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Sensory Regimes in TV Marketing: Boardwalk Empire's Chromatic Enhancement and Digital Aesthetics

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In the last decade, television channels have often employed experimental promotional campaigns to launch new shows and make viewing more interactive. At the height of its popularity, for example, *Lost* (ABC 2004-10) had about forty ancillary components, being also the first show available for real-time download on iTunes and streamed full-length on mobile phones. In addition, *Lost* counted many textual and diegetic extensions such as candy bars and working clothes inspired by the show. Through these synergies, ABC sought to increase the visibility and quality of the audience's relationship with *Lost* by extending the narrative universe into the real lives of viewers (Mittell).

Following in this track, other networks have been devising ways that intensify the audience's commitment to TV worlds. Drawing on industrial and corporate sources, this paper focuses on HBO's marketing for *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-present), contending that its promotional campaign deploys a hyperaesthetic use of digital colour and commercial tie-ins as a means to bind consumers affectively and sensorially. Here, hyperaesthetics stands as both an innovative strategy of digital design (Lunenfeld) and a mode of immersive marketing aimed at captivating a viewer's senses through visual and gustatory stimulation (Howes). To this end, the paper focuses first on the chromatic treatment employed in *Boardwalk Empire's* trailers, title sequence and character posters, contending that this design inspires a "haptic," that is, intimate response in the viewer. Secondly, the paper looks at HBO's partnership with Canadian Club Whisky, a brand featured in the show, as a further element of the experiential address of its campaign.

Aesthetic Rebranding in TV Promotion

In an article appearing in *Film Journal*, Andrea Fuchs describes the new look of the feature attraction spots that precede the airing of movies at AMC theatres, maintaining that they are part of an initiative to refashion the experience of moviegoing. Fuchs looks to the use of advanced digital video technology to explain a more general turn in audiovisual marketing towards the creation of enhanced experiences, where "[t]he borders between time and place and screen and ... seats evaporate." In the eyes of corporate executives, immersive environments sell experiences that brand exhibition venues as purveyors of spectacle, where the "look and feel" of the images supplies the senses with momentous adventures. According to Fuchs, recourse to digital audio to devise catchy jingles, as well as computer-generated imagery (CGI) that simulates the texture and colour schemes of old film, produce the kind of sensorial bombardment that would make the act of waiting for a film to begin a memorable experience in itself.

This mode of promotion, which closely matches style and marketing, is the driving principle of twenty-first century media advertising. Charlie Mawer, executive creative director at Red Bee Media, affirms that the primary mode of address in television branding has now shifted from

description to “experience” (Grainge 98). Whereas until a few years ago viewers were expected to come to the networks, now designers personify channels to *reach out* to distracted and hyperstimulated individuals who are likely to watch their favourite series across more than one technological platform. Aesthetic rebranding has proven useful to mobilise this mass of consumers. Zach Baze, Vice President of AMC Entertainment, declares that promotional videos are now “designed to ‘show’ rather than ‘tell’ [a] story of superior presentation” (Fuchs). A seductive interface enhances the sensorial appeal of a channel and/or show, by “embodying feeling” (Grainge 98) and offering audiences ways to “take stuff from” it (94). Once fascination and anticipation come into play, there seems to be a higher chance that individuals establish lasting relations with a production, coming to invest time and energy into it. Selling themselves as suppliers of new experiences, television channels hope to lead a change in the phenomenology of media consumption, based on the multisensory appeal of spectacular presentations and interactive modes of storytelling. This is a significant departure from the marketing strategies that cinema and television have adopted for almost a century. These largely rely on the cognitive pleasures of textual interpretation and anticipation to spark mass attention.

An overlapping of digital design, multimediality and immersive marketing is indeed reshaping television promotion, placing the emotions of viewers at the centre of new modes of persuasion. The creative freedom permitted by digital technologies is key to this project in that it offers new ways to enhance the look of moving images and increase their experiential impact. Already in the last decades of the twentieth century, the senses and affective drives of consumers became the object of a different marketing approach as David Howes contends in “HYPERESTHESIA, or, The Sensual Logic of Late Capitalism.” Howes explains that consumer capitalism has “increasingly made it its business to engage as many senses as possible in its drive for product differentiation and the distraction/seduction of the consumer.” By “multiplying the sensory channels through which the ‘buy me’ message is communicated” (288), sensorial marketing creates a higher emotional investment and a better promotional address. Not dissimilarly, television’s aesthetic rebranding seeks to operate at the intersection of the senses. Although Howes is mostly concerned with studying the “make over” of tangible commodities in the shopping environment, the following sections will draw on his study of the colonisation of the consumer’s “mind-space” to examine the role that immaterial qualities, namely colour grading and lighting, play as a means of persuasion in *Boardwalk Empire*’s campaign.

Boardwalk Empire’s Promotional Design: “Nucky Carnation”

AMC’s vision of spectacular presentational spots offers a starting point to discuss the hyperaesthetic address of HBO’s marketing. In the aforementioned quote, Baze foregrounds the ability of promotions to engage potential viewers at the level of the senses, employing technological virtuosity to disengage the spectacle from the narratological framework of audiovisual storytelling. Although presentational features come in different styles and formats, with the majority designed to deliver information about upcoming productions, in the last decade they have often given prominence to elements that set a mood, while contributing little to genre or storyline. This is especially true of the marketing of action films that replicate early cinema strategies. In her historical study of Hollywood trailers, Lisa Kernan writes of a “vaudeville” and “circus mode” of pure sensorial inputs as a successful tool of mass attraction (18). Gary Wythoff similarly refers to the “ludic grid” [1] to describe a presentational style that has been gaining popularity in recent years, where “impressionistic displays of force ... [that] have no reference to the parts around them” displace descriptive principles of storytelling based on causality and continuity. These moments of spectacle create a sort of “alchemical theatre” (21) that stupefies the senses. Mentioning the “hisses and cheers” that trailers elicit in the audience, Kernan shows that an aesthetics of discontinuous juxtaposition of random audiovisual cues can catalyse sensorial reactions and flows of desire to impact significantly on cinema attendance (21).

The four trailers that promoted *Boardwalk Empire*’s premiere in August 2010 can be analysed in

light of Kernan's and Wythoff's study of expressive presentations, their sophisticated looks and high-production values contributing to brand the show as event television. [2] The trailers [3] are little more than sixty seconds and present the show in a non-linear fashion, referring to graphic elements and title cards to introduce the cast and production team and employing musical cues to impose rhythm on discontinuous editing. The shot length is brief, getting more compressed as the clips approach their ending. The promos reveal little about the actual plot, but some characters and generic elements are foregrounded, most notably those associated with the gangster characters played by Steve Buscemi and Michael Pitt. Their prominence suggests that they will be crucial to the development of the narrative, while the recurring appearance of other actors (such as Paz de la Huerta, Vincent Piazza and Michael Kenneth Williams) and locations (the boardwalk, the Ritz and a supper club) introduces a large ensemble cast and the period-piece nature of the spectacle. Interspersed among shots of characters going about illegal businesses are flashes of murder, excess and dissolution that set the stage for a dive into the underworld of liquor smuggling in 1920s Atlantic City.

Appealing visuals and soundtrack account for the trailers' high-quality look. An amalgam of sensorial inputs is deployed, from the energetic feeling communicated by the rapid cutting pace of the promos and a blues guitar vamp and solo (from an original song by The Brian Jonestown Massacre band), to nostalgia associated with the sepia tones of selected shots. Among these inputs, a prominent place is reserved for the visual stimulation incited by the trailers' chromatic treatment, where digital colour becomes a signifier of spectacle and quality entertainment. To communicate motifs of violence and mischief, Süperfad Agency, the boutique responsible for *Boardwalk Empire's* campaign, devised a special hue known as "Nucky carnation," dubbed after the show's protagonist Enoch Thompson (Steve Buscemi), kingpin and treasurer of Atlantic County. The coloration is obtained in monochrome, a technique that "involves a process of partial desaturation followed by the emphasis on a single hue" (Mišek 165). The result is a gloomy, dense crimson shade, with marked black accents, which recurs in both on-channel and off-channel promotional pieces as the show's signature marker (DeMott). A carnation, created by Süperfad's 3D team in Softimage XSI from images of actual flowers, is also featured at the end of the trailers, as it blooms in the background of the title card with the show's title, and it is also the core element of Süperfad's final concept table (fig. 1). Research into the trailers' colour patterns, undertaken with Feedpeep software (fig. 2), [4] confirms the predominance of the families of red and black in the chromatic score of the promos, whereas a look to other promotional pieces shows the hue prevailing also in character posters, wallpapers and title cards. This formal choice makes use of crimson, in tandem with black and dark brown overtones, to imply drama and danger but also decadence and corruption. This is consistent with the use of red in advertising, where the hue is employed for its arresting power that brings images to the foreground. In fact, the theory of colours associates red to energy and passion: exposure to it increases the blood pressure, stimulating people to make quick decisions (Birren).



Figure 1. Süperfad's concept table for Boardwalk Empire.

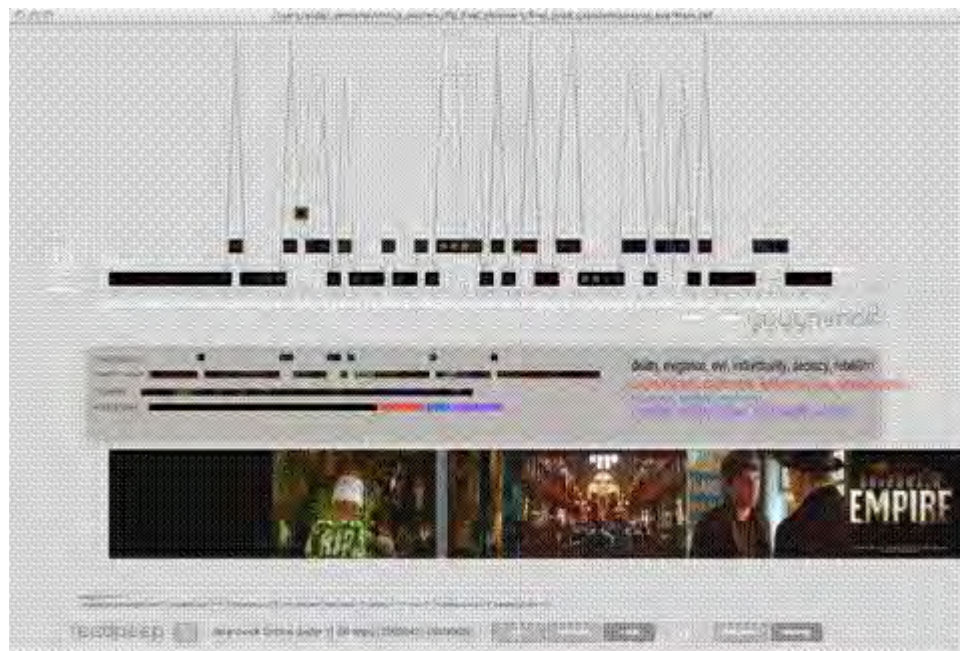


Figure 2. Sample of FeedPeep's results on Boardwalk Empire's colour palette.

Other formal elements concur to convey a dark narrative mood. The use of sidelights and highlights, as well as increased grain and strong contrast, creates a “hybrid of gritty realism and Expressionism/Impressionism” that is further enhanced by telecine and postproduction (Thomson). Unsurprisingly, Jonathan Freeman, director of photography, contends that the colour palette is designed to be evocative of the paintings of John F. Sloan and George Bellows of the Ashcan school. These artists reproduce scenes of destitution, poverty and violence, employing a gloomy coloration and extreme contrast to convey a bleak vision of life. *Boardwalk Empire* similarly represents the effects of corruption and excess on the lives of a group of bootleggers and their mistresses by indulging in chiaroscuro and uneven plays of light. To emphasise the indexical function of the carnation as a symbol of corruption, Simon Benjamin, creative director at Süperfad, looked to the baroque style of lighting and tonality as a primary source of inspiration. He mentions Caravaggio’s “Canestra di Frutta” (where a bowl of seemingly fresh fruit is, on further inspection, rotting) as a visual referent of the “sinister mood of the show” and its obsession with blood, which brings to the small screen the fascination with gangster life often found in the movies of Martin Scorsese, the show’s executive producer. In the promotional campaign, the chromaticism that charges Scorsese’s movies with “intense” emotional tones

(Gormley) operates as an emotional cue, with digital design implementing its stimulating purpose.

Benjamin maintains that the choice to use carnation as the trailers' signature colour came after watching footage of the pilot episode. In retrospect, the sensual address of the carnation emerges also as a recurring cue in *Boardwalk Empire's* overall aesthetic register, and a core element of the episode's atmosphere of moral degeneration. While in the trailers the colour is attached to physical elements (a stripper's lipstick and garments, the flower in Buscemi's lapel, the balcony at the supper club, an interior's upholstery), in the series it becomes more of a chromatic plating. Here, the carnation's grading is overlaid onto the images, lending them a recognisable graphic character. So, for example, in contrast to alabaster skin tones, the hue heightens the red of the lips and accentuates eye contours, lending faces a livid appearance consistent with their status of symbols of corruption. Similarly, when associated with female characters, the carnation directs attention to their most sensual features, whether the shape of lips, breast or hair colour. Often the abundance of the plating produces effects of sublime excess, decay and corruption. This technique orchestrates a decadent atmosphere that refashions Scorsese's aesthetic for the small screen. As he states in an interview for the *Observer*, his use of lavish colours is meant to spark off sensations and "fill the gap in people's emotional lives" (Kermode).

Chromatic Remediation

In *Boardwalk Empire's* campaign, the sensory appeal of the chromatic spectacle becomes, in itself, an aesthetic endeavour: a stylistic horizon where recourse to digital technology upends the codes and conventions of television advertising. Where most channels would use narrative and genre to attract audiences, in HBO's promotion the appeal of its star-studded cast overlaps with a marketing strategy of digital attraction. Its experimental protocols and promotional codes strive to provide spectacular feats of design and complement the cognitive pleasures of watching complex narratives (Mittell, "Narrative Complexity") with a style of immediate sensorial and hyperaesthetic impressions.

According to Peter Lunenfeld, hyperaesthetics refers to patterns of media interrelation and experimentation, where digital technology makes images dynamic by "dispersing all other media in a digital suspension, from which pulled constituent elements are separated and then deployed" (16). Supporting the visionary rhetoric of this quotation is the belief that recent changes in media production require a new vocabulary and set of practices to theorise an immersive relationship with media. Lunenfeld strives to elaborate just such a theory of the transformations determined by digital aesthetics. Relatedly, he refers to hyperaesthetics both as a practice of software manipulation, "a metacritical language" with which to update the codes of design, and as a "working model" to theorise the multisensory address of digital media. HBO's campaign offers a case study to address both aspects of this discourse. For one, mashing the aesthetics of baroque and expressionist painting with cinematic homages to cult movies, the network turns to formal rebranding to update the conventions of televisual marketing. Within this context, the high-tech look of the promotion is paramount to assert HBO's identity as a provider of sophisticated programming.

A look at *Boardwalk Empire's* opening credits further confirms these ambitions. This time the colour palette is enhanced with special effect techniques. The sequence shows Buscemi standing on a shore, smoking and scanning the horizon, where time-lapse clouds gather for a storm and a profusion of liquor bottles washes up on the sand around his clean shoes, before he returns to the boardwalk as if unimpacted by wind and tide. [5] The feature's look is a hybrid of painting and visual cinematography obtained through rendering tools such as Cinema 4D, Maya and AfterEffects (Maynard). Commenting on the visuals' exploitation of CGI, Jason Jacobs notes that the use of "vivid colour and dynamic range" creates a spectacle that is "somewhere between a Magritte and HDR landscape photography." Enhanced by special effects and photomanipulation,

the coloration alerts the senses. Its palette is much more brilliant than in the desaturated visuals discussed in the previous section and the chromatic modulation foregrounds cyan and brown hues. Yet, consistent with the design of the trailers, it serves the double function of clearly identifying the show through its distinctive visuals and providing a way to condense the affective force of the narrative.

The videos analysed so far suggest that, although colour has long been employed as an advertising tool, in *Boardwalk Empire's* campaign its lavishness is a primary vehicle of promotion. It startles audiences, giving them both a taste of the show in advance of its broadcasting, and a means to brand it as a nearly-cinematographic production with little precedent in television history. The move flags a marketing strategy where representational and affective elements come together to address the challenges posed by a dispersive and overcrowded environment. Both Nucky carnation and the titles' Magritte hues are sensorial markers that give viewers a reference point to navigate the multichannel terrain of digital media. As with the reference to painting and the crimson grading in the trailers, the credits' cinematography proclaims HBO's interest in digital impressions. The overlapping of different artistic languages – the analogue art of Caravaggio, Sloan and Magritte crossing with the digitality of high-definition photography – is meant to mobilise attention by making a show of *Boardwalk Empire's* high-production values. Arguably, the sequence was conceived as a short piece of cinematography that could sustain repeat viewing, while also feeding the viewers' interest in the show (Maynard).

Although it would be impossible to measure the actual impact of chromatic stimulation on audience engagement, the trailers' and title sequence's design attests to HBO's commitment to the aesthetic integrity of its promotional texts. The character posters uploaded on the show's web and Facebook pages during Season 2 further confirm this hyperaesthetic strategy of promotion (fig. 3). Representing individual characters portrayed in medium shot against various sketched backgrounds (a boardwalk, a distillery, the Ritz's hall, a bar), they hypostatise Scorsese's iconicity of corruption and mischief through, yet again, colour grading and dramatic lighting. The posters' chromatic scheme is markedly unlife-like, with skin reflecting muted yellow hues and the blood red of carnation. Their clothes similarly reveal a mix of red and brown overtones, while the backdrops are coloured in a sepia tone and dark burgundy shadows. Moreover, the use of grunge textures exasperates the hieratic posture of the actors by increasing tonal contrasts and lending them a stylised impression of restrained movement.



Figure 3. HBO's character poster of Steve Buscemi as Nucky Thompson.

This is an aesthetics of “chromatic remediation,” where digital manipulation attaches a cinematic feel to television images by alluding to various uses of colour adopted in different epochs (Mišek164). Such design principle refers to the role that colour grading plays in summoning a memory of the senses and putting it to commercial use: “If realistic color signals the ‘here and now’ then perhaps digital color signals the other times and places of our cultural imaginary” (178). Indeed, in the show’s campaign, colouring reaches a degree of abstraction at which carnation functions as an emphasis in itself. This effect is not new to cinema and television audiences. The use of colour in post-war Hollywood often “interfere[d] with the emotional trajectory of melodrama, and trouble[d] the attention to the narrative” (Haralovic 150). Obtaining a similar result with its stylised reinvention of “Expressionism/Impressionism,” *Boardwalk Empire’s* campaign uses colour in a nonreferential way.

Herein lies an ambiguity that enhances the cultural and affective value of the show. Historical accuracy plays a pivotal role in its conception (Lavery). The series is inspired by the real-life account of New Jersey’s county treasurer and bootlegger “Nucky” Johnson, as it is chronicled in

Nelson Johnson's *Boardwalk Empire: The Birth, High Time and Corruption of Atlantic City*. [6] While the plot loosely weaves together fictional and real-life events, formal elements, like period garments and ephemera, participate in a naturalistic recreation of prohibition times (Stahl). *Boardwalk Empire's* colour palette is developed in line with a goal of historical accuracy and with an eye to sensorial persuasion through colour design. [7] Yet, despite a formal respect for realism, its chromaticism does not faithfully reproduce the look of the times. While costumes and props accurately approximate 1920s style, colour grading "sets [it] ironically apart from the physicality of surface color" (Mišek 166). Chromatic remediation suggests that the show's representation of the prohibition age is, indeed, informed less by a desire to excavate the past, than to fashion a new image of it. The carnation's mute, desaturated hues, as well as the vivid cyan, yellow and brown of the titles are designed not to reproduce the look and feel of the times, but to stand apart and impress with their aesthetic virtuosity. Their decadent quality is meant to expose them precisely as *period* pieces, inviting an almost nostalgic reaction to their status as tokens of long-gone times.

In this respect, they refer to a conceptual framework of hyperaesthetics that both comments upon and disrupts a mimetic rendering of real-life events. Borrowing from Edward Branigan's study of coloration in Jean Luc Godard's films, it could be argued that in HBO's marketing the significance of colour is elevated to the point that certain hues are "capable of connection to various points in a text and helping to make patterns" and "need not be confined to the surface of a specific object" (178). The resulting spectacle reinvents a lost world by inscribing our cultural memories into the sensorially enhanced imaginary of twenty-first century media production, and in so doing incites an experience of television viewing where sensation plays as relevant a role as cognition in summoning a viewer's attention.

The Flavour of Prohibition: HBO's Partnership with Canadian Club Whisky

Boardwalk Empire's campaign delivers the aesthetic sophistication that in past decades established HBO as a haven of authenticity and creative freedom. In a time when other actors, most notably Showtime, AMC and FX, compete for cultural supremacy in television programming, promotional materials are a crucial weapon in the battle to conquer and retain the loyalty of audiences. It is in this context that chromatic remediation is deployed as part of an effort to meet the requirements of psychographic targeting, a lifestyle segmentation research that identifies the attitudinal attributes of the audience. Indeed, remediation operates within a project of hyperaesthetic enticement that includes other strategies of multisensory marketing whose aim is to make audiences commit to the show prior to its broadcasting. To the pleasures of aesthetic rebranding and audiovisual flooding, HBO adds gustatory and tactile ones.

For example, in 2010 the channel secured partnerships with Canadian Club Whisky, Martin Greenfield Clothier's suits and Bloomingdale's fashion department (Elliott), while in September 2011, it commissioned an original 1920s subway train to run on New York's number 2 and 3 lines to launch the show's second season. The train's interiors were designed in the typical turn-of-the-century style and decorated in a shade of red that matched Nucky carnation. In terms of multisensory marketing, this move has the double function of stimulating consumers' subconscious emotional processes and conscious perception by addressing lifestyle attitudes.

The strategy presents the show as a social phenomenon and lifestyle attraction, while also differentiating it from its competitors. In the process, the campaign sketches the fictional world in greater and deeper detail. The synergies attach a material/sensual dimension to the visual commotion of digital aesthetics, but they also italicise the narrative plot. [8] When Movie Central and Canadian Club Whisky organised a screening of the first episode of the show's second season at Canadian Club's headquarters in Windsor, Ontario, special cocktail recipes inspired by the show were served. To describe the flavour of a "Nucky" drink, the recipes refer to the imaginary of the show: "A delicious combination of orange and lemon juices mixed with the exceptional

smoothness of CC and a splash of flashy fizz. Garnished with a tart orange slice in a rocks glass. This is what it tastes like when someone puts the squeeze on you." Similarly, another drink, the "High Roller," is claimed to be "so good, it ought to be illegal" (Chow). The overlapping between the fictional and real world is further enhanced by the status of Canadian Club as a common liquor choice in the prohibition era. Not only were its headquarters in Windsor a meeting point for gangsters the likes of Al Capone and Lucky Luciano, the brand was also routinely smuggled to US shores and it figures in the plot of the series. Its connection with HBO's show is therefore double. To drink Canadian Club is not only a declaration of preference in both distilled spirits and entertainment; it is also a historical gesture that reappropriates a forgotten past and embeds it in a new experiential horizon, where allegiance to the product and the show marks a fashionable, personal style. Standing as a way to encode and modulate a specific kind of audience's response, HBO's multisensory marketing implicates a hierarchy of values where tailored clothes and beverage preferences signify glamour and social success.

Hapticity and Hyperaesthesia

Hyperaesthetic promotional campaigns inscribe sensation into new strategies of consumer mobilisation in the hope of fostering modes of engagement where impressions (affects) aid a show's successful reception in advance of broadcasting. Such practices operate at a conscious and subconscious level, regulating the passage of emotions across the screen and mediating the relationship between the moving image and the body of the viewer.

Returning to Lunenfeld's plea for a new theory of digital aesthetics, the scholarship on "hapticity" offers a useful and updated conceptual tool to address the emotional positioning of *Boardwalk Empire's* campaign. Art scholars refer to hapticity to discuss the degree of closeness that aesthetic features like grain, colour and texture invite between audiences and images, and the kind of sensorial bond and reactions stemming from an "intimate" experience of art (Marks). Whereas neuromarketing supplies marketers with actual maps of the affective reactions that material goods and brands trigger in consumers, [9] hapticity adopts a purely phenomenological approach to hyperaesthetic design. For this reason, its implications remain theoretical, rather than pragmatic and industrial. Yet, a focus on proximity and the arresting power of form offers an alternative starting point to examine the value of promotional paratexts in the age of "five-dimensional" marketing (Thrift 259). Where the dominant approach to this subject is through signification and cognition, as the very label "paratext" suggests (Gray), hapticity probes the inter-sensory nature of affectivity, looking at the subconscious dynamics of reception.

Particularly, haptic scholarship argues for an embodied notion of reception: "a mode of vision informed by the alternative spatial logic of touch" (Lundemo 97). Here, the primacy of vision is displaced by a multisensory engagement. In this respect, apperception stems from a network of interrelated faculties where the eye functions "as an organ of touch" ("Haptic Visuality" 79). In "HYPERAESTHESIA" Howes too writes about a synesthetic engagement with consumer goods where impressions, whether originating in vision, hearing or touch, intersect at the subconscious level and come together in an inter-sensory event. Indeed, although he does not refer explicitly to hapticity, his discussion of synaesthesia adds an anthropological contribution to art theories of haptic proximity. "Synesthesia establishes cross-linkages between the modalities at a subconscious level, and so opens up a whole new terrain – the terrain of the inter-sensory – for marketers and designers to work their magic" (292).

Discussing his predilection for "lurid" tonalities, Scorsese is aware of the intersensory address of colour perception and its uses in cinema (Kermode). His idea that colour is "splashed all over the consciousness of popular culture" echoes Howes's argument about the affective appeal of synesthetic stimulation. Both Scorsese and Howes interrelate the visual with the tactile, discussing moving images as if they were endowed with a sensuality that "reduces the abstracted distance of the gaze" to induce a bodily reaction (Paterson 81). *Boardwalk Empire's* promotional

design brings this vision to marketing practice. By disengaging itself from the mimetic imperative of historical realism, it clears a space of abstraction that, by pleasing us, becomes also productive and commercially exploitable.

The cinematography of the promos is impressive, and their postproduction intervention on colour unusual. Save for short sequences and the occasional use of techniques like bleach bypass and desaturation in cult series (Steward; Picarelli), the look of most television shows rarely foregrounds such significant interventions. *Boardwalk Empire's* promotional visuals, instead, emphasise their chromatic elements, intensifying reds through complementary associations with other hues, dramatic lighting, contrast, and grunge texturing, to orchestrate a spectacular composition where life in early twentieth century America is not simply represented but strives to make itself *felt immediately*, at an epidermal (haptic) level. Eivink Røssaak correctly observes that the visual spectacle produced by digital modes of presentation can operate as a perceptual attractor that invites an intimate engagement with the images. The possibility to mix and overlap different aesthetic languages, as in the case of *Boardwalk Empire's* use of baroque, expressionist and impressionist artistic techniques, produces an “emotional space ... where the audience is transported from the familiar to the unfamiliar” (322) and is drawn to react to the spectacle in an emotional, non-cognitive way. [10]

Yet, it would be misleading to believe that the persuasive power of such a tactics of mobilisation operates smoothly and unconditionally. For all the compelling force of digital design and the critical acclaim it has received so far, *Boardwalk Empire* also sparks criticism. Bringing hapticity into my analysis of the campaign, I mean not to argue that multisensory promotion can scientifically pre-determine a positive reception, so much as to highlight some of the implications of HBO's marketing philosophy. Among them is an attempt, by the network, to seduce audiences by means of a sensational aesthetics where spontaneous flows of affects and emotions are modulated *in advance* of broadcasting, the better to favour reception. By devising a spectacular campaign, HBO operates pre-emptively, tying audiences to its series by means other than, and in excess of, cognitive address. In this respect, the campaign acts on a double register. If, on the one hand, certain features establish the apparatus of meanings attached to the narrative, using genre to italicise its dark/violent mood, on the other, the aesthetic performance of chromatic remediation suspends identification, its empathic force escaping generic containment and thematic conventions. For production strategies the challenge seems now to be not just to stimulate embodied reception, but also to catch the value of the simultaneous overlapping of narrative and spectacular moments.

Furthermore, the high-production values of *Boardwalk Empire's* campaign point to a second implication relating to the status of paratexts as purely promotional materials. Promos have, by now, become essential venues to assess the “emotional strength” and “affective valence” of a show, two terms employed by neuromarketers to label embodied reception (Sampson). As Catherine Johnson argues, these are “captivating short films” that should be examined not just as texts designed to sell programmes/channels, but as an “increasingly ubiquitous form of cultural content whose meanings, aesthetics and contexts of production deserve the same close attention as the programmes they surround.” When the aesthetic integrity of a paratext brings it on a par with cinema productions, what texts should we look at to account for the reception and consumption of a television show? The growing ubiquity and appeal of promotional shorts prompts further investigation into the temporality of television watching and the norms of audience measurement. When the assimilation and enjoyment of a show is conditioned by the consumption of its paratexts, shouldn't we interrogate what accounts for the boundaries of a television event? [11]

The Industrial Productivity of Television's Hyperesthetic Marketing

The stylised representation of the 1920s of *Boardwalk Empire's* campaign is based on the

assumption that an overlapping of spectacle and storytelling functions as an aggregator of the lifestyle aspirations of a certain type of viewer. Capitalising upon some of the show's iconic and genre elements, the campaign revives the vaudeville address of old Hollywood promotions by means of a spectacular performance of chromatic remediation. The presentational modality that the analysed materials borrow from circus promotion puts the emphasis on a hyperbolic sensory experience distributed through the "see," "hear," "feel" imperative characteristic of parades. This mode of address "promotes spectacle by emphasising attractions as cinematic events that transcend narrative – that indeed come to, or *at*, you. ... The event is both the film and the expectation of the film" (Kernan 23).

Furthermore, through synergies with manufacturers in the fields of clothing and distillery, HBO treats its audience as a sophisticated class of proactive viewers endowed with a discernible sense of style. The synergies expose a hyperaesthetic strategy of immersive marketing that capitalises upon the sensitivity of viewers, stimulating them to act upon and co-create a fictional world that would feel as authentic as the one they inhabit day by day. As per Howes's definition of consumers as "visual, tactile creatures" (287), the recipients of HBO's campaign are indeed engaged primarily as desiring subjects, caught in a sensual relationship with the narrative. Moreover, the promos also accomplish a metonymic function, by which the all-encompassing, emotional appeal of the show comes to stand for HBO's identity as something different from regular TV (after all, "It's not TV, it's HBO"). [12]

The appeal of *Boardwalk Empire's* digital aesthetics operates in this fashion. The battle to win increasingly distracted audiences not only requires that eyeballs be aggregated, but that the quantitative demands of audience assembling be enriched with qualitative back up. Branding, that is, must deploy an array of affective weapons to turn viewers into an army of passionate consumers (Arvidsson). In this sense, passion becomes both something to tap into and to stimulate. As this paper has argued, key to this goal is the close match between marketing and style. It comes as no surprise that the design of *Boardwalk Empire's* promo campaign is remarkably appealing and that its campaign fosters immersion through visual stimulation, tie-ins and partnerships with producers of lifestyle goods. It must, indeed, be able to activate the anticipative branding gesture necessary for audiences to develop a connection with the program based on first-hand impressions and affective resonance. Its glamorous aesthetics favours the reductive dynamics by which the advertised show is encapsulated into few distinctive elements. In this context, the promos' chromatic remediation serves as a visual referent that operates as a pre-sold property attached to the show. The synergy with Canadian Club Whisky further makes *Boardwalk Empire* instantly recognisable as an event of high sensorial affect, enhancing awareness and inviting associations with HBO's other programs.

Finally, if, on the one hand, the trailers, credits and posters mobilise the circus rhetoric of the ludic grid, on the other they can also play back and indeed refresh the audience's knowledge of what sophisticated TV is through seductive visuals. While fuelling desire for an unknown object, they also invoke the familiar pleasures associated with HBO's sophisticated dramatic series. While the rhetorical appeals made by the promotion validate the generic conventions of the gangster story, as well as discourses of stardom and narrative complexity, they also incite affective expectations. Following Elena del Rio's argument on cinematic performance it seems that these two strands displace each other in a dynamics of temporal becoming, where "the eruption of affective-performative moments is a matter of a constantly fluctuating distribution of degrees of intensities between two series of images: those belonging to exploitable narrative structures, and those that disorganize these structures" (16). Therefore, in *Boardwalk Empire's* campaign representational and non-representational elements coexist. Even before we consume the actual show, the promotion embeds us within a semiotic and affective chain that prompts a variety of effects, not the least of which is nostalgia. In this light, HBO's digital aesthetics represents a class of commercial products that work by evoking hopes, pre-creating meaning and abstracting formal qualities from images

as a means to stir affective responses. The sensation of unqualified expectation and even excitement that is thus generated points toward marketing's anticipative logic whereby hyperaesthetics generates affective attachment to as-yet unaired productions. It remains to be seen whether the constitutive unpredictability of emotive reactions can really be tamed to meet the commercial expectations of corporate gurus.

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Endnotes

1. Referring to cinema studies Frederick Greene describes the grid as "[b]asically a mode of story presentation produced by inter-cutting one scene with scenes/dialogue that are not continuous with it but establish a kind of counterpoint to it – or elaboration of it – the grid delivers great amounts of film information quickly, without requiring it to be related temporally, spatially or logically."
2. *Boardwalk Empire* is executively produced by Martin Scorsese and Terence Winter. In its first season, the show was nominated for 18 Emmy Awards, winning, among the others, a Golden Globe for Best Dramatic Series and Best Actor in Dramatic Series (Buscemi). The show's ratings have been average with the pilot, "Boardwalk Empire," being the highest rated premiere for a HBO's production since *Deadwood's* pilot.
3. The trailers are available on *Boardwalk Empire's* official YouTube Channel (*Boardwalk Empire* trailers).
4. FeedPeep is an application for analysing the colour patterns and meanings of image sets from RSS feeds. It was realised by Eva Casado de Amezua Fernandez-Luanco, Associate Professor at Universitat Oberta de Catalunya.
5. The credits can be viewed online (*Boardwalk Empire* opening credits sequence).
6. The trailers and titles are conceived as part of a larger, immersive experience. They operate in conjunction with HBO's off-screen promotion that employs tie-ins to expand the world of the show, inviting viewers to find out more about the narrated events by means beyond televisual representation. Johnson's *Boardwalk Empire: The Birth, High Time and Corruption of Atlantic City* (2002) is the channel's main tie-in. HBO's promotion of this historical reconstruction of the criminal activities of Enoch "Nucky" Johnson, who was, in fact, New Jersey's county treasurer in the 1920s, expands the diegetic imaginary, inviting viewers to step in and strengthen their affiliation with the show. Analysed in the context of HBO's campaign, the trailers and titles support the kind of engagement that television executives now attach to immersive campaigns, which equally try to impress viewers by offering

something they can “take stuff from” (Grainge 94).

7. John Dunn, the show’s costume designer, exemplifies *Boardwalk Empire*’s naturalistic approach to 1920s culture with his description of how, in an effort to accurately reproduce period clothing, he had removed seams from period garments and had them analysed to understand the exact fabrication of the textiles (*Emmys: ‘Boardwalk Empire’*).
8. None of the goods produced by the partners appear in the show’s official merchandising, save for an engraved flask.
9. Neuromarketing draws upon recent findings in neuroscience to test consumers’ subconscious reactions to services, material goods and brands. A variety of softwares are being developed to evaluate a person’s purchase intent by measuring his/her brain’s electrical activity, skin temperature, eye movement, perspiration etc. The presupposition driving this new class of marketing research is that consumer preferences are the result of brain-body chemistry where unconscious attraction prevails over conscious engagement.
10. On the affective address of audiovisual aesthetics see Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*.
11. Keith M. Johnston rightly observes that “today the role of trailers is ever broader, as they proliferate in new types of exhibition formats in the consumer market (on DVDs, in store displays, on the Internet), and they are increasingly necessary to the assimilation, regeneration and replication of the film event. The pure cinema event is thus sensed as *never* present, but always coming – the attraction of the contemporary event film is ‘an attraction of coming’” (23-4).
12. *Boardwalk Empire*’s digital aesthetics is consistent with other branding strategies that HBO adopts to assert its role as the major producer of quality TV in America (Leverette, Ott and Buckley), where quality stands for a zeigeist approach and high-production values. Avi Santo argues

there can be little doubt that HBO has exploited the discursive ambiguities of defining “quality” programming in its marketing strategies. In fact, it is precisely through its promotional efforts that the pay network has reconceptualised the term “quality.” ... “quality” now denotes a distinction between HBO and other television networks, which is primarily marked by the exclusive access and cultural capital subscribers receive, which in turn, separates them from the masses who must settle for “must see TV.” (32)

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