

## WHEN CHANGE COMES

Article published in « *L'utilisateur horloger dans un monde en mutation*, recueil des études et présentations réalisées pour la 4<sup>e</sup> Journée de Recherche en Marketing Horloger (25 novembre 2009) et pour la 13<sup>e</sup> Journée Internationale du Marketing Horloger (26 novembre 2009) », LEP, Le-Mont-sur-Lausanne, pp. 217-224.

“The world has changed, it’s time to go on to something else”,<sup>1</sup> announced Steve Jobs when he came back as head of Apple in 1997. We know what happened next – success worldwide. As we emerge from a crisis that has hit the luxury watch industry in Switzerland hard, does Steve Jobs’s comment perhaps sound like a first attempt to respond to the theme of “The watch user in a changing world”. It is indisputable that “The world has changed”, but “to go on to something else” is harder to grasp. If the answer is yes, what should luxury watch companies be moving on to? Before we outline a proposal that could turn watch hands backwards, we will take a look at the problems of change from a particular angle – its nature in two areas both close to and distant from luxury watch-making: serious music (*musique savante*) and Apple.

It is a fact that when the nature of the change brings complexity to the surface of a system, demand becomes scarce. When, on the other hand, change produces surface simplicity, demand increases. It is the surface of a system that the customer sees first – a melody in an opera, the visual aspect of a watch or a watch company’s brand image. The underside of a system is its organisation, consisting both of the company that designs the watch and the mechanism that makes it work. This organisation is generally complex.

### From a simple to a complex surface in music and vice versa:

#### First analogies with luxury watch-making

In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the Abbey of Saint-Gall produced some Gregorian chants that the entire Western world would go on singing for centuries. Saint-Gall was to religious music what Switzerland is to luxury watch-making – an unrivalled centre of production. On the surface the Saint-Gall music is simple, a single melody sung in unison. It is constructed round two poles, two notes out of the twelve that make up the Western scale. However, while its surface is simple, Gregorian chant is complex in its organisation. It is hard to sing because of the subtle relationship between sounds and words, ornaments and line length. The fact that music from Monteverdi to Chopin has been so successful is because, despite major transformations, it has kept the mediaeval bipolarity of the scale and the predominance of a simple melody at surface level.

At the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Arnold Schoenberg prolonged the destabilisation introduced by Richard Wagner and prompted a radical change with the invention of dodecaphony. This in aesthetic terms was an earthquake that would affect all of 20<sup>th</sup> century music, which lost the bipolarity it had had for a thousand years and became multipolar. From now on the twelve notes of the scale would be equally important. The consequences of this revolution were enormous; the musical surface became complex. Without dominant poles as reference, it becomes impossible for an ordinary person to sing a tune. As for the final verdict: “in France, the State bodies concerned with contemporary music have contributed to creating a closed world, where audience rarefaction goes hand in hand (...) with cost inflation”.<sup>2</sup> Only small audiences listen to contemporary music – a niche clientele comparable to one of the four luxury clienteles defined by Bastien and Kapferer.<sup>3</sup> The niche client stands out because he or she buys avant-garde products like the creations of fashion designer Jean-Paul Gaultier. In economic terms contemporary music is a failure just as the splendid but chronically deficient trajectory of the great couturier Christian Lacroix in the fashion world was a failure.<sup>4</sup> And yet in terms of evolution

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey S. Young & William L. Simon (2005), *iCon-Steve Jobs*, Wiley, New-York, p. 214.

<sup>2</sup> Nathalie Heinich (2004), *La sociologie de l’art*, La Découverte, Paris, p. 61.

<sup>3</sup> Vincent Bastien & Jean-Noël Kapferer (2009), *Luxe oblige*, Eyrolles, Paris, pp. 141-143.

<sup>4</sup> Vincent Bastien & Jean-Noël Kapferer, *op. cit.*, p. 335.

and influence, this music represents a fertile period of experimentation that will be followed, it may be imagined, by an aesthetic trend with a simpler surface that will once more attract the crowds.

The history of music had already experienced a change of this type at the dawn of the Renaissance. Between the 14<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, a form of music with a complex surface – known as polyphony – flourished in Europe (fig.1). It might carry as many as three melodies and three different texts sung simultaneously. It was only appreciated by a limited public of wealthy cultivated nobles. It was precisely in this period that the first clocks were invented. Is this a coincidence?



Figure 1: Baude Cordier, France, “*Rondeau canonique*”, early 15<sup>th</sup> century  
(*The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2002, Grove)

During the Renaissance the humanist ideal of simple natural beauty emerged in painting (figure 2) and subsequently spread into Baroque music. The first opera, Monteverdi’s *Orfeo*, was composed in this context in 1607. Melodies for lute and solo voice were sung in the salons of the new bourgeoisie. Their refined simplicity was the incarnation of urbanity, the art of good manners that distinguished the wealthy city-dweller from the landed gentry. The public and financial success of this new music has endured until today.



Figure 2: Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*, around 1485 (source: Internet)

These musical examples illustrate what seems to be an important principle. When visible complications appear on the surface of a product that is the luminous outpouring of the craftsman's genius, users become few and far between, perhaps because an intimate acceptance of the object is harder. When, on the contrary, the craftsman steps back and the surface complications disappear, it is in a sense the user who finds himself at the centre. The emotion he experiences on contact with the work leads to a stronger attachment. This applies to the music of Mozart, Saint-Exupéry's "Le Petit Prince" or the Apple iPhone. Can it be that the luxury watch industry finds itself at the dawn of a renaissance that will see the emergence of watches with no obvious complications, their complexity concealed under a plain and simple surface? The question arises as to what beautiful surface melody will be capable of provoking a greater depth of emotion in the watch-user and of gaining the adhesion of a wider public.

### **Within Apple, from a complex to a simple surface:**

#### **Other analogies with the luxury watch industry**

Apple has many aspects in common with the luxury watch industry. The company pursues a luxury strategy of prices higher than the market average, a vertical development model aimed at controlling the entire production chain, the quality and aesthetic aspect of its products, an exclusive distribution, a spirit of rarity, a culture of secrecy and finally the continuity of its style.<sup>5</sup>

In 1997 Apple was on the brink of disaster. It was witnessing the disintegration of its clientele: too many products, poorly differentiated, with no major innovations, prices deemed too high, too many Research and Development projects, a compartmentalised organisation that favoured bureaucratic conflicts, and product developers who did not trust their leaders. At the same time Microsoft was establishing itself as the leader in the personal computer market thanks to the commercial success of its Windows 95 operating system.<sup>6</sup>

When Steve Jobs came back as head of Apple he intuited that the rupture caused by the Internet would have profound implications both for the users and for the company. He effected a radical change, converting Apple from a complex to a simple surface. The change was visible in the clarification of the products and the company's image.



**Figure 3: Apple advertising campaign *Think different*, 1997 (source: Internet)**

<sup>5</sup> Vincent Bastien & Jean-Noël Kapferer, *op. cit.*, pp. 353-356.

<sup>6</sup> Information about Apple where no reference is given is taken from: Owen W. Linzmayer (2008), *Apple confidential 2.0*, No Starch Press.

The launch of the “*Think different*” advertising campaign in 1997 was Steve Jobs’s first gesture (figure 3). The originality of the campaign deeply impressed users and reinforced staff attachment to the company according to the specialists. The “*Think different*” campaign accompanied the introduction on the market of the iMac and iBook computers (figure 4). Computers were for the first time simple, beautiful, transparent and efficient.



Figure 4: The iMac and iBook series, Apple 1997 (source: Internet)

Apple reduced the price of its products, but computer sales nevertheless fell by 15% between 2001 and 2003. Steve Jobs’s reminder was “*Don’t look at profits, look at potential*”<sup>7</sup> and he went on hiring. Employee numbers rose from 10,000 in 2000 to 14,000 in 2003 because work was needed on the iTunes online music and iPod personal stereo projects; they would be a commercial success in 2004 preparatory to the enormous success of the iPhone in 2007 (figure 5).

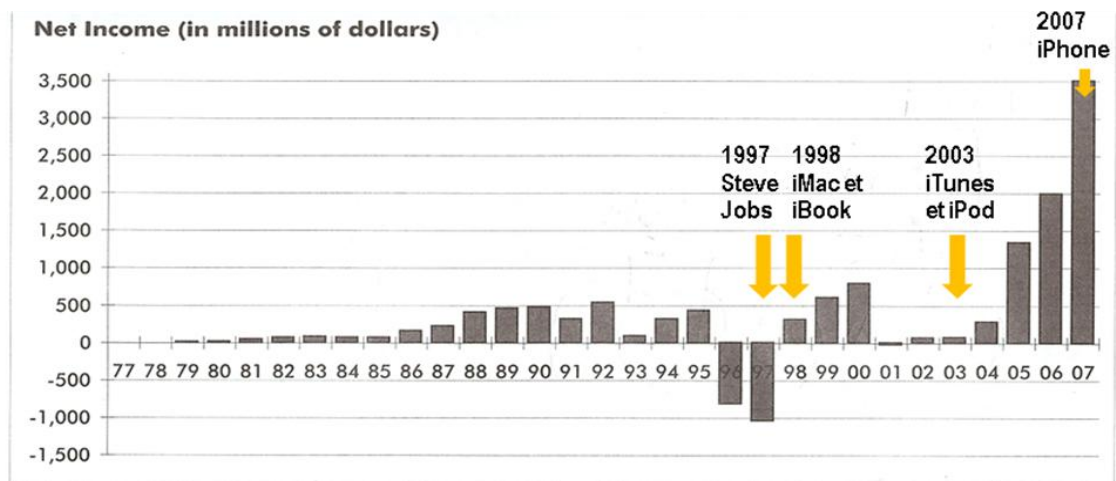


Figure 5: Evolution of Apple’s net product from 1977 to 2007  
(Owen W. Linzmayer, 2008, *Apple confidential 2.0*, p. 65, No Starch Press)

Apple reinforced its exclusive distribution strategy and in 2001 opened its first two “*Apple Stores*”. The number of Research and Development projects was cut back by 70%. “*Focus means saying no*”<sup>8</sup> said the boss. Two IT developers were given top management positions. The organisation of work was decompartmentalised by setting up small cross-cutting teams dealing with marketing, finance, sales and production. Finally, Steve Jobs

<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey S. Young & William L. Simon, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

<sup>8</sup> Steven Levy (2000), *Insanely great*, Penguin, London, p. 317.

made what was *a priori* an unholy alliance with the giant Microsoft which boosted investor confidence and propelled Apple up to Microsoft's level in the collective subconscious, despite a less than 5% share of the market. These radical changes were the source of Apple's comeback. They demonstrate, over and above the method, the importance of the leader's vision and the willingness of the workforce to commit to the change.

### **A little music lesson for the luxury watch industry**

Apple has transformed the cold, complex computer into an elegant, sensual and playful object, and in so doing has revolutionised the relations between man and the machine. Indeed, the advent of new information technologies, the aesthetic transformation of electronic objects and the application of luxury strategies by computer companies perhaps represent a change for the luxury watch industry as major as the advent of the Internet for Apple. Watches are no longer needed today for the computer and the mobile phone tell the time. Moreover, beautiful, expensive and unique electronic products will perhaps suffice to fulfil the role of distinction conferred by a luxury watch and render it old-fashioned in tomorrow's world.

In order to face up to the change, the Apple revolution brought the aspect of simplicity to the surface in both the product and the company. For the luxury watch industry, taking this same step could represent a revolution of its relation to time. *"You think you know the sea because you sail across it in a boat, but the sea is not a plane surface, it is an abyss. You want to know the sea? Sink your boat,"* said Meister Eckhart (1260-1327). In other words, *"You think that you control time because you can measure it. But time is not a plane surface, it is an abyss. If you want to know time you need to take the plunge"*. Time has depth, density, elasticity. If a minute is often longer at the dentist's and an hour always too short on a date it is because time is above all an individual experience.

How can a watch go beyond the measurement of time and incorporate the experience of time? One way is through play. Play can suspend time, whether it is a question of seduction, chess, the piano, or the speculation leading to the creation of a company. Play is always emotionally charged, mainly because its effect is a forgetting of oneself and a coming closer to the other. It is a paradox. A watch that encapsulated play would enable its user to plunge into time and reinforce his relation with others. Its surface would be simple and uncomplicated, but with even greater internal complexities, like the iPhone. If a brand of watches successfully invents a watch like this that incorporates the play aspect, it will no doubt tell its desperate competitors: *"You can tell the time but we have time"* (African proverb).

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