

## HISTORY IN THE MAKING: POSTMODERN MARKETING AND THE RIVERDANCE PHENOMENON

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### ABSTRACT

*History, to some extent, is textually constructed, yet the literary qualities of marketing history have attracted very little attention hitherto. This paper applies postmodern (Bakhtinian) literary theory to the 'text' of Riverdance, a phenomenally successful stage show that employs all manner of historical motifs. Although some purists have been critical of the show's postmodern representation of Irish history, it has succeeded in raising the question of what it means to be Irish in the late-twentieth century. History, after all, is made not discovered and, according to Hobsbawm, cultural artefacts are at the forefront of historical re-making, re-construction and re-invention.*

### INTRODUCTION

Although marketing is generally considered to be an ahistorical - or even anti-historical - domain, where last season's sales promotions are 'old news' and the previous year's pricing policies positively primordial, the study of marketing history has grown rapidly of late. True, the sub-discipline is depressingly tiny compared to the densely populated fields of (say) consumer research or international marketing, not to mention the latest in that long line of 'hot topics', relationships and networks. Nevertheless, the advance of historically-minded marketing scholarship continues apace - and long may it continue.

Few would deny that this encouraging rate of progress is attributable, in no small measure, to the unstinting endeavors of Stanley C. Hollander and his associates, who have instituted and sustained a host of research initiatives: biennial conferences, regular newsletters, special issues of major journals, compilation volumes and so on. However, it cannot be divorced from the overall maturation of the marketing discipline and the 'sense of history' that goes - reification notwithstanding - hand-in-hand with the aging process (e.g. Kerin 1996; Levy 1996; Malhotra 1996). Nor, for that matter, is it unreasonable to suggest that the 'retro' orientation of our present postmodern times, coupled with the 'sense of an ending' that accompanies *fin de siècle*, has contributed to our discipline's growing preparedness to abandon the desiccated dustbowl of marketing future and marketing present for the pastures new of marketing past (Brown *et al* 1996).

Gratifying though the advance of historically-minded marketing scholarship undoubtedly is, the sub-discipline is not above criticism. It is overwhelmingly American in orientation and, judging from the contents of the conference proceedings, appears to be more concerned with the history of marketing thought than the history of marketing practice. These criticisms, admittedly, can hardly be described as critical, since marketing history is no more US-centric than the discipline as a whole (if anything, in fact, it is much more cosmopolitan than the marketing research mainstream) and a preoccupation with theoretical matters seems eminently sensible in a subject area that is not exactly renowned for its conceptual accomplishments.

There is, however, a much more serious charge that can be leveled at the corpus of historical research in marketing, and that concerns what can only be described as its give-me-the-facts ethos. The vast majority of published papers are essentially 'positivistic' in tenor (Jones 1991). Brute empiricism of an historical variety is all-pervasive. Now, this does not mean that marketing historians are hypothesis testers, model builders, Truth seekers or 'number crunchers' of stereotypically positivistic stripe. Quite the reverse. Nor does it imply that marketing historians are unfamiliar with the semi-fictional status of historical 'facts', as it were (in so far as the 'facts' are identified, selected and, in effect, *created* by the researcher). On the contrary, marketing historians are acutely aware of the ultimate, ineradicable subjectivity of the fact gathering and interpretation process. They know only too well that history is, to some extent, *made* not discovered (Nevitt 1991; Smith and Lux 1993).

But, and this is a very big but, it can be contended that whereas marketing historians are cognizant of the 'facts'

component of their give-me-the-facts mentality, they have given very little thought to the 'give' side of the statement. In other words, the fact that the 'facts' are given or presented to the readership in the form of a narrative, a paper, a text, a written document, which is itself a construct, a concoction, a compilation of historical information that is sifted, shaped, structured and set out by the scholar concerned. The 'facts', such as they are, do not 'give' themselves; they are taken, transformed, transcribed and, in effect, 'told' to us. As readers, we are never in full possession of 'the facts', in all their fullness, we make do with mediated facts, filtered facts, textual facts.

Although, as LaCapra (1985) points out, mainstream historians continue to fetishize the archive and consider the discovery of hitherto unknown information (i.e. 'new' facts, which lead to the reinterpretation of past events) to be the absolute acme of scholarly achievement, a small group of historians has sought to examine the essentially literary qualities of historical texts. In a series of magisterial volumes, for example, Hayden White (1973, 1978, 1987) has interrogated the publications of nineteenth-century 'monumental' historians - Ranke, Michelet, Macaulay, Carlyle, Bruckhardt and the like - arguing, after literary theorist Northrop Frye, that these are characterized by four main modes of emplotment: romance, comedy, tragedy and satire. LaCapra (1983, 1985), likewise, has proffered textual interrogations of a wide variety of historical works, ranging from Marx to Ginzburg, and champions the use of more diverse modes of historical literary expression - irony, humor, parody, scatology etc. - rather than the dry, depersonalized, third person, passive voice that has tended to predominate throughout the post-war period. Schama (1992), similarly, has indulged in a number of historico-literary experiments which both draw attention to and blur the supposedly sacrosanct boundaries between known fact and complete fiction. Not everyone, admittedly, endorses this 'postmodern' approach to historiography (see Himmelfarb 1987, 1994; Zagorin 1990), yet there is no question that the writing of history is once again high on the historical agenda (Topolski 1994).

In these circumstances, it is arguable that the time is ripe for literary-minded analyses of marketing history. To some extent, of course, this is already happening. Barbara Stern (1989) has subjected a single, 1929 advertisement for Ivory Soap to a range of contrasting 'readings' from the manifold schools of literary theory - psychoanalytical, reader-response, Marxist and so on - and examined the rise and demise of 50s-style motivation research from a literary perspective. Thompson (1993), furthermore, has offered a hermeneutic deconstruction of the great realism/relativism 'debate' of the middle-to-late 1980s. More significantly perhaps, the Eighth Conference on Historical Research in Marketing included several papers on issues that are demonstrably literary in orientation, most notably the place of metaphor in marketing thought and historical understanding (Jones 1997; Spears and Germain 1997).

Welcome, if somewhat belated, though these latter-day academic endeavors are, it is arguable that much more needs to be done. The purpose of the present paper, therefore, is to contribute to this growing stream of research by means of a Bakhtinian interrogation of *Riverdance*, a postmodern marketing phenomenon that draws heavily upon 'historical' motifs and has been instrumental in the latter-day 'reinvention' of Irish history. There are, of course, many other modes of literary analysis besides Bakhtinian, but Bakhtin has never been meaningfully applied in a marketing context hitherto and, as shall become apparent, his postmodern concepts are particularly pertinent to *Riverdance - The Show*. Thus, the paper commences with an introduction to Bakhtin's life and thought; continues with an consideration of *Riverdance*; turns to a Bakhtinian interpretation of this incredibly successful theatrical production; and concludes with a brief discussion of the relationship between postmodernism, literature and the history of marketing.

#### MIKHAIL BAKHTIN (1895-1975)

If there is such a thing as the postmodern spirit, it is surely embodied by the life of Mikhail Mikhailovitch Bakhtin. The biographical details of this prodigiously talented literary theorist are so incredible that it is hard to believe they are true, the death of the author thesis notwithstanding. For example, at the height of the Siege of Moscow in 1942-3, when cigarette papers were unobtainable, he famously smoked the *only copy* of his manuscript - his masterwork - on the history of the novel! Bakhtin, for good measure, miraculously survived the Stalinist purges; lived and worked in poverty-stricken internal exile, whilst denied access to the bare necessities of academic life; had his PhD dissertation on Rabelais rejected when it was examined in 1946, some ten years after submission; may or may not have been responsible for two seminal books on Marxist literary criticism which were published under the names of his associates P.N. Medvedev and V. Voloshinov in the mid-1920s; and, as if he didn't have enough problems to contend with, Bakhtin had one of his legs amputated when he was in his mid-forties. His work, what is more, was rediscovered, republished and effectively rehabilitated by a group of radical Russian thinkers in the less illiberal 1960s and the man himself was rightly if belatedly lionized when they realized he was still alive! However, perhaps the most poignant event in what was a remarkably eventful life, was the fact that Bakhtin lost

contact with his elder brother, Nikolai, who fought for the White Russians in the post-revolutionary Civil War, subsequently emigrated to England, became a lecturer in Literary Theory and Linguistics at the University of Birmingham and died suddenly in 1950 still believing that Mikhail had been executed some twenty years beforehand.

Mikhail Bakhtin is a very rich, varied and influential literary theorist and aspects of his corpus have been claimed by commentators hailing from all points of the critical compass - formalists, structuralists, marxists, feminists, semiologists, discourse theorists and many more besides (Hirschkop 1989; Lodge 1990; Holquist 1990; Morris 1994; Docker 1994; Dentith 1995). Apart from his preoccupation with *parole* (to employ the Saussurean terminology), as opposed to the *langue* leanings of orthodox structuralists, and life-long concern for the dialogic or polyphonic novel (where the narrator's voice is not privileged but just one among many), Bakhtin is best known for three key concepts: *carnavalesque*, *chronotope* and *heteroglossia*.

Most fully articulated in his book on Rabelais, *carnavalesque* refers to the inversions, transpositions and temporary reversals that characterize the medieval marketplace (Bakhtin 1984). These are locations where fools become wise, kings turn into commoners, the sacred is profaned, authority is subverted, rogues run wild and unmentionable bodily functions are frequently and freely mentioned. They represent, in short, a physical manifestation of the deeply ironic, inherently irreverent outlook that finds expression in the works of a long line of satiric, parodic and erotic novelists such as Cervantes, Swift, Sterne, de Sade, Dickens, Wilde, Joyce and, of late, the postmodernists.

Predicated, in part, upon Einsteinian astro-physics, *chronotope* refers to the manner in which time and space are represented in works of literature. Novels, after all, unfold in imagined, phenomenological worlds where the normal laws of time and space may be suspended, transformed, broken or dissolved, and where the characters may experience time and space in an idiosyncratic, fluid, open-ended, relational or, to introduce an appropriate Nietzschean note, perspectival fashion (Bakhtin 1981b).

In a similar vein, *heteroglossia* pertains to Bakhtin's belief that language is not an abstract and unified system, as traditional Saussurean linguistics suggests. Language, rather, is always in a state of flux, where meanings are never singular or uncontested but plural, debatable, contradictory, open to multiple interpretations, sites of perpetual struggle and prone to periodic revolts against stultifying orthodoxy, standardization, convention and false unity. It is a place where a multiplicity of voices obtain at any one time (Bakhtin 1981a).

#### RIVERDANCE - THE SHOW

By any reckoning, *Riverdance* must rank as one of the most remarkable achievements in the annals of services marketing (Ó'Cinnéide 1995, 1996). It began as a seven minute interlude in the 1994 Eurovision Song Contest - a contemporary celebration of traditional Irish music and dance relayed to an estimated television audience of 300 million - and blossomed into a 98 minute stage show that played to packed houses around the world (400-plus performances and counting); shattered box-office records in every venue bar none; earned approximately \$50 million in ticket sales alone; and transformed its principals, Jean Butler and Michael Flatley, from overnight sensations into international celebrities. The *Riverdance* single spent eighteen weeks at No.1 in the Irish charts (top ten in the UK), the album went double platinum (double gold in Britain), merchandising sales at Radio City Music Hall (NY) comfortably exceeded the previous record set by *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and, incredibly, the video not only outsold Disney's *The Lion King*, but, at 2 million copies purchased to date, is the best-selling music video of all time (Donnelly 1996; Pielou 1996; Quantick 1996).

*Riverdance*, however, is more than a mere example, admittedly a dazzling example, of our postmodern 'society of the spectacle', Debord's (1990, 1994) contention that we live in a world increasingly characterized by a ceaseless parade of incredibly vivid, if fleeting, images, events and occurrences (Venkatesh 1992). It is also a well-nigh perfect example of a postmodern marketing 'product' (see Brown 1995, 1997). Like all services, of course, *Riverdance* only really exists, as it were, in the moment of its production and consumption, and hence the show can legitimately be described as an example of hyperreality. Similarly, the receipts from tie-in merchandise and associated activities (CDs, videos, books etc.) are much greater - in 'authentic' postmodern marketing fashion - than those derived from ticket sales. And, in equally true postmodern marketing fashion, the show has stimulated any number of intertextual allusions and advertising parodies (the most bizarre of which comprised step-dancing teabags). Furthermore, the single biggest setback of the product's otherwise triumphant progress, which involved the forced departure of one of its stars, revolved around the thorny but typically postmodern issue

of *authenticity* (Belk 1990; Stern 1994; Grayson and Shulman 1996). In short, the originality and/or ownership of the always-already-written ideas that form the core of the show (i.e. who actually 'owns' the dance steps? or the Celtic heritage of the story line? or the airs, reels and jigs that inform the musical accompaniment?)

More meaningfully perhaps than its attendant postmodern apparatus, it is the nature and content of the stage-show itself that gives *Riverdance* its overwhelmingly postmodern aspect. According to Banes (1987), there are many forms of 'postmodern' dance - breakaway, analytic, metaphor and metaphysical etc. - but they are as one in their abandonment of the reductionism, minimalization and denial of meaning that typified 'modern' dance. Postmodern dance, rather, is marked by the reintroduction of meaning (in the form of narrative, character and extravagant expression) and characterized by pastiche, playfulness, vernacular and ethnic quotation, theatricality, musicality and, above all, *radical juxtaposition* (see Levin 1990; Brinson 1991; Mackrell 1991; Copeland 1993). All of these distinguishing features are readily discernible in *Riverdance*. The show not only quotes but completely reinterprets the Irish step-dance tradition by introducing flowing movement, choreographed ensemble work, principal dancers and even shafts of amusement into this somewhat rigid, highly formalized, largely anonymous and deadly serious mode of terpsichorean expression. With regard to radical juxtapositions, moreover, *Riverdance* draws freely upon and intermingles a multiplicity of ethnic traditions such as Russian, Scottish, Spanish and American tap, square dance, break-dance and Hollywood musical. The music is equally eclectic with its melange of medieval chant, flamenco, Ole Man River-style basso profundo and Irish traditional music played in the heavily amplified rock 'n' roll manner (complete with solos, call and response, extravagant gestures, flamboyant stagecraft *et al*). The fractured narrative of the show, furthermore, is premised on a highly allusive, dream-like melding of Irish myth, legend and historical events (prehistoric settlement, Cúchulainn, Shivna, famine, emigration), set within an overarching framework of the primordial Great Year (the unending cycle of the heavens and seasons), and, not least, the River of Life as it flows on its journey from source to sea (Campion 1994; Eliade 1996). *Riverdance* thus comprises an evocative postmodern fusion of old and new, past and present, myth and history, east and west, north and south, here and there, us and them, rural and urban, birth and death, war and peace, feast and famine, earth and water, sea and sky, home and away. It has often been described, in that most postmodern of oxymorons, as a 'modern classic'. It is narrowly ethnic yet has managed to transcend national, linguistic, cultural and socio-economic barriers. It is, so the producers maintain, about the roots of all nations finding themselves in dance. It is 'nothing less than the story of humankind' (Brophy 1996, p.7).

## BAKHTINIAN INTERROGATION

### CARNIVALESQUE

Just as *Riverdance* is a supreme example of postmodern marketing practice, so too its text can be treated to a postmodern marketing interrogation in terms of the Bakhtinian concepts carnivalesque, chronotope and heteroglossia. By its very nature, of course, dance is inherently carnivalesque. Not only is it a form of social- and self-expression that has been around since the very dawn of civilization, but it has always been very closely associated with fertility rites, orgiastic behavior, liminality, licentiousness, abandonment, ecstasy and frenzied outpourings of emotion (Sporre 1989; Thomas 1995). True, the pagan, profane, Dionysian side of dance is periodically subject to sacralization, sanctification and Apollonian-style censure - the strictures of St. Augustine, for instance - yet the history of terpsichorean accomplishment reveals that these spells of formalization, standardization and stasis are eventually destroyed by the sudden, explosive irruption of dance's basic instincts (the Ballet Russe controversy at the turn of the present century being just one occasion among many). Thus, it comes as no surprise to discover that *Riverdance* is routinely described in this liberatory, transformational fashion, as a joyful release from stultifying orthodoxy, as a sensuous, sinuous, serpentine antithesis to the stultifying rigidity, formality and angularity of the step-dance tradition, as a return to the 'uninhibited earthiness that must once have been there' (Brophy 1996, p.7).

Indeed, in a remarkably revealing interview with Michael Flatley, a less than enamored (female) reporter states: 'First he wants to talk about sex or dance, how they are the same thing. He wants to know, do I understand masculine and feminine energy? "A man should dance like a man. The energy he creates is a sexual energy: that's what dance is all about. I've discussed this with different people and I don't know why, but sometimes they just don't get it. But the audience understand. That's why they are there." So the Irish dancing phenomenon started by *Riverdance* wasn't about tapping into the zeitgeist, about Flatley's charisma, the whimsically dramatic musical score, the heavenly choir, the roots of all nations finding themselves, or some such rubbish that its producer, Moya Doherty, talked. It wasn't about a dance format available to all body formats. It was about sex.' (Iley 1996, p.32).

At one level, then, *Riverdance* can be regarded as a much-needed carnivalesque cure for Ireland's step dance sclerosis. The show, after all, contains many elements of the carnivalesque, ranging from the covert sexual symbolism that inheres in its celebration of the lunar and the land (Jung 1964; Becker 1994), to scenes which overtly address the voluptuary-cum-bacchanalian-cum-procreative sides of life ('The Heart's Cry', 'Women of Ireland'). In truth, this Rabelaisian spirit is nowhere better illustrated than in the professional spat that led to Michael Flatley's abrupt departure and ensuing Oedipal ambition to oust *Riverdance* with his competing, belligerently entitled production, *Lord of the Dance* (Dougill 1996; Harlow 1996; Tedre 1996). Nevertheless, the possibility must also be entertained that *Riverdance* represents a form of controlled madness, of permitted promiscuity, of Apolline Dionysianism, in so far as it ultimately serves to underpin rather than undermine the powers that be. It is generally acknowledged, for example, that by turning the Irish step-dance tradition on its head, the show has succeeded in stimulating prodigious interest in, and attracting a host of new recruits to, this venerable if hitherto moribund mode of cultural expression (Pielou 1996; Smyth 1996). But, the question has to be asked: will these new recruits be inducted into anything other than the traditional, formal, orthodox style? The answer is probably not and, hence, the aesthetic status quo is not merely reinforced or revitalized - it is redoubled. Likewise, it is noteworthy that audiences invariably remain seated throughout performances of *Riverdance*. Unlike the rock concert format from which the show derives so many of its stylistic motifs, there is no evidence of step dancing, break dancing, idiot dancing or any other type of dancing in the aisles. There is no audience participation. Everything is strictly under control. Subversive? Certainly not!

The controlled decontrol that permeates *Riverdance* is perfectly captured in Iley's (1996, p.32) aside in her above-mentioned interview with Flatley. She responds to his suggestion that the show represents carnality unleashed with the rider that its sexuality is covert, sanitized, unthreatening, acceptable: 'A multi-class version of the Chippendales, suitable for family viewing.' Similarly, the very fact that the President of the Irish Republic - *the* voice of the establishment - can unreservedly recommend *Riverdance* as a 'fresh impetus to the consciousness of our Irish culture...[that]...has brought an uplifting pride to ourselves and friends of Ireland at home and abroad' (Robinson 1996, p.5), confirms that the show does not so much represent an anti-authoritarian release of primal, orgiastic forces, as a mechanism for keeping them under lock and key. Terpsichore in chains.

#### CHRONOTOPE

At the same time, however, the comments of Iley and President Robinson are indicative of, and highly relevant to, the chronotope of *Riverdance*. Despite the fact that the show is patently an act of patriotic boosterism, narcissistic nationalism and ethnic self-glorification, it has proved to be an unalloyed international triumph. It has transcended cultural differences and demonstrably succeeded in countries without obvious Irish connections or substantial communities of expatriates and descendants. With two separate touring companies (and plans for a third), *Riverdance* is rapidly developing into a global brand. It is the Disney, the Diners Club, the Dunkin-Donuts, the Dyno-Rod, the McDonalds of dance. Indeed, by telling us, in effect, to 'think local, act global', *Riverdance* offers an adroit postmodern alternative to the global-local orthodoxy of international marketing (Levitt 1983; Dunning 1993; Ohmae 1990, 1995; Clegg and Gray 1996; Hirst and Thompson 1996).

Although it exemplifies Lyotard's (1984, p.76) description of the postmodern condition - a world where 'one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonalds food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and retro clothes in Hong Kong' - the chronotope of the *Riverdance* phenomenon is not limited to its *siècle* surfing melange of local and global. Nor, for that matter, is it confined to its pre-millennial torsion of mythical Irish past (of heroes and warriors) and equally mythical present (of cultural leviathan). The stage show itself has a very distinctive chronotope, albeit a chronotope that is distinctly indistinct. If we ask when and where the action occurs, no clear-cut answer is forthcoming. *Riverdance* is set in another time and another place that is recognizably Ireland at various points in its history and in various spaces of its geography. But, these settings are filtered through a sort of spatio-temporal haze, a mist of myths, a shimmer of symbols, a cloud of archetype, that gives the show its striking atmosphere of both archaic contemporaneity and transnational parochialism. This sense of distant familiarity is reinforced by the choreography, which is innovative yet orthodox and flowing yet formal, while the music is an extraordinary combination of conventions that can perhaps best be described as ole time rock 'n' reel, rock 'n' canticle, rock 'n' oratorio.

Thus, by drawing upon the primeval concepts of cyclical time, of eternal recurrence, of the Great Year, coupled with the seemingly ubiquitous spatial cycle of nationhood, Diaspora and homecoming, *Riverdance* manages to encapsulate

the universal in the particular, the past in the present, the past as the future, the world in a grain of sand. It provides nothing less than an ephemeral postmodern illumination of Heidegger's *being-in-the-world*, a fleeting glimpse of the fact that we, in our innate *thrown-ness* and state of *inauthenticity*, are as much a part of the world as it is of us. The *Dasein* of dance affords a momentary means of surmounting *gestell*, our technocratic worldview, grants us unmediated, if passing, access to *The One* and thereby enables us to commune temporarily with the transcendental truth of *Being*.

Now, Martin Heidegger may have been something of a brown-shirted tree-hugger, the eco-friendly wing of the Nazi party, a pre-postmodern cross between Greenpeace and the Gestapo, yet his metaphysical ruminations accord, after a fashion, with the truly astonishing outpouring of emotion that greeted the first performance of *Riverdance* during Eurovision. For those in the auditorium, and many more at home, it provided a genuine, tingle-in-the-spine, tears-in-the-eyes, once-in-a-lifetime aesthetic epiphany. At the time, it seemed to be drawing directly from the bottomless artesian well, the irrepressible geyser, of Irish cultural accomplishment and, having done so, not only quenched the unquenchable thirst of the intoxicated audience but soaked it to the seventh skin of the seventh skin and swept the entire Song Contest away in a swirling current of ethnic euphoria. Terpsichore *in excelsis*. Terpsichore *in celtus*.

#### HETEROGLOSSIA

Drenched by the rapturous *Riverdance* downpour, it is all too easy to get caught up in an ersatz hibernian whirlpool; to shoot the white water rapids of sham Irish heritage, to lose oneself in the bogus bayous of the Celtic delta, or, worse still, to attempt to identify the spurious source somewhere in the watersheds of cultural prehistory. A cursory examination of the *Riverdance* phenomenon, however, indicates that there is much more to the show than its ostensibly monoglossian glorification of counterfeit Irish ethnicity (or, indeed, the limitless opportunities it provides for mixing aquatic and acoustic metaphors). On the contrary, a cacophony of competing voices is very clearly audible. There are, for instance, polysemous voices from within the production itself - the demands of the market, the interjections of promoters, the soliloquy of ticket sales, the asides of tie-in merchandise, the rhyming couplets of the press release. It is impossible, moreover, to turn a deaf ear to the unmentionable but nonetheless detectable professional aspirations of the principals, the producers, the musicians, the chorus and the troupe. The stage show, furthermore, endeavors to translate several musical and terpsichorean tongues - Russian, Spanish, American etc. - into pidgin Irish.

Eavesdropping and back-stage gossip aside, it is clear that two of the voices within *Riverdance* are particularly insistent and difficult to ignore. The first of these is the voice of dance itself. Long the thin and intermittent rivulet of Irish culture, seemingly overpowered by a cascade of achievements in the adjacent streams of literature (Joyce, O'Brien, Doyle), drama (Shaw, Beckett, O'Casey), poetry (Yeats, Heaney, Muldoon), music (U2, Morrison, Cranberries) and film (Jordan, Neeson, Brosnan), dance has leapt, in a single fluvial bound - a spring, no less - to the forefront of national aesthetic consciousness. Thanks to *Riverdance*, Irish step dancing is no longer a babbling brook but a raging torrent. It is a raging torrent that has burst its parochial banks and, in a terpsichorean inundation the like of which has not been felt since the (equally ethnic) Ballet Russe of the last *fin de siècle*, the unashamed genre-bending populism of *Riverdance* has succeeded in irrigating the parched floodplains of postmodern dance per se (cf. Joaquín Cortés' subsequent (Wood 1996) Armani-clad, rock 'n' roll-based reinvention of flamenco).

A second and even more emphatic utterance that expresses itself through *Riverdance* is the voice of Ireland, or, rather, the voices of Ireland. Euphonious though the *Riverdance* experience undoubtedly is, the Ireland it articulates is the Ireland of myth, of legend, of half-remembered historical facts. It is the Ireland of the heritage trail, of the tourist trap, of Bloomsday, of Paddy's Day parades, of the *craic*, of a land before time - O'Topia - that never existed and doesn't exist, except in our dreams, travel brochures and, naturally, advertisements for Ballygowan Water, Irish Mist soap, Caffrey's Ale and Lucky Charm breakfast cereal (Kennedy 1996). The Ireland of crime, drugs, delinquency, prostitution, terrorism, urban blight, traffic jams, air pollution, unemployment, homelessness, teenage abortions, child abuse, patriarchy and religious discrimination (and that's just a typical Monday morning) has been silenced, swallowed and scrubbed clean by the melodious, mellifluous, magical waters of *Riverdance*. Granted, the show never quite descends to the priest-ridden, pig-in-the-parlor, shillelagh-wielding, leprechaun-baiting stereotype - though *Lord of the Dance* comes within spitting distance - but it is undoubtedly closer to the Ireland of *The Quiet Man* than the Ireland of *The Commitments*. It is nothing short of astonishing that a society, which has latterly gone out of its way to emphasize its progressive, egalitarian, business-like, ultra-modern, cutting-edge cosmopolitan credentials, should completely capitulate and willingly participate in this communal, pseudo-Celtic regression therapy, at the first sound of the uilleann pipes and the clicking-clacking of the high-heeled shoe.

*Riverdance*, in sum, is a potent, if ultimately parochial, irredeemably philistine and utterly phony celebration of cod-Irish culture. It is hiberno-hokum writ large.

Postmodernists, of course, are perfectly at home with the philistine, the fake, the phony, the pseudo, the kitsch, the ersatz, and if it comes in retro or tribal packaging, so much the better. False consciousness may be alive, well and step dancing at 28 beats to the bar, but does anyone really care anymore, so long as it's a good night out? If *Riverdance* uses the Irish Muse as a shamrock-bedecked ventriloquist's dummy, is it reasonable to expect a Habermasian ideal speech situation, especially when we can't see its lips move? In this respect, it is surely no accident that the original principals of *Riverdance*, Michael Flatley and Jean Butler, are not native-born Irish. They are American-Irish and it is their (mis)perception of Ireland that permeates the show (this is particularly true of Flatley's rival production, *Lord of the Dance*). But what is wrong with that? Irish culture has never been pure; it was largely an invention of the last *fin de siècle*, thanks to Yeats and the nationalist revival (Hobsbawm 1983; Regan 1995; Kiberd 1995; Boyce and O'Day 1996; Foster 1996). In our postmodern world, Irish culture does not and, as a consequence of the imperialistic artistic ambitions that *Riverdance* exemplifies, simply cannot belong to Ireland - nor should it. If someone wants to exploit a 'degraded' version of Irish culture for their commercial purposes, why make a song and dance about it?

## DISCUSSION

Marketing, like all academic disciplines, is a predominantly literary undertaking. Although many scholars like to think of themselves as scientists manqué, the vast bulk of marketing research output consists of works of literature. It comprises words on a page and, for historically-minded scholars in particular, these words on a page (published paper) pertain to other words on a page ('relevant' facts), which are predicated upon yet other words on a page (the archive). The whole process is irredeemably, unalterably textual, yet the essentially 'literary' qualities of academic marketing research have been all-but ignored hitherto. As a consequence, however, of the advent of postmodern perspectives, the sheer textuality of the social sciences - and indeed the physical sciences - is attracting a great deal of academic attention. 'Postmodern', admittedly, is one of those slippery words that everyone has encountered, no-one can adequately explain and seems to refer to everything from an historical epoch to underpinning epistemological assumptions. Nevertheless, it is generally accepted that the postmodern is characterized by its overwhelmingly textual orientation. As Waugh (1992, p.1) rightly observes, 'it carries with it wherever it goes the idea of "telling stories"'.

Despite the recent, rapid growth of marketing history, the sub-discipline has paid very little attention to its inherent literary qualities. The present paper has sought to rectify this shortcoming by means of a Bakhtinian 'reading' of *Riverdance*, a postmodern stage show that has not only proved phenomenally successful from a marketing standpoint but it has raised all sorts of questions concerning the nature of Irish culture, identity and history. Within Ireland, *Riverdance* has been lionized and celebrated, as one might expect, yet it has also been severely criticized by some cultural purists for its debased, stereotyped, historically inaccurate portrayal of Ireland and Irishness. The charge of misrepresentation, of course, is routinely leveled at manifold manifestations of popular culture (most recently, the biopic of 1920s revolutionary-cum-politician, *Michael Collins*). However, it is particularly striking in the case of *Riverdance*, since the attacks of the defenders of the cultural faith presuppose that 'Irishness' is set in stone, that it is a socio-cultural 'given', that there exists, somewhere in the mists of time, an 'authentic', unmediated, unvarnished version of Irish culture. This is simply not the case. Although many people are understandably uncomfortable with the exaggeration, extravagance and sheer intellectual excesses of postmodern analyses, they nonetheless foreground the fact that culture, identity, society and, not least, history are textually mediated, some would say *constructed*. They are fluid, debatable, contested, context dependent and subject to periodic, often radical reinvention. Above all else, *Riverdance* has effectively redefined what it means to be Irish at the *fin de siècle* - like W.B. Yeats one hundred years ago - and it is this reconstruction of Irishness that the purists will doubtless be defending one hundred years from now.

The postmodern, in sum, reminds us of the 'givenness' of historical 'facts' and, in a subdiscipline that has long been dominated by an uncritical, give-me-the-facts mentality, it is arguable that marketing history needs to pay greater attention to the textually constructed nature of the phenomena it seeks to portray. Granted, many academic authorities consider the 'literariness' of postmodernism pretentious at best and pernicious at worst, but it can also be contended that history is not, and never has been, a science and hence the rules of scientific 'method' (whatever that is) do not apply. Just as *Riverdance* triumphantly rewrote the conventions of Irish step dancing, so too it is time for marketing historians to do likewise, to transcend their textual inhibitions and write the disciplinary wrongs that have been perpetrated in the name of marketing

(pseudo)science. *Riverdance* is not simply a metaphor for Ireland at the end of the twentieth century, it is a postmodern model for the pursuit of marketing history.

## CONCLUSION

The sub-field of marketing history has made considerable progress in recent years, but this has been an unselfconscious progress, a progress premised upon an apparent unwillingness to examine the literary character of the marketing history literature. This paper has attempted to foreground the textually mediated nature of marketing understanding by means of a Bakhtinian literary analysis of *Riverdance*, a stage show that draws attention to the malleability of history. While the paper does not claim to offer a comprehensive introduction to Bakhtin, nor to the nature of postmodern marketing, nor indeed to post-historical marketing research, has tried to exemplify, in its quasi-carnavalesque mode of exposition, something of the irreverent, irrepressible, insouciant spirit of postmodernity.

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