

In Mel Brooks' Hitchcock spoof of 1977 *High Anxiety*, Madeline Khan plays Victoria Brisbane the neurotic daughter of the wealthy industrialist forcibly incarcerated in the asylum recently taken charge of by Dr Robert Thorndyke.¹ Having arranged to meet Thorndyke, played by Brooks himself, Victoria arrives for their assignation in a customised limousine. The car is decked out in a version of Louis Vuitton's famous brown and gold livery, only the usual LV initial motif has been replaced by the letters VB, the initials of Victoria Brisbane. Not only is the car decked out in this ironic pastiche of the luxury brand, but on getting out of the car we see that Brisbane herself is likewise branded, wearing a trouser suit of a similar pattern, and carrying a clutch bag all in the same VB monogrammed material. Obviously distressed she launches into a diatribe concerning her confused mental state, stating to Thorndyke at one point: *"Oh Richard, Richard!! The world has gone crazy; I mean nothing makes any sense anymore. I don't know what to believe and what not to believe. My life is just all...topsy-turvey...I mean how much more can a girl take? I mean my nerves are...cracking! I feel like I'm going to die! I...I think I'm going to explode!!!"*² This construction of self as luxury brand is a visual gag typically pushed to the limit by Brooks, so that the audience observes her elsewhere in the film accessorised with the obligatory monogrammed bag, and playing with a VB teddy bear in a spoof phone sex scene.



High Anxiety dir. Mel Brooks 1977

Whilst the scene is obviously played for laughs, Brisbane's neurotic state and her sublimation into the brand of VB befits the pseudo-psychological theme of the film and its parody of the most extreme examples of Hitchcock's psychologically motivated suspense films. The psychologist Dr. Robert Thorndyke, struggles throughout the film to free himself from a morass of multiple and mistaken identities, whereas Brisbane asserts her identity in the most explicit manner possible, by branding herself publically via her dress and possessions.

Walter Benjamin famously defined his methodology with the following definition: *"...to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total*

event.”, similarly this comedic fragment seems both scathingly perceptive and prophetic if viewed from the contemporary landscape of luxury brand pre-eminence and is a fitting visual distillation of the principal subject of this paper.³

The relationship between the consumer and the brand is one that is currently much under scrutiny, our apparently insatiable desire for luxury branded items has been seen as symptomatic of society’s increasingly ostentatious, materialistic and celebrity driven means of affirmation. In short the fully developed expression of Veblen’s notion of conspicuous consumption.⁴ Brisbane’s branding can be understood as symptomatic of the contemporary consumer for whom the appeal of brands and their acquisition is fundamental and where: “*The product is promoted as a 'sign of me' – a signal to others of our status, aspiration or personal values*”.⁵ Today the concept of the brand and branding is a self perpetuating phenomenon, encompassing exhaustive critical, economic and sociological surveys of what is readily understood to be part of our contemporary global condition. Terms such as brand management, brand leaders, brandscapes and so on have become everyday parlance, and every conceivable consumer product, geographical locale and way of living is subject to the processes of branding.

When faced with the 21st century marketing of global brand juggernauts such as Louis Vuitton or Nike, earlier critiques of consumer society that exposed the ideological apparatus fundamental to the success of consumerism seem innocuous, perhaps even naive. Roland Barthes’ discussion of a product such as the new Citroën laid bare the considerable arsenal of myth and illusion deployed to market a 1960s automobile, and artists such as Rosemarie Trockel’s deployment of corporate logos and Hans Haacke’s interrogation of the shared discourse underpinning the political and cultural institutions of the 70s and 80s constituted an early critique of the seduction of branding.⁶ But faced with the sophisticated techniques of today’s marketing teams ideological attacks such as these appear ineffectual against the pristine, crafted armour of contemporary luxury brands. The dazzling conflation of sophisticated marketing strategies, celebrity culture and eco awareness employed in Vuitton’s latest campaign seems simultaneously irresistible, unassailable and abhorrent. For their 2011 ‘*Core Values*’ campaign Angelina Jolie has been filmed apparently un-groomed walking through a Cambodian jungle, experiencing the sights and sounds of temple bells and happy children’s voices. Pietro Beccari, vice president of Vuitton, told WWD magazine: “*People are not used to seeing Angelina in this situation...*”⁷ Maybe not, but those followers of celebrity lifestyle would of course be aware that Jolie first visited Cambodia in 2000 and adopted her first child Maddox, from the country in 2002, and so perhaps Beccari is being somewhat disingenuous. Other images of Jolie shot by celebrity photographer Annie Leibowitz for the campaign in a boat accompanied by her old, and unfortunately no longer available Vuitton *Alto* bag seem to undermine Beccari’s statement concerning his admiration for the campaign: “*I like the fact that it’s a real moment.*”⁸ What all this has to do with ‘core values’ is anybody’s guess and the campaign could arguably be as much about the acquisition of objects, be they expensive hand bags or adopted children, as about ethical consumerism and ecology.

In terms of contemporary manufacture and marketing a brand's primary function is to create a set of associations and therefore desirability for a product in the consumer's mind. This is done through a variety of means, most typically advertising campaigns. Branding in order to be successful must differentiate the products it represents forcefully enough for consumers to be able to distinguish them from others. It must also encourage brand loyalty, whereby a customer will continue to purchase the brand thus ensuring its continued economic success within its given market place. Returning to Roland Barthes in his celebrated work *Mythologies* he discusses the Citroën DS 19 as:

...fallen from the sky in as much as it appears at first sight as a superlative object. We must not forget that an object is the best messenger of a world above that of nature: one can easily see in an object at once a perfection and an absence of origin, a closure and a brilliance, a transformation of life into matter (matter is much more magical than life), and in a word a silence which belongs to the realm of fairy-tales.⁹

This supernatural quality of perfection, of something that exists without prior knowledge of its making, of just being, is the crux of how branding functions. For all of the pedigree and manufacturing heritage that luxury brands such as Vuitton invoke in their campaigns, their products' ability to just be, or '*just do it*' to borrow Nike's famous slogan, allows the consumer to project and participate in any number of fantasies that purchasing the object will bring. Whether that be beauty, admiration, sexual desirability, sophistication, taste, the list of illusions is endless and can be altered to fit the latest shift in public desire (a '*simple*', '*sustainable*' lifestyle if we follow Angelina Jolie's Cambodian awakening). But of course all that we actually purchase are a few bits of stitched leather, some chemicals and water in a bottle or moulded metal and computer chips.

So if branding serves to manufacture and sell the impossible and unreal, it's other function to individuate and set apart from the rest is perhaps easier to comprehend. In a simpler era luxury goods meant just that; goods that were affordable by a few, and therefore signified economic superiority, familiarity with, and understanding of, the brand's 'values'; craftsmanship, quality, permanence etc. Values that make Vuitton, for example, the luggage of choice for Audrey Hepburn, (dressed by Givenchy, of course) playing the recently widowed Regina Lampert, in the 1963 film *Charade*.¹⁰ On returning from her skiing trip, Regina, replete with a full set of Vuitton luggage, finds her apartment emptied of all possessions by her errant, deceased husband. The luggage takes centre stage in the empty apartment and the viewer is reminded that perhaps all a lady of Regina/Hepburn's taste and status needs in life is Vuitton luggage stuffed with Givenchy, as she declares to Cary Grant (her co-star) on asking where everything has gone: "*Charles sold it all at auction – this is all I have left!*".¹¹ Given that supposedly the only possessions she has left are what she has in the luggage, she manages to appear throughout the film in a seemingly endless supply of couture outfits. Is this a testament to the tardis-like capacity and magical bounties a brand such as Vuitton can bestow? Perhaps we can understand this scene in the context of early luxury brand product placement, from a time when the 'brand message' was both more direct and uncomplicated.



Charade dir. Stanley Donen 1963

However, in the contemporary terrain of global brand saturation, in order to maintain their market share luxury brands such as Vuitton have to differentiate themselves not only from their rivals' products and reinforce their brand heritage, but also to create internal levels of differentiation. A development that has created what can be understood as strata of exclusivity; in the case of Vuitton this commences with the widely affordable wallet, progresses to the classic Vuitton bag and finally onto seasonal variations and limited editions - Vuitton and similar brands have entry levels for all stages of luxury consumption. But even objects of fashionable desire such as the Stephen Sprouse or Takashi Murakami bags for Vuitton, begin to lose their mythic status due to the inevitable production of further '*limited*' editions and revivals, and what was initially exclusive becomes ubiquitous as a result of the inexorable advance of the brand. And so, perversely, the only way to differentiate oneself from other Vuitton consumers is by displaying the longevity of one's brand loyalty, and refrain from buying the latest product, hence Jolie's '*old bag*'. But this of course is dangerous territory and can only be sanctioned within highly specialised promotions such as the '*core values*' campaign; otherwise the brand may find itself encouraging the unthinkable; the short-circuiting of consumerism.

It is over ten years since Naomi Klein raised popular awareness of the global brandscape and its emergent opponents in her book *No Logo*¹², and since then we have witnessed, in clothing at least, parallel consumer responses to branding. Whilst labels such as Vuitton employ ever more sophisticated strategies to guard the boundaries of their particular brandscapes for fear that their message be misinterpreted (including their notorious cultural policing of any art works that they deem to be off message), they also expend considerable effort in assessing and accurately gauging the public response to issues such as sustainability and then appropriating these concerns as marketing tools. Meanwhile fashion conscious consumers increasingly look elsewhere for ways to '*brand*' themselves as individual and possessing their own '*style*', which surely accounts for the recent ascendancy of what is known as '*vintage*'. Second-hand, retro, or vintage clothing delivers the key attributes of tradition, quality, and longevity essential to any successful brand, but without the commercial ubiquity and

corporate cynicism of the contemporary luxury superbrand. Of course the demand for vintage is in itself merely a response to a modified form of branding, and what ‘*vintage*’ has now come to mean is any garment or accessory that is not currently in production, its actual age is increasingly secondary or meaningless, what matters is that it has been bought *as vintage*. Angela McRobbie noted: “*While fashion currently trades on the nostalgia boom, it also, more specifically, reworks the already recycled goods found in the street markets. It produces new and much more expensive versions of these originals in often poor quality fabrics and attempts to sell these styles, on an unprecedented scale, to a wider section of the population than those who wander round the ragmarkets.*”¹³ Little seems to have changed since this was written in 1989, except for the growing trend for outlets to dispense with copying the original at all, instead we now have major retailers selling vintage at vastly inflated prices alongside their new collections. Vintage clothing, for want of a better term, however brings us to the main subject of this paper, namely how an earlier manifestation of personalised branding in the form of the mid 20th century fashion for monogrammed clothing, in particular its deployment in popular cinema of the time, can help us understand the essentially fictive nature of contemporary branding.

The level of complexity that characterises the contemporary understanding of branding seems at variance with the relatively straightforward act of displaying one’s identity or sense of self by wearing initialled or monogrammed clothing and accessories. Here the brand or rather monogram would appear to merely be a sign of the wearer; their name abbreviated to initials and then used to ‘brand’ possessions as personal belongings. The use of initials and monograms in film however, invariably subverts their accepted function which is to proclaim the identity of the wearer, and ironically, often demarcates the terrain of *false* identity. The aspirations and desires encouraged in the consumer of luxury brands which is made explicit in contemporary advertising are, on film, veiled, camouflaged and used almost as a form of cinematic vestimentary sleight of hand, where the viewer’s recognition of the ‘brand’, in this case the character on screen, is misdirected. In the discussion of the films *Leave Her to Heaven*, *Whirlpool* and *Rebecca* that follows, it can be seen that mid-twentieth century cinematic branding in the guise of monogrammed costumes and accessories constructs ‘*a sign of me*’, but one that is rarely singular, and is often finally revealed as bogus, signalling the absence of self.¹⁴

Adding initials or monograms to clothing is on one level an immediate, simple and relatively inexpensive way of individualising clothing, adding a certain level of prestige and exclusivity, making a simple garment one’s own etc., and of course this is not too far removed from classic definitions of the function of branding. Why the need to establish and display identity became so prevalent in the period under discussion can perhaps be explained by the general feeling of insecurity and instability sweeping Europe and North America at this time. The Second World War had the effect of literally erasing identities, as the general awareness of global instability increased in the run up to 1939, and then during, and immediately after the conflict ceased the old understanding of one’s position in society and sense of self could no longer be taken as fixed and unchanging.



Tweed jackets with gold embroidered monograms designed by Rahvis, 1941.

As is well known fashions in clothing reflect and translate into cloth major socio-cultural and economic shifts and the use of monograms as a way of reasserting a sense of personal stability in times of war can be clearly contextualised within this phenomenon. This desire for marking and establishing the self via monogrammed clothing and accessories was built on a legacy of personalised possessions as the sign of aspirational intent derived from the aristocratic tradition of displaying coats of arms and similar devices on everything from buildings to clothing. Interestingly Vuitton's famous interlinked L and V and the other symbols that make up its distinctive brown and gold livery are derived from just such an ancient armorial system; the Japanese *mon*, similar to the European heraldic tradition.

Cinema's use of the monogram is closer; however, to the historical understanding of the verb *to brand*, that is to indelibly mark the flesh, most typically with a hot iron of some sort, as the property of another. One only has to consult the dictionary to grasp how complete the etymological shift has been when the largely 16th century definitions of branding such as: '*burning*', '*the mark made by burning with a hot iron*', '*to mark indelibly*,' '*to stamp with infamy*', '*to cauterize*' etc. employ a distinctly corporeal discourse, and it is not until the 19th century that we begin to note definitions such as '*a trade mark*', '*a class of goods*', '*a sign of quality*' which have a decidedly more commercial and manufacturing implication.¹⁵ It is this earlier function of branding that can, ironically assist in an understanding of the contemporary globalisation of the branded body.

In *Leave Her to Heaven* Gene Tierney plays the father-obsessed, pathologically jealous Ellen Berent, and her extreme possessiveness, violent mood swings and ultimately psychopathic behaviour are cloaked within the startlingly fashionable wardrobe Kay Nelson designed for the film.¹⁶ Released in 1945 the designs reflect and incorporate many of the elements of

American post-war fashion; immaculate tailoring, padded shoulders, trouser or play suits and the aforementioned emphasis on monogrammed clothing and accessories. After accidentally meeting her future husband Richard Harland played by Cornel Wilde, Ellen Berent finds that he is also staying at the same ranch in New Mexico where she and her family are vacationing. Ellen's extreme temperament is swiftly established as we learn of her unhealthy adoration for her late father (whose ashes she has come to the ranch to scatter), and her immediate attraction for Harland is explained as she tries to convince her mother and adopted sister of his uncanny resemblance to her deceased father. Given Ellen's extreme sense of filial devotion, it is unsurprising that one of the first outfits we see her in is a white, play or lounge suit embellished with the initials E B in cut work across her throat and chest. Ellen's clothes throughout the film, typically consist of robes, negligees, beach wraps and pyjamas, or verge on fancy dress such as the newly-wed, dutiful wife in kitchen florals, or pseudo cowgirl outfit worn at Harland's ranch. These designs emphasise her immature, unformed sense of self, a semi-dressed, unprepared incomplete self that must be labelled and marked; a self only completed by others, firstly her father and then by Harland.



Leave Her to Heaven, dir. John M. Stahl, 1945

What is interesting to consider is, that on closer observation, the cut work monogram on Ellen's suit appears to consist of the capital letters E and B for Ellen Berent, flanking a smaller, somewhat indistinct H. This of course could merely be coincidental and formed as a result of supporting areas of cutwork necessary for the whole monogram to maintain its shape, but this nascent H can also be construed as being more prophetic and revelatory. Ellen wears this outfit in the scene where she casually jilts her long term fiancé Russell Quinton, played by Vincent Price, and dramatically and without warning or consultation with Harland, announces her engagement and intention to marry him instead. The extent of Ellen's ruthlessness and determination to have what she wants is revealed in its true form for the first time in this scene, and ironically it is whilst her pedigree is emblazoned, or branded across

her chest, her true intent to become Mrs Harland is signalled. Whilst she purports to be the grieving Berent daughter her actual desire to be Mrs Harland is inadvertently presaged by this indeterminate monogram and like Hester Prynne's adulterous A in Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter*, Ellen's scheming nature is betrayed by this fashionable 1940s device. Further evidence of Ellen's overweening and threatening character is discovered later when, still wearing the prophetic monogram, and after giving Harland a passionate kiss vows that: "And I'll never let you go, never...never...never..."¹⁷

We next see the monogrammed Ellen sometime later in the film; she is now Mrs Harland and dressed in initialled silk satin pyjamas, she reveals to her new husband the true extent of her pathological jealousy, specifically as it is directed towards her adopted sister Ruth. On accusing Harland of being in love with Ruth, he asks: "What's happened to you? You're deliberately whipping yourself into a fit of hysterics", at which he sees her mood abruptly change from petulance to contrition, and as she breaks down sobbing into his lap she confesses: "I don't know! I don't know!" Moments later as he raises her up the viewer's attention is directed to the monogram on her breast as her mood changes yet again to the seductive Ellen defined by her obsession for Harland as she tells him whilst passionately embracing him: "Darling forgive me! I'm sorry, it's only because I love you so! I love you so I can't bear to share you with anybody!"¹⁸



Leave Her to Heaven

The monogram on Ellen's pyjamas in this scene follows the conventional layout of traditional monograms; that is the person's first name on the left, their maiden name (in the case of a woman) on the right, and central and larger, the new married family name, in this case H for Harland. Her new married status has supplanted her old familial name, but in both cases Ellen is defined monogramatically by men; her father and husband, a veneer of correctness suitable to a dutiful daughter and wife, but as the film audience is beginning to see ever more clearly, these identities are extremely fragile and Ellen is constituted by a number of other, more problematic personalities that periodically break through this exterior of familial and matrimonial correctness.

Ellen once again is ‘branded’ for the most crucial scenes of the entire film, and wears a remarkable camel and white dressing gown, with puritanical collar and neck tie. The 1940s vogue for elaborate necklines on clothing is here used to good effect, transforming Ellen into a form of domestic, feminised pilgrim father, an effective contrast to her true, possibly Satanic intentions. Her outfit whilst styled for sanctity betrays her true nature via the attention placed on yet another embroidered monogram positioned centrally on the front of the robe’s bodice, however, this time the monogram is distorted and more schematic, the individual letters EHB harder to make out and suggesting when viewed in its entirety a large letter B. The monogram acts as a sign of Ellen’s increasingly fragile grip on reality and her growing self-destructive tendencies. In the scene we learn that now pregnant with Harland’s child she has knowingly eaten shrimps, (which she is allergic to) and is reprimanded by her doctor for not taking proper care of herself. Of course Ellen sees the unborn child as a potential threat to her complete possession of Harland’s love and cannot contain the revulsion she feels for her condition, shocking the angelic Ruth when she says: “*Look at me!...I hate the little beast! I wish I would die!*” and as the camera in a close up on Ellen places the monogram centre screen continues: “*Richard and I never needed anything else.*”¹⁹



Leave Her to Heaven

Ellen’s Salem-inspired outfit is put to good effect, where in the scene prior to her confession to Ruth, we see her observing Ruth and Richard returning from a shopping expedition armed with packages of baby clothes, when due to a sudden gust of wind (or Ellen’s supernatural powers perhaps?) the boxes blow open and the baby clothes are scattered to the wind. This symbolic loss of the future fruit of Ellen’s womb is actualised in the ensuing scenes where, still wearing the satanic robe, she plots the unborn child’s abortion, by constructing her ‘accidental’ fall down the stairs, resulting in the loss of the baby and Ellen’s miraculous survival apparently unscathed. Is the indecipherability of the monogram she wears on her gown an indication of the incomprehensibility of her actions perhaps, or is the apparent

ascendancy of the letter B, and therefore her branding as virginal daughter once again, a sign of her psychological regression away from adulthood, and by implication motherhood and back to a child like state; a state that befits the majority of her screen appearances once she marries Harland? As Mrs Harland she tends to wear outfits that signify either the preparatory stages of dressing; negligees, passive occupations such as sleep and enforced rest; pyjamas, or leisure activities; beach robes and so on, rather than as a fully dressed, mature woman (it is perhaps significant that throughout the film Ellen does not appear in evening dress, when most productions from this period and genre scripted opportunities to clothe their female leads in glamorous evening gowns). What Ellen's monograms signify is necessarily complex and runs counter to her easy consumption as a 'brand', at any given time she is perceived as unhealthily father-obsessed, pathologically jealous, child-like, seductive, deadly, self-destructive, sadistic the list seems endless and one is reminded of the bewilderment expressed by the narrator of *The Scarlet Letter* when he makes his discovery at the beginning of the novel of the curious letter A: "*It had been intended, there could be no doubt, as an ornamental article of dress; but how it was to be worn, or what rank, honour and dignity in by-past times were signified by it, was a riddle which (so evanescent are the fashions of the world in these particulars) I saw little hope of solving.*"²⁰



Leave Her to Heaven

For the final scenes of *Leave Her to Heaven* Ellen reappears in the pyjamas she has worn earlier for what is to be her ultimate act of calculated destruction, the plotting of her own poisoning and the planting of evidence so that Ruth and Richard are blamed and erroneously brought to justice for her death. The viewer witnesses her clad in the pyjamas that mark her as the dutiful, loving wife writing to her jilted fiancée, now district attorney, of her suspicions, selecting poison from the stock of her father's laboratory, and most significantly for this exploration of psychological branding, planting the poison in Ruth's bathroom. It is in this scene that we see the full dysfunctional extent of Ellen's love for monograms, as clad in the pyjamas she plots not only her own destruction but that of her husband and Ruth,

substituting Ruth's bath salts for the poison which she will knowingly ingest, so that later after her death they will be discovered and Ruth implicated. As Ellen switches the contents of the jars the camera shot includes in the background a pair of towels clearly embroidered with the word RUTH. The shot acts almost as a lesson in positive branding, contrasting the hopelessly chaotic and negative branding of Ellen, with the clear and straightforward display of RUTH as the brand that means clarity, straightforwardness, honesty and most of all autonomy signalled by the use of her first name only, no family name, (she is adopted and therefore belongs to no one and is nameless in that sense). Ruth is a complete person unlike the multiple personalities of Ellen that ultimately are never united and lead to the eradication of self and non-existence - the antithesis of the function of the brand.

Just four years later Gene Tierney appeared as another branded, psychologically unbalanced heroine, in the film *Whirlpool*.²¹ Directed in 1949 by Otto Preminger, it tells the story of Ann Sutton, who at the beginning of the film we see stealing a brooch from a department store. Married to a successful psychoanalyst she obviously could afford the brooch and so the viewer quickly realises that she is in fact a kleptomaniac, just one facet of her overall mental instability. Unlike Ellen in *Leave Her to Heaven*, however, she dispenses with initials and projects her identity more directly, using her first name Ann to brand her clothing.



Whirlpool, dir. Otto Preminger, 1949

Later in the film we are presented with Ann in a towelling robe embroidered with her name, an apparently straightforward assertion of her sense of self, but it is whilst wearing this robe that she receives a phone call from a quack hypnotherapist who came to her aid when accused of shoplifting. The cleanliness and psychological security suggested by the embroidered bath robe is immediately called into question as she swiftly realises that Korvo the therapist is attempting to blackmail her, and the compartmentalisation of her different persona including that of the kleptomaniac is about to stain her unblemished character as the beautiful wife of the successful psychiatrist. As it transpires Korvo has even more sinister motives than blackmail on his mind, and it is via another branded accessory that he attempts to implicate the bewildered and semi-hypnotised Ann into confessing to murder. By planting both the

brooch we have witnessed her stealing at the beginning of the film and a silk scarf embroidered with her name at the scene of the crime, Korvo successfully makes Ann the chief suspect, and at the police station she is at a loss to explain how these identifying marks, that add up to Ann Sutton came to be found next to the murder victim.



Mommie Dearest, 1981, dir. Frank Perry

Interestingly the visual equivalence between outward cleanliness and inner pollution was reworked in the notorious biopic of another famous forties film star; Joan Crawford, who frequently appeared in monogrammed outfits both in her on screen roles and in her private life, and did much to popularise the fashion amongst her adoring fan base. In the 1981 film *Mommie Dearest*, Faye Dunaway plays Joan Crawford and the film takes great delight in depicting the film star's obsession with personal appearance and her punishing cleansing and beauty regime.²² As is well known and caricatured in the film Crawford's pristine, fashionable exterior hid a decidedly cold and ruthless persona, and it is worth noting that initials are used as opposed to her full name in this instance for a film that is determined to cast its central character in the role of a sadistic monster.

The apparent innocence of displaying one's complete first name, as on Ann Sutton's robe in *Whirlpool*, is reserved it seems for characters, who although psychologically unstable are victims as opposed to aggressors, but cinematic psychological characterisation via the use of personalised, branded clothing is as complex as the motivations that inspire contemporary devotees of luxury branding. Can we be certain that the J C on Dunaway/Crawford's robe is the sign of the movie star, the fiction created by the studio system? After all Crawford was named by readers of *Movie Weekly* and changed her name from Lucille Fay LeSueur, and as such is a complete construct both on and off the screen. Therefore if J C represents sadistic child beating monster in *Mommie Dearest* (and according to the autobiography written by her adopted daughter Christina, also in real life), it is surely just another persona. A persona as convincing, but as easily assumed as J C the proto-feminist, self-promoting actress who knew how to play the studio system at its own male-dominated game, or J C the long suffering

heroine of arguably her most successful film, *Mildred Pierce*. Branding is after all about the assumption of identity, the wrapping of an individual psyche in the collective recognition (or like Ann Sutton in *Whirlpool*, hypnosis), bought on by the sight of interlinked Cs or overlapping Ls and Vs. Hollywood film, particularly of the mid-twentieth century and its reflection of the then current vogue for personalised clothing and accessories provides a rich and intricate visual dictionary with which to decode our contemporary brand and celebrity infatuated zeitgeist.

It is perhaps inevitable and appropriate, given that it began with Mel Brook's spoof, *High Anxiety* that this paper concludes with a consideration of Alfred Hitchcock's use of the monogram and personalised accessory. The ability to signal, or more typically misdirect, the audience into attaching certain behaviours or possible psychological motivation to characters by means of visual clues is, of course one of the most celebrated hallmarks of Hitchcock's style. The opportunity presented by the fashion for personalised clothing provides the perfect vehicle for the visual set pieces that condense complex narrative into images and that typify his films of the 1940s and 50s. In *Strangers on a Train*, Hitchcock characteristically overturns the convention concerning the use of monograms to signify an untrustworthy character, such as Ellen in *Leave Her to Heaven*, or the full name to identify innocent characters such as Ruth also in *Leave Her to Heaven*, and Ann in *Whirlpool*.²³ When the tennis playing hero Guy Haines first encounters the psychotic Bruno in *Strangers on a Train*, the audience could be forgiven for understanding Bruno's rather outré tie clip that spells out his name, as a rather ill-advised piece of personal accessorising, that along with his Surrealist-inspired lobster print tie depicts Bruno as flashy, loud and a bit behind the times (the film was released in 1951 when the vogue for personalised details such as his tie clip were giving away to a somewhat more reserved style in menswear typified by the clean cut Guy).

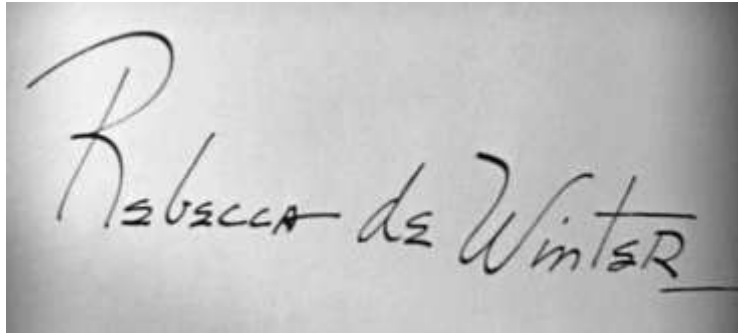


Strangers on a Train, 1951 dir. Alfred Hitchcock

But Bruno is of course a fully fledged sociopath and nascent serial killer, as obsessed by his imagined friendship with Guy as Ellen is for her father and husband in *Leave Her to Heaven*, both characters more than ready to kill to prove their love. With Bruno there is no hiding behind the initials of a family name, after all he despises his father, and so one could argue his tie clip signals his denial of paternity and declares the bi-polar personality that is Bruno. This blatant promotion of the Bruno brand is of course too distinctive for his most sociopathic acts; the killing of Guy's wife, or attempted framing and destruction of Guy at the fairground dénouement of the film, and more typically uses the display of his conspicuous tie clip to instil fear and apprehension, such as when Guy's fiancée first sees him at the tennis club and then later at the Washington museum.

But of course no discussion of personalised branding in film would be complete without the branding tour de force that is *Rebecca*.²⁴ In fact Rebecca's various plot and character developments are signalled by a visual underscoring of the importance of initials and monograms as the brand of absence and aspirational distance. If Ellen's branding as loving wife and dutiful daughter in *Leave Her to Heaven* is ultimately unsuccessful or more accurately unstable, the brand that is Rebecca is so powerful that it can be likened to today's superbrands. The Rebecca brand, as with a Vuitton, Chanel or Hermès for example, is so established that its consumers are indelibly marked and thus identified with the brand, leaving no room for self expression or interpretation beyond the brand's universally acknowledged significance and established image. In the film the sudden appointment of the nameless young girl played by Joan Fontaine as the 'new face' of Rebecca the brand, social hostess of Manderley and wife of Maxim de Winter is breaking all the laws of branding, alienating customers and in danger of making the brand itself meaningless. Her attempts to 'wear' the brand are doomed to failure, she has neither the social standing, nor sophistication or maturity to make it her own, and any attempts to do so are met with condescending amusement or incomprehensibility.

Of course in the real world luxury superbrands target all social and economic strata of society and the aspirational myths promulgated by a brand often find unlikely consumers. Indeed no brand today, however exclusive in terms of price tag can afford to ignore its customers wherever they might hail from socially. But in the fictitious class-ridden world of 1940s England seen through the lens of Hollywood, no such democratic customer base is to be found and the function of brands such as Rebecca, to paraphrase Pierre Bourdieu's statement concerning cultural institutions: "... is to reinforce for some the feeling of belonging and for others the feeling of exclusion."²⁵ For the unnamed, unbranded girl who comes to Manderley as the new Mrs de Winter her feeling of exclusion is essential for the development of the plot and the unattainable status of Rebecca, render the brand ultimately dysfunctional and doomed to obsolescence.



Rebecca, 1940, dir. Alfred Hitchcock

From the beginning credits of *Rebecca* we are made aware as viewers, even if we are unfamiliar with the plot, that Rebecca is a concept, rather than a flesh and blood character. The name signifies, style, breeding, sophistication, individuality and so forth, the very qualities most contemporary luxury brands attempt to promote themselves as enshrining, and like today's brand Rebecca itself has an essential graphic identity. The viewer is presented with her signature as the opening title frame, but this is no conventional signature, both the first and last letters are capitalised R and A, and as we witness later in the film, this graphic device is carried forward onto her married name; de Winter with a capital W and R. With her own handwriting transformed into a graphic device for the brand, there follows in quick succession once the audience is transplanted to Manderley an array of graphic variations on the house style, from conventional monograms, to singular Rs, the brand demarcates the physical and psychological territories of Manderley and its inhabitants to saturation point.

The contact with the more intimate of Rebecca's branded possessions is played out in the celebrated scenes where Danvers, the adoring housekeeper, shows the girl Rebecca's bed and dressing rooms and her personal possessions. As Danvers forces the girl into physical contact with Rebecca's things; rubbing her cheek against the fur coat Maxim gave her as a Christmas present, displaying Rebecca's underwear: "*Made especially for her by the nuns of the Convent of St Clare...*" and so on, the housekeeper takes on the role of a vendeuse from a fashion house, (her demure black dress with white collar and cuffs is not unlike the typical uniform of a Parisian saleswoman) 'pushing' the brand onto her next potential client. Danvers leaves the pièce de résistance to last, proudly declaring: "*I embroidered this case for her myself*" as she opens the monogrammed case and displays Rebecca's diaphanous negligee seductively asking the girl: "*Did you ever see anything so delicate?*"²⁶ This presentation of the brand and the impossible standards it sets proves too much for the girl who flees Rebecca's bedroom, or perhaps we can regard it as a 'saleroom', distraught.

But the impossible, unobtainable brand that is Rebecca has broken the cardinal rule of branding and made itself so exclusive that it has alienated its potential consumers and developed that most unforgivable of brand attributes, undesirability. Brands that can no longer maintain their market position are doomed to obsolescence, and therefore the final scenes of *Rebecca* are reserved for the annihilation of the brand, as the audience sees the monogrammed dressing case engulfed by flames.



Rebecca

Some seventy years ago Alfred Hitchcock, offered a possible cinematic solution to our obsession with the brand, if it is unsustainable psychologically, as he suggested, and ecologically if we return to the real world of luxury brands today, perhaps a similar rejection of the current brandscape we seem destined to inhabit needs a similar ritual cleansing as Manderley underwent, so that like Hester Prynne the heroine of *The Scarlet Letter* once she had finally torn the letter from her breast we too can aspire to a brand-less existence:

*The stigma gone, Hester heaved a long deep sigh, in which the burden of shame and anguish departed from her spirit. O exquisite relief! She had not known the weight until she felt the freedom!*²⁷

¹ *High Anxiety*, 1977, dir. Mel Brooks, cost. Patricia Norris

² Dialogue from *High Anxiety*

³ Walter Benjamin, 'N [On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]' in *The Arcades Project*, Massachusetts, Belknap Press, 1999, p.461

⁴ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009

⁵ Jane Pavitt (ed.), *Brand.new*, London, V&A Publications, 2002, p.44

⁶ Roland Barthes, 'The New Citroën' in *Mythologies*, Collins, London, 1973

I am thinking here of Rosemarie Trockel's knitted works incorporating the Woolmark and BMW logos, and for an overview of Haacke's work from this period *Unfinished Business*, Massachusetts, M.I.T.Press, 1987 is invaluable.

⁷ Quoted on website <http://skyliving.sky.com/star-style/angelina-for-louis-vuitton> accessed 14/08/2011

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Barthes, 1973, p. 95

¹⁰ *Charade*, 1963, dir. Stanley Donen, cost. (for Hepburn) Givenchy

¹¹ Dialogue from *Charade*

¹² Naomi Klein, *No Logo*, London, Harper Collins, 2000.

¹³ Angela McRobbie, 'Second-Hand Dresses and the Role of the Ragmarket' in *Zoot Suits and Second-Hand Dresses*, London, Macmillan, 1989, p.28

¹⁴ Pavitt, 2002

¹⁵ All definitions from *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, vol.I, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 230

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- ¹⁶ *Leave Her to Heaven*, 1945, dir. John M. Stahl, cost. Kay Nelson
- ¹⁷ Dialogue from *Leave Her to Heaven*
- ¹⁸ *ibid.*
- ¹⁹ *ibid*
- ²⁰ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, London, Oneworld Classics, 2010, p.25
- ²¹ *Whirlpool*, 1949, dir. Otto Preminger, cost. (for Tierney) Oleg Cassini
- ²² *Mommie Dearest*, 1981, dir. Frank Perry, cost. Irene Sharaff
- ²³ *Strangers on a Train*, 1951, dir. Alfred Hitchcock, cost. Leah Rhodes
- ²⁴ *Rebecca*, 1940, dir. Alfred Hitchcock, cost. (uncredited)
- ²⁵ Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel, *The Love of Art*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1991. p.112
- ²⁶ Dialogue from *Rebecca*
- ²⁷ Hawthorne, 2010, p.152.