

**‘An ocean voyage is a different way of life’
(*Norfolk 1972 Cruise Vacation Guide
Featuring the Brand New Cunard
Adventurer*):
‘Hyperreality’, liminality and the
Marketing of British Shipping Lines c.1880
to c.1970**

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Research purpose

This paper seeks to explore the extent to which advertising might be said to trade in illusions, warping realities and dealing in fantasies through a specific case study of the marketing of British shipping lines in the period c.1880 to c.1970. It explores the means by which this might have been achieved and questions whether the marketing of passenger shipping through this time was particularly susceptible to such practices.

Through this long period romanticism and the pathetic fallacy are considered in relation to the idea that, with the rise of modernity, marketing went to increasing lengths to “hide” the product in favour of building emotive appeals. Thus, a central research question is, does the marketing of British shipping in the period c.1880 to c.1970 typify the principles of modern marketing and advertising whereby meanings are fabricated around goods and services, removing from them the intrinsic value of those items in preference for ‘artificial, constructed human and social values’ (McFall, 2004, p. 20)?

This is approached with particular reference to the idea of ‘hyperreality’ as developed by the French theorist, Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007), with advertising as a crucial vehicle in drawing together a series of inferential signs to create something mythical. Thus, to what extent were marketing and advertising, in this sector, through this time, responsible, for the creation of dream worlds? Further, this is considered with reference to Gladden’s suggestion that the early marketing of shipping lines was governed by the necessity to ‘deny the very nature of the ship’ (2014, p. 65).

One consequence of this approach is to suggest that the ship comes to represent a liminal space; this research seeks to evaluate and explore that proposition and question how far this is a deliberate effort on the part of marketers. The extraordinary atmosphere of the ship, from the earliest days of trying to deliberately convey an impression that one is not on a ship, is explored with reference to the principle that this idea was enhanced through time and turned to promotional ends to reinforce the notion of the ship as the space apart, suggesting a whole host of other opportunities distinctive to this place and time which might not ordinarily be experienced in the practice of everyday life. The traveller is thus encouraged to escape from the ‘bonds...of daily existence’ (Gottdiener, 2001, p. 11). These ideas are examined in this paper to establish whether, from the late-19th to the late-20th century, the marketing of British shipping lines perpetuated the idea that, on board ship, the bonds and references of normal life were suspended. The question is thus posed: does marketing through this time serve to set up the ship as a distinctive liminal space giving rise to a host of transgressive behaviours which are themselves promoted within the marketing of these shipping lines?

Source material

This paper is the result of a collaborative research project between the authors and Merseyside Maritime Museum (Liverpool, UK) (MMM) working from the starting point of their collection of shipping posters. This has been complimented by a wide survey, identifying key trends and themes, of nearly 500 posters gathered from a variety of other sources. In addition to this, extensive surveys have

been undertaken of the collections of MMM, the Mariners' Museum (Newport News, USA), the National Maritime Museum (Greenwich, UK), and the Scottish Business Archives (Glasgow, UK) in the areas of marketing materials and ephemera collections.

Discussion

McFall argues that marketing and advertising serve to corrupt 'authentic' meanings so that 'reality' increasingly disappears from view' (2004, p. 10): this paper suggests that in the case of the marketing of British shipping lines in the period c.1880 to c.1970 this was most pronounced, being accentuated by the nature of the product. In the earliest period this was out of a basic necessity, distracting passengers from the notion that they were at sea and the risks inherent in that, as demonstrated by Gladden (2014). However, it is demonstrated how marketing and advertising complimented and extended that by continually building on this mythical construct.

This was, in part, driven by the challenges faced within the market, the need to seek out new consumers, and the associated need to reposition the basic product proposition. At the beginning of the interwar period, the primary aim of the passenger was to reach a destination and the marketing of British shipping lines reflected that, although paying heed to the necessity to provide a distraction to passengers that took their mind off the idea that they were at sea with the potential risks and unpleasantness that might be associated with that. However, the destination remained the primary driver, not necessarily the ship, or ship-borne culture per se.

However, two key developments in the interwar period impacted on shipping lines, calling on them to reconfigure their proposition. In the first instance, the dramatic falling away of the emigration market consequent upon legislation enacted in the USA, meant that shipping companies needed to develop a new market to absorb this excess capacity. This took the form of satisfying the increasing desire to travel amongst an affluent middle-class, giving rise to the new, 'tourist third cabin' offering.

The second development, though not new, came in the wake of the stock market crash of 1929: cruising. Whilst cruising, for the sake of cruising, could be dated back to the late-19th century, up to the late 1920s, this had been a rather exclusive affair, with a focus on the improving, educational nature of such voyages. However, from the late 1920s, as that traditional market was eroded, appeals were once again broadened to encompass the middle-classes who were appealed to on the basis of leisure purely for leisure's sake.

The new approach to marketing that developed in each of these cases was to 'get away from the ship', to extend the attraction of travel by sea beyond a simple, utilitarian approach, and talk up a distinctive, shipboard culture.

The most commonly recurring feature throughout the period but most especially in the key, interwar period was to describe these ships as floating palaces, hotels, clubs or country homes. Apart from the fact that this played to a 'First Class' rhetoric that appealed to those customers that still elected to travel First Class, it also appealed to the aspirations of a new middle-class market. Further, it served the important purpose of depersonalising the proposition, appealing to the emotions and embedding the passenger, or potential customer, into the enterprise. Extending from this, the meanings woven around the idea of ocean travel, and specifically the ship-borne experience, became more elaborate, distinctively setting up the ship at sea as a space apart. Whilst this might be physically the case, the marketing and advertising around this embroidered an extraordinary meaning, not only establishing ships as very definite spaces but at the same time fabricating a specific relationship between object and consumer that played on human relationships (Dyer, 1982, p. 116). Featherstone notes how this was typical of the modern age whereby the elite practice of art was co-opted by industry in the form of advertising in the service of the creation of illusions and fantasy (2007, pp. 71 – 2). This study of the marketing of British shipping sets this up as a typical example.

The deliberate and systematic production in the form of the marketing of these shipping lines, renders that to which it is applied as somehow artificial or less real. In due course, that impression, the culture that is created, serves to overwhelm the actuality of the 'object'. This is what French Marxist theorist, Guy Debord, refers to as the 'spectacular society', concerned as it is with the production of illusions and pseudo-forms, a sense of 'counterfeit life'. It perpetuates a state of unreality – 'unlimited artificiality' – whose 'cumulative power...sows everywhere the falsification of social life' (1970, p. 68). The marketing of British shipping lines developed a concentration according to these principles which seems to typify a spirit of postmodernity given that the shipping companies went to great lengths to suggest that their ships were something which they were in actuality not. In effect, this study finds that the efforts of these shipping lines served to effect a blurring between the lines of illusion and

reality, with the ‘real world’ getting lost somewhere along the way within this ‘self-referring “hyperreality”’ (Best, 1994, pp. 41 – 2).

Conclusion

This paper suggests that advertising and marketing which might per se be said to deal in fantasies and artificialities, especially lent itself to the promotion of shipping in the period c.1880 to c.1970 whereby the entire enterprise became overwhelmed in the notion of setting up the ship at sea as a space apart in the realms of ‘hyperreality’. It is found that the language, evocation and general approach typified modern advertising at this time, even stretching into the realms of postmodernity. This is absolutely grounded in the history of the time - not least, the context of those early commercial shipping pioneers who had a very real need, as they perceived it, to convince potential passengers, and passengers themselves, that, in actual fact they were not at sea, going to great lengths to suggest that consumers lost the impression that they were incarcerated within a ship. However, what is revealed is that this did not simply come to an end as the real drive for this approach subsided. Rather this was continued and became further accentuated, even serving the purposes of these shipping lines post-1945 given that they could turn to such tropes to set up an entirely distinctive proposition far removed from what was offered by the competing airlines. The end product of these various activities is to firmly establish ocean travel in the consumer’s mind as offering the promise of a ‘counterfeit life’, allowing passengers to imagine themselves in a different guise and, potentially, engage in transgressive behaviours. The marketing of British shipping lines between c.1880 and c.1970 traded in ‘hyperreality’, firmly establishing the ship at sea as a liminal space.

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