplified by the seemingly limitless catalogue of the irrepressibly funny blog, *diehipster.com* (2009) offers an immeasurably willing participant in the progressive slide of signified into the abyss of meaninglessness. The hipster is a stereotype of stereotypes and contradictions, each of which the blogger carefully highlights. Hipsters hail from the end of a cul-de-sac in a typical midwestern suburb and their faux-hemian ways are gentrifying, and therefore ruining, otherwise fine neighbourhoods, especially in Brooklyn. To summarize the type, they are likely to be seen clutching expensive latte drinks made from the finest organic materials while riding replica penny-farthing bicycles on their way to write their blog on the latest iPad so their rent-controlled neighbours will know that they are up-to-date between installation art features. To this eye, they resemble a bearded, lumberjack shirted version of Heath and Potter's (2005) evisceration of Naomi Klein and her ilk in the first chapter of *The Rebel Sell*. Jennifer Aniston's equally vacuous character, Rachel, on the once-popular show, *Friends*, serves as a kind of archetype (Perlich 2004). In one episode emblematic of the type, Rachel wears an MC5 t-shirt, not because she or Aniston grew up in the Detroit/Windsor area, supports the White Panther party, listens to the music, or even knows that there is any. It was a trendy shirt from a trendy store and she is a

trendsetter. Moreover, the shirt came from a supplier hoping hipsters would want the after seeing one on Rachel/Aniston. That is the extent of the meanings available.

To call this combination of signs a collage would be an overstatement, or better, an over-estimation of the project. In the language, as it were, of hipsterdom, signs only mean that they mean. What they mean, though, is nothing more than an apostrophe, or an interjection demanding that the bearer of the sign be noticed for bearing the sign and for *being the sign*. While academics, and those who hate hipsters, might recognize the signs and (be willing to) trace their history, this kind of work is not part of the currency of the signs, nor is it even presumed to exist. Indeed, it is anathema and antithetical to the hipster, for whom even nostalgia is *faux*. Moreover, the speed with which the signs change renders keeping up-to-date an almost fruitless exercise that could best be described with metaphors involving snowballs rolling downhill or sinking in quicksand. This is important because two baseline assumptions prevail and these reveal the extent to which style and the devices associated with it have become prosthetic technologies, complete with the resultant auto-amputation. While they are allegedly meaningless, they also cannot be absent. While they do not have histories, those histories could always be looked up using one of those devices that cannot be put down. The contradictions reveal the remediation of the technologies so that the medium, style, is the message, and this renders the signs as short-circuit ones.

If the kinds of signs enacted by hoodies, harlots, and hipsters are of the short-circuit variety, there is clearly a twist (or two) on the concept. At the very least, there is a materiality to the signs insofar as the signs have a human embodiment. Ultimately, what James Monaco says of film could be said of style: “The power of language systems is that there is a very great difference between the signifier and the signified; the power of film is that there is not” (1981:127-8). Here, Monaco builds on Christian Metz’ original conception of the short-circuit sign and the “imaginary signifier,” which is a key part of understanding what came to be known as the cinematic signifier (Chandler 2002:62). In looking at the progression of style as a project —here, it is worth noting that I am very aware of roughly 200 years of North American style, including “Bridget,” the stereotypical Irish house servant found in the hateful rants of some early Anglo-American feminists, to the grey flannel suit of the stereotypical “organization man,” and beyond—the current variety goes beyond its ancestors in terms of the array of gadgetry necessary, and its redistribution of the circuit of the sign.

Quite simply, Bridget carries a message. The “cool pose” carries a message. Tommy Smith and John Carlos carry a message in their infamous Olympic salute which was then copied by rappers, which was then copied by fans, which was then reduced to one rolled up pant leg for no reason other than style. In fact, the originals carry a very political message and adhere to the diagrammatic model(s) of the sign taught in intro semiotics classes, or featured in Hall’s (1999) seminal essay. However, the hipster version of the model remediates the now ubiquitous Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram self-portrait. It is a photograph of the self looking in a mirror. Beyond the short-circuiting of the sign and there being less of an obvious gap between signifier and signified, these pictures, if not the subject/object of the picture, as well, to offer what

Chandler calls “reflections of reality” when he details the short-circuit sign in cinema (2002:62). That is to say, there is still an imaginary in these very material signs. The significant difference now is that the unreal element is the ongoing denial that a history or a precession exists, or indeed has ever existed at all.

The mirror version of the circuit, combined with the denial *qua* authorial intent effectively closes the sign’s circuit. History makes no difference in this model because the short-circuit version of authorial intent always already states takes precedence. However, photography does not merely reproduce; it remediates. Similarly, style remediates and equally abstracts from and mediates the actual. If photography mediates, then style remediates photography, as well as the blogs sites, TV, etc. and other media where it is located. Unlike the previous style affectations, though, the current prosthetic version screams only one message: “Look at me!” The bagelhead merely signifies that the competition for attention has increased. But, it also clings to authorial intent as following the communicative bullet. Everyone is an author; nobody is a reader. That is to say, the author remains in control of the receipt of the sign in this version of the sign’s imaginary existence. Here, I can cite the last five years of anecdotal data from roughly 2,000 undergraduate students as emblematic of the shift. Among the most poignant examples is an exercise in conformity and anti-social behaviour that I have been conducting in this period. Individuals are asked to write anonymously the first two things they would do if they could be invisible for forty-eight hours. Where students used to write about being naked and dancing, they now want to know what boyfriends, girl friends, best friends and family are thinking and are saying about them. In the last batch of 144 such answers, dancing and nakedness did not appear at all! Instead, students react to the omnipresence of surveillance, their need to control the extent of unintended readings, and the unacknowledged cognitive dissonance produced by the two.

One of the most disconcerting moments for several first-year classes came when they were given wet-transfer lower back tattoos for little girls as an essay topic. They immediately and overwhelmingly ran to the “tramp stamp” short-circuit reading, but were shocked when confronted with the notion that this was actually a reading—that is, interpretive work and not a mere recitation of a given—and that they might be read, too. They easily concluded that the little girls would soon be wearing low-rise jeans, sporting “whale tails” and flaunting their sexuality, just like their mothers. Rather than embrace reading, however, there are two steps taken in its place. First, there is the denial that the sign exists. This is reflected in the very popular contemporary catch-phrase, “It is what it is.” The second step is to constantly, repeatedly, obsessively update the profile shot or status report. In this regard, Kim Kardashian, whose daily bikini pictures garner newspaper and magazine attention, not to mention thousands of followers, provides only the most notorious such example given the hundreds of thousands of equally frequent updates by people who are not famous for being famous. More unfortunate, though, are the all too frequent tales of bullied children who feel that the Internet is the only place to turn and who cannot seem to turn it off. Nothing exemplifies this relationship more poignantly and paradoxically than the *Freedom* app (2012), which allows users to disable their devices for as many as eight hours. The contradictions of this app abound, and range from

the obvious of the purchase price, to the not-so-obvious issues of surveillance, self-subjection, and self-regulation. Moreover, it reveals the extent to which the smart phone is a prosthetic style item, one without which the self cannot exist.

Gimme a little sign: Conclusions

That said, avoiding the temptation of moral arguments offers a more telling critique of the process. Indeed, part of the rationale and the outcome of the surveillance and the self-regulation is the closing of the circuit of the sign into an occlusive existence. The loop requires and facilitates an endless stream of purchasing to update continuously the style of the bearer, as well as to turn into the detritus that is hipster chic. The result is a never ending stream of rebranding, repackaging, repurposing, and reimagining of brands and products so that their histories—*i.e.*, the precession of the signs—becomes elided or even disappears altogether. In this regard, the pitches for “diamond” Shreddies, left and right Twix, the always already of new Tide, the constant rebranding of the Aldo shoe labels, trash the dress photos, and similar easily identifiable exercises offer a ready source of examples of the need to call attention to nothing at all. However, the critical amputation occurring is not the much foretold end of history, but rather it is, as stated earlier, the end of reading. At a microcosmic level, it led a student in one of my very first classes to exclaim loudly, “You can’t know that!” when presented in detail with the relatively short history of the white wedding dress in Western culture. He reacted similarly to the even shorter history of homosexuality as it is currently understood. The student meant this in several ways. It was a challenge. It was incredulity. He did not believe that I knew the history. He did not believe that anyone could know the history. Writ large, the phenomenon reveals itself in instances like the mass surprise regarding Titanic as an ocean liner and not as a movie. It also appears in the surprise and the indignation earlier cited with regard to the uniforms being identified as such. In turn, these developments contribute to the situation *Globe and Mail* reporter Patrick White (2008) encounters in surveying what he calls “Mr. Google’s children,” whom he finds in Toronto’s secondary schools. One student typifies and explains the approach that gave White his title:

His all-time favourite teacher is the one he calls Mr. Google. He doesn’t need lectures or classrooms, he says, because he can ask Mr. Google and learn everything he wants to know. “I mean, I can learn to speak languages off of YouTube. I’m learning to play the guitar right now off of YouTube. I can look up anything and in a few minutes know more about any subject than my teacher does. Why should I listen to them?”

This is not over-confidence. It is a way of life to assume that one has the devices that enable one to look up anything if, *and only if*, one has to do so. Moreover, as the *Freedom* app highlights, there is an app for everything. Thus, the need to look up information quickly reduces to the overall need down to finding just one app among the few hundred available. This cuts

Google or Bing's algorithm to a tiny one. It is not a coincidence, then, that Google finds itself facing charges in the United States for fixing its results and that Microsoft is being threatened with similar anti-competition charges in Europe. However, a more quotidian concern is the narrowing of the gap between citizen and consumer, along with a closing and a cloister for the gap between signifier and signified.

The need to update constantly so as to be noticed also points to an obvious continuation of the self as spectacle. Yet, it is in the idea of auto-amputation of reading as a consequence of style as a prosthetic that further study should turn. This notion points to a simulation beyond a copy without an original, so that the imaginary precedes and conditions the real. Instead, the imaginary remediates the imaginary and materializes as a transparent, immanent real. Shortly after World War II, and J. C. R. Licklider (1960) and Douglas Engelbart (1963) penned their first technical papers, "Man-Computer Symbiosis" and "Augmenting Human Intellect," respectively. In these speculative works, they foresaw what became the Internet and the massively, inescapably mediated information saturated existence that has become the current reality. However, it was as an augmentation—as a prosthetic—that they considered the computer-human fusion. As well, Bolter and Grusin update McLuhan in light of video games, the Internet, instant messaging, etc. but they, too, overlook the resultant auto-amputation. Roughly fifteen years ago, I offered as my MA thesis an analysis that *qualitatively and quantitatively* points to the increase in "thinking out loud" that results from Internet communication.⁹ What I failed to consider then was the consequential and implied end of reading, if only of the self-regulating variety. The rise of Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook signal, to me at least, that I was onto something that needs further examination. The lesson of Trayvon Martin rings true. He deployed a closed-circuit sign and it did not get a reading, it drew a reaction. The interpretation was a kind of thinking out loud, a reflexive rather than reflective or retrospective thought. A young man died because of a willfully and intentionally meaningless sign. This is not a call for the teaching of reading, but one for the teaching of *readings*. In an era when there are myriad projects for and about multiple forms of literacy, these should include, as a bare minimum, the principle that any text has multiple and simultaneous *valid* readings.¹⁰ This would be far more democratizing than any collection of prosthetic gadgets and devices.

Endnotes

1. As an aside, it is a critical commonplace to suggest that Baudrillard consistently ignores the materiality of sign production in his studies of simulation.↵

2. Interestingly, the OED lists 1859 as the date for which this usage came into currency.↵

3. Admittedly, this could be taken as a restatement of the definition of a cyborg. However, it is important to distinguish that the politics of the cyborg, especially as enumerated by Donna Haraway's (1991) "A Cyborg Manifesto," offer almost limitless entry points for analyses and interpretation. In contrast, those deploying style as

a prosthetic means of producing and transmitting short-circuit signs do so precisely to foreclose, circumscribe, occlude, and otherwise prevent analyses and interpretations.↵

4. It is well worth mentioning that these results overwhelmingly point to sites and blogs aimed at and produced by women.↵

5. I have to admit that my views on amputation were only furthered by taking my children to the Ontario Science Centre and witnessing school, daycare, and family groups whose minders attempted to deal with children one-handed because they would not or could not put their smart phones in a pocket, purse or backpack.↵

6. This is to say that anti-communication behaviour is anti-social, but not all anti-social behaviour is anti-communication.↵

7. It is well worth noting that Horkheimer and Adorno's (1997) discussion of mass cultural mediation, in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, for example, must come into play in terms of the effects of the remediations listed. Similarly, one could also further such a discussion through a consideration of the Althusserian concept of interpellation for a more localized analysis.↵

8. For my own take on this subject, please see the forthcoming, "‘And nothing she needs’: Victoria's Secret and a Post-Feminist Gaze" (*Foregrounding Postfeminism and the Future of Feminist Film and Media Studies*. Ed. Marcelline Block, Cambridge Scholars Press).↵

9. An excerpt of this thesis is available as "The Collective Monologues of Cyberspace: The Internet's Convention of Spontaneity" (*Arachne: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*. 6.1 (2000): 29-44).↵

10. In Ontario, for example, it is a commonplace to remind educators in the k-12 sector that every teacher is a literacy teacher, but the literacy test emphasizes singular, totalizing readings.↵

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