The case for culture in business, as clearly and forcefully as I can make it

This is an abbreviation of talk I gave for the design firm Thomas Pigeon in early April.

It puts the “case for culture in business” as forcefully as I can make it. (NB I’m not talking about corporate culture here. I’m talking about culture as in “culture creative.”)

Here’s a summary:

SECTION 1

00:25 capitalism and its creative destruction

00:30 Schumpter
00:54 Alvin Toffler
01:11 Clayton Christensen

01:31 the world is turbulent
…and culture creatives can help

SECTION 2

01:38 strategy struggles

1:44 Peter Schwartz and the corporation in a state of perpetual surprise

1:56 we wake up one morning to discover that our business model can be ripped out from under us
2:00 Michael Raynor and the death of strategy

2:19 Nassim Taleb on black swans and the unimaginable

2:48 these guys are not the least bit defensive (a joke!)

3:07 Andy Grove, here’s how we do strategy now: act like a firehouse

3:24 all that talk of agility is Andy’s firehouse

3:40 strategy is struggling…and we can help

SECTION 3

3:45 corporations and brands are in crisis

3:48 CPG brands especially, all the big brands are down, all of them are struggling to live in this new world

4:00 brands are struggling…and we can help

SECTION 4

4:07 culture to the rescue

this world of commotion gets simpler if you get culture

4:17 getting culture makes the world less “black swany” and less “suprisy”

4:47 we can do better than Andy’s fire house

4:2 culture is the professional competence of the culture creative

4:59 culture is our competitive opportunity

5:02 culture is our difference

5:03 we have always said our difference is creativity and it is but we can’t do great creativity without a connection to culture

creativity requires culture

5:12 creativity that’s not rooted in culture has this calorie-free quality. It’s not lasting, it’s not impactful. It doesn’t really change the brand. It doesn’t really touch the consumer, and it doesn’t really resonate with the culture in place.

5:25 that’s when you know there a cycle here: you’ve drawn from culture buy you’ve created something so good, it’s so powerful, it actually contributes to culture

SECTION 5

5:40 culture is 3 things, meanings, rules and motions

6:20 the difference between Roger A and Roger B
(Roger is a dog, he doesn’t have culture. Roger B is a person, he does.)

7:10 Aspies and culture (making conversation in the elevator)

7:44 three purses, one is a Birkin bag worth $14,000
culture defines how we think about self and the meanings of gender, age, ethnicity, race, and our preoccupation these days with celebrity

and how we think about groups, style, entertainment and communications are all established by culture

SECTION 6

is there a Canadian advantage?
Yes, there is (possibly)
e.g., Michael Ennis, Malcolm Gladwell, Marshall McLuhan

SECTION 7:
the case of the artisanal trend

food after World War II

the rise of prepared food: Cheese Whiz!

the artisanal trend itemized

the artisanal trend created the CPG crisis, it took on prepared food and fast food

and big brands disrupted by the artisanal
Unilever, Nestle's, Coca-Cola, P&G taken by surprise

SECTION 8:
How can we help our clients?

first step: we map culture

culture too often the latest hippest thing, the coastal stuff, the beltway stuff, the elite stuff

the recent error of Democratic party

we want breadth of coverage

we don't want to only listen just to the coasts

second step: choose the meanings (on the map) that really work for the brand?

which meanings work for the consumer

third step: now we build an exquisite brand

fourth step: stage events in the world that create meanings for the world (culturematics: meanings in action)

fifth step: meanings in motion. we have to track meanings, we need to find metrics. the corporation runs on numbers, all numbers are made with numbers. and when we are asked for numbers we just say just trust us, your career will be fine, your kids will go to college, you can trust us, look how hip our glasses our

it's no longer about "refreshing" the brand, we need to be able to show when we want the client to claim this meaning and when to exit the meaning

We are still inclined to step in, offer a big idea and then leave, as if to say "our work is done"

what we need to say is "this is when we want you to get into this cultural moment and this is when we want you to get out"

this is the stuff of an enduring connection with the client
Worlds Atlas: Story telling & world building made easier

“Everyone is talking about story telling, right? This is is what it looks like!”

Sunday, we had the extended family over for Memorial Day festivities.

I called the older kids into the house to listen to Lisa W. talk about a story she is working on.

The kids rewarded me with looks that said, “You don’t really care how nice it is outside, do you?”

But eventually they fell beneath the spell of Lisa’s story.

Then she helped us see how she made the story, how she constructed it out of real and imagined glimpses of 19th century American, rural Georgia, small town Connecticut, aboriginal cultures, and American dictionaries. It’s a hum dinger. (And I will leave it to her to describe more fully. Look for it at a cinema or a streaming media service near you.)

Lisa has been working on this story for a long time. Years. And as I watched the kids watching her, I thought, “What are the chances, with all their school work and their extracurriculars, they are ever going to have enough time to build a narrative world of their own?”

Well, one of them, Andrew, the classicist, has actually written his own language, so apparently some of them have a little extra bandwidth to work with.

But generally speaking, building a world in order to tell a story, this will be a daunting undertaking for all of them. Before they can write a single scene, they will have to summon a vast amount of imaginative material.

Then I thought, “This is what fan fic is for, clearly.” (I am slow to see some things. An internal voice will sometimes intervene, usually witheringly.)

Writing “fan fiction” using something like, say, Elementary or Sherlock as your infrastructure, gives you a lot of imaginative materials: a time (19th century), a place (Victorian London), characters (Sherlock, Watson, Mrs. Hudson), crises, back stories, many transmedia variations on several themes, and so on. The point is this: fan fic means you don’t have to start from zero.

The trouble with fan fic is that it is for some people an all-or-nothing proposition. You take the Sherlock world more or less whole. You are glad to have so much of the world building done for you. But your creative license is perhaps a little limited. You are the captive of a certain “creative momentum,” let’s call it.

Then I thought, “what if we can do better than fan fic? What if there were an atlas that serves as an inventory of imaginative materials with beautifully specified times, places, characters, crises, back stories, etc. These would be more modular, less motivated, than the materials we draw from existing stories. More “Chinese menu,” as the cliche has it.
Let’s say your real dramatic interest, the thing you really want to write about, is characters who are making the transition from small towns to big cities. The “worlds atlas” can give you a range of options (medieval England, imperial Rome, ancient China, etc.) and you can choose. The Atlas will give you the envelope for your story. Not just “medieval England” but the deep historical particulars of town to city transitions in 12th century London. The why, the who and the what.

Or let’s say what interests you is people who are being whipsawed back and forth between competing cultures (official, unofficial, ancient, orthodox, emerging, marginal). *Game of Thrones* gives us a glimpse of this sort of thing occasionally.

Or let’s say you are interested in characters preoccupied with transformation. The worlds atlas would offer up werewolves, vampires, Transformers, and yes Mrs. Hudson. (No, not Mrs. Hudson. Just kidding. Mrs. Hudson is always and inalterably Mrs. Hudson.) The writer can choose from the worlds atlas. The writer can combine.

Something like this might have been the origin of *Being Human*, the TV series undertaken first in the UK and then more memorably in the US. *Being Human* brings together a werewolf, a ghost and a vampire. The results are interesting not least because the “worlds atlas” (let’s pretend there was one) gave three very different creatures preoccupied with transformation and then rinsed away the genre “coating” that normally adheres to them. Liberated from their origins and brought together as roommates in an old house in Boston (aka Montreal), wonderful story telling happens. Some story-telling elements are supplied, but no story-telling option is predictable. And that’s a lovely formulae for the construction of the new popular culture: still accessible but increasingly unpredictable.

The worlds made available in the Atlas still have a certain pre-fab quality. The writer doesn’t have to start from zero. But we have got rid of some of that “creative momentum” that can constrain fan fic. And we have “rinsed” away some of genre constraints as well. The storyteller has greater “executive privilege.” She is taking fewer “notes” from the original creator. She is calling deeper creative shots.

There are risks here. What if the outcome looks mechanical, a little paint-by-numbers? What if the seams show? Well, possibly. But of course gifted people would alter and transform the originals so that their origins went away. They would also bring them into combinations which would have transformative effects of their own. (We should note in passing that rhetorical training in the old liberal arts curriculum routinely asked students to adopt some well known original and then transform it until the original became original.)

I know we are as a culture entranced by the romantic idea that real creativity comes from a single author. But the Worlds Atlas would enable (and
acknowledge) a story telling that comes many sources and a division of labor. Some character development could come from one person. Some dialogue from someone else. The mise en scene from a third party. (This is pretty much how Hollywood storytelling works in any case.) The “writer” is like a show runner, a curator of beautifully wrought materials. (Mark Earls and Faris Yakob have both suggested ways out of conventional ideas of creativity.)

Once there is an Atlas, several possibilities open up.

the atlas economy

And if this is an atlas, it should also be an economy. As every reader of this blog knows too well, we have a crisis of employment at the moment. The problem is that we don’t have a way to pay many of our creators of culture. An Atlass economy could help solve this problem. We don’t just borrow materials. In some cases, we commission them. “Where did you get that village! Unbelievably good.” “Oh, that. That came from Gutfeld. He’s living in Vermont now, so his costs are low and his rates are good. And yes, he’s a big talent. We use him a lot.” Or we come to be seen as especially gifted “show runners” (“show curators?”) and everyone wants to work with us. We will get our name in the credits and some part of the proceeds of the culture content so crafted. Again a lot like Hollywood.

collaborative story telling in real time

Another idea we have about creativity is that it happens somewhere sometime, and comes to the audience only if and when it’s perfect. But an Atlas might open up the possibility of a showrunner who assembles the story in close to real time in an act of literary improv, with meanings flying all over the place before a breathless audience who gasp as the story materializes before them. (There is some small parallel here with the people who know “play” a video game by watching it played in a run-through on YouTube. I watch Uncharted 4 this way. It was mesmerizing.)

a directory for story sources

In a recent blog entry, I looked at the relationship between the show runner, Natalie Chaidez, and world builder Seth Horowitz at Brown, and the collaboration between them that enabled them to create a rich story called Hunters. God knows how Natalie found Seth. It compares to Malcolm Gladwell’s miraculous detection of “research juste” in a university library. The Worlds Atlas could make this easier, so that world builders can search for academics who can help.

There is an anthropology piece here. And I’m sorry to take so long to get to it. Anthropologists are good at the communicative and cultural materials of a world. They can specify rituals, patterned behavior, clothing codes, material culture, style and fashion. They can help you think about those cultural moments when people are being “whipsawed back and forth between competing cultures (official, unofficial, ancient, orthodox, emerging, marginal).” In some cases, they can supply worlds fully built, but not yet occupied for literary purposes.

Take for instance the extraordinary world captured for us by Gordon Mathews in his book Chungking Mansions. I give you the description on Amazon.

There is nowhere else in the world quite like Chungking Mansions, a dilapidated seventeen-story commercial and residential structure in the heart of Hong Kong’s tourist district. A remarkably motley group of people call the building home; Pakistani phone stall operators, Chinese guesthouse workers, Nepalese heroin addicts, Indonesian sex workers, and traders and asylum seekers from all over Asia and Africa live and work there—even backpacking tourists rent rooms. In short, it is possibly the most globalized spot on the planet.

World builders, start your engines. But first call Mr. Mathews. He can help.

Also, come to think of it, call me. I’ve spend the last couple of years looking at how people look at TV and the results are, I think, interesting. The fundamentals of story telling have been transformed. Many of the old rules of culture, the ones that gave us popular culture after World War II, have been systematically rethought. It’s not too much to say that they have changed what a “story” is and what “telling” has to be if it wants to engage an audience. (Here’s the somewhat general view I wrote for Netflix and Wired.)

The Atlas should be an opportunity to contemplate how we want to tell stories, the imaginative grammars that may, and in some cases must, be employed.

inspiration

I remember reading an interview with David Lynch. He was talking about the origins of Blue Velvet. I believe he said that the entire story seemed to him implicit in a particular flower. Sometimes what we need are not the bits and pieces of the story but a sense of a world from which all these details will
then follow. The Atlas could make these available too.

A case in point is the work of Michael Paul Smith who escaped the after-effects of a brutal childhood by building a miniature world called Elgin Park. It's a provocative place, a world well built, and at the moment story free. (Except for the ghosts of Smith's past which flit here and there.) The Worlds Atlas can be a catalogue of frames of mind, sense impressions, and other materials out of which worlds swim.

acknowledgements

Thanks to Jenny Odell for the second image. See more of her magnificent work here.

This essay was first posted on Medium. It has been slightly edited. This is now the definitive version.

apologies

I think Michael Paul Smith's website appears down at the moment. I have left the link in place in the hopes that this gate way to Elgin Park comes back up.

a last thought

I was talking to, Tommy, one of the people who listened to Lisa W.'s spell binding story. We were talking about the courses he plans to take next year at school. I blurted out, “Too bad there’s not a course on world building.” If anyone knows of a course on world building, please let us know below.
Malcolm Gladwell says we need 10,000 hours to get good at something. We pass that figure in childhood.

But of course there is no simple relationship between watching and expertise. “Garbage in, garbage out”, as we used to say. Bad TV is as likely to “dumb us down” as it was to confer more sophisticated taste.

But I think there is some relationship. Unless we were truly brain dead, we couldn’t help noticing how bad TV often was, how wooden the characters, how much screen-time was being devoted to that paean to stupidity, the car chase. In this case, “stupid in” gave us, in some cases, “clever out.”

How many hours did this revelation (the one that said that TV was a little thin) take? Probably more than 10,000. (And of course it would in any case. Gladwell’s figure applies to the pursuit of mastery. Lying in front of a TV does not qualify.) That would be mean we come out of childhood as witless viewers, grateful for pretty much anything that’s on.

It begins with a simple act of noticing. “God, that was a long car chase” would qualify. Or, in the language of family vacation now applied to car chases, “how much longer!” And this is the first act of active viewing. Scrutinizing something we see on the screen. Seeing that something as a choice, a choice made by someone. Seeing the choice as something we might make differently, that we could make better.

This begins as a tiny current of consciousness, a small voice in the back of one’s mind. But eventually there is a kind of acceleration and the viewer shifts more and more from passive to active. We watch enough (and this “enough” might be 10,000 hours, which would make Gladwell’s condition the beginning, not the end of mastery) and at some point, we go “really, that’s it?” And now gradually, we begin to use our cognitive surplus, as Clay Shirky would use the term, to do other things. Now we always see the tedium of the car chase and we begin to use this “interlude” for other acts of noticing and contemplation. “Why do we only see her left profile?” “What is the deal with the way he says ‘immediately’?”

The necessary condition for better TV is in place. Viewers are paying attention. But the sufficient condition is better writers and producers. And this is another story. I think of these people as ham radio operators, desperately pouring a signal into TV land, hoping that someone somewhere will get this subtle bit of dialog. And eventually a signal returns.

Eventually, viewers and these writers find one another and a virtuous cycle is set in motion. A number of shows emerge: Hill Street Blues (1981), Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997), The Wire (2002), Arrested Development (2003). TV gets better and by the turn of the century, writers and viewers have found one another. And now the entire system changes. With better, richer TV in place, someone has probably logged the hours they need for mastery quite early on. But the end of your teens certainly.

Thoughts and comments, please.
Causes of UK chaos

Here is the British Prime Minister on a cause of recent mayhem in Tottenham and elsewhere.

“At the heart of all the violence sits the issue of the street gangs. Territorial, hierarchical and incredibly violent, they are mostly composed of young boys, mainly from dysfunctional homes.

“They earn money through crime, particularly drugs and are bound together by an imposed loyalty to an authoritarian gang leader.

“They have blighted life on their estates with gang on gang murders and unprovoked attacks on innocent bystanders.

“In the last few days there is some evidence that they have been behind the coordination of the attacks on the Police and the looting that has followed.”

I expect Cameron is right about gangs as a cause of chaos. I also suspect that quite ordinary people got caught up in the event. And in this case the PM ought to be talking to Mark Earls.

It may be a two-stage kind of thing. Gangs ignite the occasion, supplying a license for unlicensed behavior and a tipping point. (See Bill Buford’s wonderful book *Thugs* on the first theme, and Malcolm Gladwell on the second.) That’s stage 1. Then comes stage 2, as “ordinary” people find that their moral tolerances and social understandings are suddenly “reset” by what the gangs have done.

I am using a machine metaphor (“reset”) rather than at a viral one (memes, contagion), etc. because the second group, ordinary people, are not in fact “infected.” Which is to say they are not taken by the virus.

They choose to follow the influence of the gang, to give themselves to the moment, and their willingness to follow and to give is itself shaped by social conditions, ideas, movements, in sum, the culture in place at the moment. And that means of course that the PM should be talking to Russell Davies.

Just so long as he knows we have trained professionals standing by.

References


I attended the Advertising Research Foundation meetings today and had a chance to listen to Jeff Bewkes as interviewed on stage by Guy Garcia.

Bewkes is now the CEO of Time Warner, but his remarks were devoted especially to his days at HBO. And well he should. Over the course of 10 years, Bewkes and his colleague Chris Albrecht changed TV extraordinarily. They changed a lot of American cutlure in the process.

So when Bewkes began talking about the HBO program *The Wire*, I leaned in. As did everyone in the audience of 300 people. The oracle was about to speak.

Two things struck me. It sounded as if Bewkes was saying that HBO quite deliberately broke with the rules of mass media. Traditionally, TV shows have proceeded extensively. They seek a nice broad proposition in the hopes of attracting as large an audience as possible. The Wire seemed to proceed intensively. It traded away lots of viewers for a more vivid, visceral relationship with a smaller audience.

Normally, this would look like self indulgence and a kind of ratings suicide, except that something in the world had changed. There was now a new kind of viewer, more mobile, more questing, more prepared to find a show wherever it was and then patient enough to let it build a connection. In this sense, one of the necessary conditions of the rise of HBO was the rise of a new audience out there. Whether anyone at HBO was reading Henry Jenkins was not made clear over the course of the interview, but I must assume someone was.

But then a second, more seditious thought occurred to me. And this was not proposed by Mr. Bewkes, and no one should blame him for my moment of delirium. I thought to myself: listen (I have to get my own attention somehow), this new, more mobile, more literate viewer holds a more revolutionary promise. If and when most viewers are active and engaged in this way, wouldn't this spell the end of influence?

Here's what I was thinking. As and when viewers become more free wheeling, more curious, more prepared to stop in at obscure places and to bear with difficult shows, the "early influencer" matters less and less. Viewers will be possessed of the ability to find their own shows and make their own choices. They will not look to others to identify and vet shows for them. Every viewer, or at least more viewer, would act as "masterless" men and women, making their viewing choices by their own lights.

And this would mark an interesting development in the world of media and marketing. After World War II, the assumption was that in an era of mass media, it was really enough to fill the advertising and production cannons and eventually our messages and show would find their audience. We might emulate those above us in the status hierarchy, but really the very point of the era of mass media was that it was now possible for Hollywood and marketers to make direct contact. But as audiences fragmented, it was increasingly necessary to have some viewers leading other viewers. Someone to play the role of the early adopter. Hence the work of Gladwell and the buzz students. Hence all that talk of activating chains of influence. Early adopters were now key to the viewing community, and increasingly key to the advertising research community.

But this is perhaps a temporary condition. As viewers get better and better, influencers matter less and less. In a weird way, we will return to the world of mass marketing. Not because there are fewer, louder media, but because they viewer is so mobile, so charged with his or her own taste, so motivated by his or her interest in what TV has to offer, that the only person most viewers will be listening to is themselves.

It’s just a thought, really.

Note: This post was lost in the Network Solutions debacle. It was reposted on December 26, 2010.
acuerdo al libro de Malcom Gladwell The Tipping Point (discutido aquí y aquí), los Conectores –la gente con amigos y conocidos en una variedad de mundos sociales – son cruciales en lograr viralizar la información. ¿Pero de dónde sacan esta información? Read more ...

Windigo, Winn Dixie, wrestling, yelling bpritchett.