

Pink!: Community, Contestation, and the Colour of Breast Cancer

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Abstract: This article focuses on the vibrant communicative media of colour, outlining its “codification” in public space and various challenges levelled at particular colour “codes.” Colour codification is presented as an active site where the visual is framed and deployed to advance particular ideas and goals—but is also strongly contested. Pertinent literature on the use of colour in public space is reviewed, providing a grounding for the analysis of ribbon campaigns and, more specifically, the contested use of pink per se in the breast cancer awareness movement.

Keywords: Cultural analysis; Breast cancer awareness; Visual culture; Ribbon campaigns

Résumé : Cet article porte sur le médium communicatif brillant qu’est la couleur, examinant la codification de celle-ci dans l’espace public ainsi que diverses critiques faites à l’égard de certains codes de couleur. On y présente la codification de couleurs comme un site actif où le visuel est encadré et déployé de manière à faire avancer certaines idées et certains objectifs – suivant une approche qui est fortement contestée. L’article passe aussi en revue des écrits pertinents sur l’utilisation de la couleur dans les espaces publics, ce qui permet d’effectuer l’analyse de campagnes employant des rubans de couleur et, en particulier, une campagne qui a suscité de la controverse, celle du ruban rose pour la sensibilisation au cancer du sein.

Mots clés : Analyse culturelle ; sensibilisation au cancer du sein ; culture visuelle ; campagnes de rubans.

On September 30, 2005, Mrs. Evelyn H. Lauder, Senior Corporate Vice President of the Estée Lauder Companies, proudly illuminated Houston’s City Hall in pink light. The following week, Boston’s Prudential Tower was also bathed in pink—as were other significant buildings, landmarks, and monuments worldwide: Ontario’s Niagara Falls and Capetown’s Table Mountain;

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Austria's Esterhazy Castle and Vienna's City Hall; Rome's Arco de Constantino and Belgium's European Parliament; New York's Empire State Building and Jerusalem's Museum of Art; Tokyo Tower and Tokyo's Rainbow Bridge; the Panama Canal; and many more. This was all part of the spectacular "Global Landmarks Illumination Initiative," an annual project geared to focusing public attention on the urgent need for breast cancer awareness and research. Over the past seven years, the initiative has illuminated hundreds of famous landmarks (from Elvis Presley's Graceland Mansion to the Leaning Tower of Pisa) in over 40 countries. Evelyn Lauder has explained that the project works to "raise Breast Cancer Awareness around the world by simultaneously uniting instantly recognizable landmarks in a blaze of pink light" (Breast Cancer Research Foundation, 2002).

Emblazing the world in light is not new, of course. Virilio (1994) writes about illuminating Paris with lanterns in the late 1600s and notes the "spectacle" of eighteenth-century electric street lighting, and Nye (1991) reveals the emergence of the "electric sublime" in America from 1880 to 1940—a sublime in which people's first contact with electric light occurred in public space. Electrifying a place to draw in people was the original rationale behind lighting up America's streets and store windows, theatres, restaurants, and World Fairs, an illumination building in intensity from the 1880s until American cities could lay claim, in 1900, to being "the most intensively lighted in the world" (Nye, 1998, p. 166).

Yet with the Global Landmarks Illumination Initiative, there is a presumption behind the light, one predicated on "drawing in people" on a completely different level. This global and public "blaze" of pink signals something quite different from Virilio's spectacle and Nye's sublime. The significance lies not in the light, but in the pink: in the idea that pink alone, whether tinting ribbons or beamed upon major landmarks, is the universal symbol of breast cancer awareness. To repeat Mrs. Lauder's claim, pink "raises Breast Cancer Awareness around the world" (BCRF, 2002).

Breast cancer awareness (and breast cancer marketing in particular) has become the focus of much recent commentary—ranging from critical feminist analyses (Orgad, 2005) to a focus on news coverage (Cho, 2006), social activism, and corporate philanthropy (King, 2006). Although this paper touches upon several of these issues, it probes how the colour pink in the breast cancer movement works as a form of public, politicized, and frequently contested communication. In a time in which trademark battles rage over the colour orange¹ and Cadbury claims rights to purple in the category of confectionary products, the idea that "colour communicates" seems a truism. However, the use of colour as a form of public communication—and one employed in social movements—has been largely overlooked. In this context, this paper will focus specifically on the use of pink in the breast cancer awareness movement and the ways in which the colour itself has become co-opted and made to signify through a network of signification, corporate products, and ideologies about women. Its frame is colour communication; it is interested in probing how public actors/groups and grass-roots organizations sometimes codify colour to accentuate campaigns intended for public benefit.

My contention is that the broad-scale, mass mobilization of pink by breast cancer survivors and supporters (and salespeople) aptly fulfils the function John Durham Peters accords to “communication” writ large: it has to do with the “task of building worlds together” (1999, p. 30). But as Peters also observes, sometimes mass dissemination results in a distortion of the message—and the research explores how the very practice of using colour to communicate poses unique challenges and can create factions, even within the breast cancer awareness movement itself. While the overall “success” of pink in the breast cancer campaign signals the power colour has to “build worlds together” (as per a community of survivors or supporters), a scrutiny of both the political use of colour and the cultural practices surrounding pink suggests worlds that are, in fact, very much divided—divided over both the gendered political articulations of colour and those who seek to exploit it for commercial gain.

This paper develops in three sections. First, it provides a cursory tour of the use of pink in connection with breast cancer and discusses the symbolic reasons for “communicating” with pink. Second, it deals with the major critiques of the pink “awareness” campaign, which pertain to the cultural practices of ribbon-wearing, the commodification of the cause, and the gendered political implications of using pink. Third, it assesses how illuminating the landscape in pink has implications for forms of activism, contestation, and the ability to control the public meaning of the colour.

The rise of pink and its public expression

Theorists of visual culture ranging from W. J. T. Mitchell (1994) and Nicholas Mirzoeff (1999) to Mark Poster (2002) affirm the public, active nature of visual culture and the power contained within images. But as scholars interested in the visual of colour will attest, colour is a complex semiotic system and philosophical epistemological issue that depends on context for its meaning (see Gage, 1993, 1999; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2002; Pastoreau, 2001). If visual culture is public and active, the *colour* visual in public space seems more active than other visual sites. Using colour alone (or colour “per se”) to connote presumes great awareness on the part of its actors, as there is no text to situate the message. Mirzoeff affirms that visual culture “does not depend on pictures themselves but the modern tendency to picture or visualize existence” (1999, p. 6)—and this demand to visualize reaches a sharp relief in the case of colour. Pink, for instance, is currently employed to call forth the “visualization” of a disease and all things pertaining to it: the pink ribbon and pink per se are used to connote breast cancer, breast cancer awareness, the search for the cure, the community of women afflicted by breast cancer, the survivors, support for the cause, and so forth.

How is it that pink achieved such clearly codified meaning and prominence in public space? And is it really a *public* expression? Despite the grand, corporately backed Global Landmarks Illumination Initiative, the pink/breast cancer link enjoys strong grass-roots and individual support. Pink’s linkage with breast cancer began with Nancy Brinker 17 years ago; she established the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation and the Race for the Cure in memory of her sister and started awarding bright pink visors to breast cancer survivors running

the race in 1990. In 1991, the foundation distributed pink ribbons to every participant in its New York City Race for the Cure (Fernandez, 1998). Merely a year later, that same ribbon received a huge promotional boost when *Self* magazine, striving to promote its issue devoted to Breast Cancer Awareness month, teamed up with Estée Lauder to create a massive pink-ribbon campaign. Estée Lauder cosmetic counters handed out 1.5 million ribbons in 1992, and since then, various organizations have distributed over 115 million pink ribbons (Danziger, 2002). Both organizations that originally “pushed” the pink are currently huge foundations: the Susan G. Komen Foundation has invested \$630 million into breast cancer research and awareness programs (Komen Breast Cancer Foundation, 2006) and Estée Lauder’s Breast Cancer Research Foundation awarded over \$22 million in new research grants in 2005 alone (Lauder, 2005).

Even though the pink ribbon was, from its inception, promoted by corporate interests, this does not detract from the public’s widespread embracement of pink in reference to breast cancer. Participants—and not only breast cancer survivors—of various runs, walks, and hikes “for the cure” often show their support by sporting pink clothing, ribbons, or hair. Canada’s Run for the Cure was described by a local race director as “a sea of pink,” which is likely why the notion of extending this to create a “Think Pink Week” (in both Canada and the U.S.) seems quite natural. Both countries also play host to “Pink Sunday,” a grass-roots effort in which local churches (in concert with an affiliate of the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation or the Komen Foundation) raise funds and speak to their congregations about breast cancer.

Pink has been embraced by those personally touched by breast cancer—in which pink becomes a badge of their struggle or triumph over the disease. Breast cancer survivor Dr. Margo Husby-Sheelar regards pink as a symbol of community, a hue that other survivors—and those who care about them—can rally around (personal communication, January 17, 2003), and myriad examples bear this out. There are the Cincinnati-based Pink Ribbon Girls—a “sisterhood” group for mothers stricken with breast cancer, which operates according to a type of grass-roots “viral” marketing. Spearheaded by three young survivors, the group meets monthly for support and friendship, striving to bring another survivor to each meeting. “Floating support groups” also exist, such as the dragon-boat racing teams cropping up across Canada and the U.S.—where team members wear pink, mostly, to indicate their battles with breast cancer and race vessels with such parodic names as “Knot a Breast” or “Abreast in a Boat.”

Support for the use of pink also emerges in the Pink Page Ladies, a website created to connect breast cancer survivors and to provide a venue where they can share their stories and struggles (<http://pinkpageladies.bcans.net/>). Displayed on this website, as with the Global Landmarks Illumination Initiative, are ethereal (and, in this case, virtual) applications of breast cancer’s codified pink. This plays out in references to such things as the Pink Bus—the magical creation of one of the survivors, but “boarded” by many. Ann, a breast cancer survivor from Perth, Australia, explains the bus to a fellow Pink Page Lady as follows:

A few or couple of years ago, when someone (I cant [*sic*] remember now whom), was very down, this ficticious [*sic*] magical pink bus happened.

So, when the pink bus went on a journey to comfort someone, (I was the second person to get it I believe—when diagnosed with liver mets, and I lost it), we all posted in with what we would take to comfort that person. Some would take their special music, some poetry, gentle hugs, sunshine, mountain air, special food, wines, humour, you name it). Debra the Bassplayer [sic] was a driver once, and others have shared the 'driving'.

I would post when the pink bus was being called out of it's [sic] garage, that I was coming up from Oz, on a super pink harley, and picking up the other downunderers on the way.

It's something we kinda get carried away with, but in the nicest possible way, and it's just amazing the support of a magical and caring way comes on the "Pink Bus". (Ann, Pink Page Ladies, January 11, 2003).

Countless other examples exist; suffice it to say that the feminine colour has been widely embraced, even though this has corresponded to both an increasingly complex pattern of signification and an increasingly diffuse audience. The pink visors first awarded solely to breast cancer survivors (signalling "survivor") almost immediately transformed into ribbons distributed to concerned parties (who could be those battling breast cancer, survivors, or supporters). In the process, one of colour's core functions in commercial culture—the signalling of identity (Elliott, 2007)—is diffused to mean, in this case, "things pertaining to breast cancer" in a more general sense. Yet at the same time, an overriding theme characterizing the discourse of both women fighting breast cancer and its survivors is pink's role in creating community. Breast cancer survivor Sandy Finestone (in keeping with the other groups just mentioned) proudly dons pink as a symbol of "sisterhood":

I co-chaired the Orange County Race for the Cure in 1996 and stand shoulder to shoulder every year with the other survivors in our pink caps and pink ribbons, as a beacon of hope to those women who were coming after us and who will stand with us the next year. (Finestone, 2003)

Communicating pink: Consensus movements and the "why" behind the (cancer) colour

Symbolically, pink makes sense. Pink has a connection to femininity; its prominence as a particularly "female" colour gained a stronghold in the 1950s postwar era (aided, in part, by Mamie Eisenhower's passion for pink and Mattel's highly successful Barbie doll) and flourished right into the 1970s as media and marketers used the colour as a pithy means of expressing ideas about women and womanhood (Peril, 2002). "Pink is the quintessential female colour," explains Margaret Walch, director of the Color Association of the United States. "The profile on pink is playful, life-affirming. We have studies as to its calming effect, its quieting effect, its lessening of stress. [Pastel pink] is a shade known to be health-giving; that's why we have expressions like 'in the pink.' You can't say a bad thing about it" (quoted in Fernandez, 1998). Pink, in short, is cancer inverted—life, health, play, joy. And its widespread codification in tandem with breast cancer can be interpreted as part of an activist movement: it is not an oppositional,

angry, or confrontational activism; it is a consensus movement, one “that lacks a countermovement and enjoys public, institutional, and financial support” (Myhre, 2001). Within this consensus movement, breast cancer activists have employed mostly peaceful strategies (such as educational drives and social awareness campaigns) to bring about social and political change. They have gained widespread public support for breast cancer issues, increased breast cancer research funding, directed breast cancer policy, and influenced the scientific research into the disease (Myhre, 2001). The “lack of countermovement” seems quite natural, for it proves difficult to be *against* breast cancer awareness. The activists’ cause (i.e., awareness, support) proves infinitely more innocuous than the disease itself.

But the story does not end here. One cannot simply take the public breast cancer movement and tie it up with a proverbial pink bow—for, contrary to the claims of Margaret Walch, you *can* say bad things about pink. And speaking in loud, anti-pink tones are vehement opponents who disapprove not of breast cancer awareness, support, or research, but of the pink woven throughout it.

Think before you pink: Challenges to the colour code

Ironically, the most fervent denouncers of this pink codification are survivors and militant activists themselves. Their disgust with “illuminating” the world in pink stems, first, from the generally empty practice of focusing on colour to make a political statement (specifically the cultural practice of ribbon wearing) and, second, from the degree to which large corporations have “commodified” pink, exploiting its codification to gain goodwill. Finally, the activists critique the pink awareness movement for distracting attention away from the real issue of seeking the cause and demanding a cure. Each of these critiques will be dealt with in turn.

Colour and cultural practice

Certainly, colour can be used to make a political statement (see, for example, Gage, 1993, 1999; McCracken, 1985; Pastoureau, 2001) and the fact that pink has been promoted by corporations like Estée Lauder does not necessarily mean that it will remain within their control. When marketers succeed in establishing colour as distinct to a product, it can also be exploited by social movements. Mecca-Cola, for instance, uses the bright Coke red colour to make a statement about American imperialism and global capitalism. Sold in Europe, as well as the Middle East, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and North Africa, Mecca-Cola’s slogan prescribes “Don’t drink stupid. Drink committed.”

But the most pertinent contemporary example of using colour to communicate a political statement by individuals and grass-roots organizations/activists emerges in ribbon campaigns—where vibrant strips of fabric (or little swatches of colour per se) convey meaning without requiring an “explanatory text.” The ribbon is the medium; colour conveys the message. This is the intent, at least, although the proliferation of symbolic ribbons can sometimes cause a degree of colourful confusion. Virtually every cause seems to have a ribbon, from purple signifying the “fight against urban violence” (Cerio & Rogers, 1993, p. 8) and Elder Abuse Awareness Day (Beech, 2005) to green ribbons for environmental activism and Canada’s Green Ribbon of Hope Campaign.²

Red ribbons, which the activist art group Visual AIDS first used in 1990 to

promote AIDS Awareness, also represent the pervasive and high-profile Mothers Against Drunk Driving campaign. More ribbons colour the annual American "Red Ribbon Week" anti-drug campaign, a national project started in 1985 to promote public awareness of drug and alcohol abuse. And most recently, Canada has witnessed the emergence of Red Fridays (where Canadians wear red to show support for the troops in Afghanistan—and where House of Commons employees, who generally follow strict dress codes, are permitted to display support by wearing red ribbons) (Lewis & Arseniuk, 2006). Given that the same coloured ribbon might signify support for anything ranging from AIDS awareness and anti-drug campaigns to Canadian troops and sobriety behind the wheel, it is difficult to assess precisely the political "stance" being taken by a person wearing a red ribbon. Even when the ribbon is generally accepted to represent a single cause (as with pink for breast cancer)—the meaning behind its display may remain ambiguous.

As Pershing & Yocom (1996) observe in their analysis of the "yellow ribboning" of America during the Gulf War, the display of ribbons could signify a range of things. Yellow ribbons, at a minimum, meant "the concern for human beings"; more generally, they meant "support for the troops" (Santino, 1992, p. 27). Sometimes participation in the "ribboning" meant using yellow to convey patriotism and support for government policy in the Gulf (Santino, 1992); other people, however, used yellow to convey the neutral, apolitical message of "support-the-troops-not-the-war" (Pershing & Yocom, 1996). Yellow ribbons' "supposedly neutral connotations" could, further, be manipulated by government and military leaders for their own purposes—so by filling airports, Air Force bases, and parade routes with yellow ribbons, they could co-opt the display to make it the symbol of bringing the "victorious" American troops home safely. According to Pershing & Yocom, this strategy allowed those in power to avoid public debate of the more "difficult questions" concerning the Iraq war. Within the context of Gulf War references, yellow ribbons took on myriad connotations, which allowed virtually everyone to participate, regardless of their moral or political stance on America's involvement in the war. The result was a public, and ultra-visible, illusion of solidarity.

As with yellow ribboning, pink has realized widespread public use, both decorating and transforming public space; and this colour spectacle, too, can function as an ambiguous (and sometimes empty) political gesture. Pink, as the mark of femininity and the badge of sisterhood, most certainly masks the horrors of the disease. What pink actually signifies is also in question, in terms of whether the ribbon wearers are survivors, supporters, or those currently battling the disease. Breast cancer's health-related aspects further raise the all-important question of what it means to wear a coloured ribbon. As Marita Sturken's *Tangled Memories* (1997) and David Roman's *Acts of Intervention* (1998) both point out in the context of the volatile debate within the AIDS community about red ribbons, you cannot wear a ribbon if you are dead.

Commodifying pink

That ribbon-wearing is a hollow cultural practice is only underscored by the degree to which corporations have worked to bolster this "pink awareness"

through cause-related marketing. King (2001; 2006) links the rise of cause-related marketing to the political climate of the Reagan administration, which encouraged private-sector activity in social programs via corporate tax cuts and by increasing the limits on charitable deductions for corporations. The result was a strategic philanthropy in which corporations treated "donations like investments" and therefore expected "some return from them" (2001, p. 121). Cause-related marketing, such as marketing breast cancer awareness, becomes a means of "adding value" to one's brand: as King attests, "marketing professionals are explicit in their belief that cause-related marketing should be first and foremost a strategy for selling products" (2001, p. 124). Indeed, this seems to be the case. *Advertising Age*, without a hint of irony, recently highlighted one success story with the headline "Raising Awareness, Doubling Sales." The lead chirps:

By turning its iconic red-and-white soup cans pink for Breast Cancer Awareness Month, Campbell Soup Co. has doubled sales of its top varieties to its biggest retail customer.

Tied to Kroger Co.'s annual Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation promotion, the pink-ribbon cans of condensed tomato and chicken-noodle soup have helped Campbell sell 7 million cans to Kroger for the crucial month of October when it normally sells the chain only 3.5 million cans. (Thompson, 2006, p. 4)

Soup, of course, is not the only product to turn pink for the cause. American Express used the pink ribbon to promote its (now expired) "Charge for the Cure" program, which donated one cent to the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation for every transaction made through the month of October. During the same timeframe, Cineplex Entertainment's "Spotlight on the Cure" donated a portion of each ticket sold to the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation. KitchenAid gave U.S.\$50 of each limited-edition pink stand mixer sold to Komen, and in 2002 Eureka Company launched its "Clean for the Cure," promising one dollar from the sale of each pink-ribboned LiteSpeed vacuum (up to U.S.\$250,000) to the Komen Foundation.

Such cause-related marketing campaigns abound: cosmetic giant Avon markets a whole Pink Ribbon product line, which includes "Kiss Goodbye to Breast Cancer lipsticks" in six pink-encased "crusade shades." Sun Soy sells soy milk in cartons with pink caps. Tweezerman markets pink "pink-ribbon" tweezers. New Balance offers "Lace Up for the Cure" cross-trainers sporting tiny embroidered pink ribbons. Yoplait prods customers to "Save Lids to Save Lives," setting aside 10 cents for every pink yogurt lid mailed in during a three-month span (up to \$750,000). And Old South promoted "Straws for the Cause," donating 5% of the purchase price of its eight-pack of drink boxes to breast cancer research.

For some people, the problem with all this charging, cleaning, mixing, tweezing, running, sipping—and, ultimately, shopping—for the cure is that certain corporations are getting rich off of the pink cause while diverting only nominal monies to it. In the grand scheme of things, donating *one cent* per transaction (as per American Express' Charge for the Cure) is not a lot of money. Avon's Pink Ribbon products—those flagged to benefit breast cancer research—were so suc-

cessful that they supplanted regular product sales, so the company initially changed its policy to better serve the bottom line³ (Anthony, 2002). Should one “Yoplait-for-the-cure,” it would take four months of eating three containers of yogurt per day to raise a paltry \$36 for breast cancer research (Breast Cancer Action, 2006).

In light of this, advocacy groups such as the San Francisco-based Breast Cancer Action (BCA) group have launched awareness projects of their own. BCA’s “Think Before You Pink” campaign exhorts people to ask critical questions of the companies pinked in pink: “How much money goes to the cause? What is it supporting? How is it being raised? And will it truly affect the fight against breast cancer?” (BCA, 2006). It has challenged Avon’s “Walks for Breast Cancer” for staging its events through a private, for-profit company—and for funneling over a third of each dollar raised (in contributions and pledges) into advertising, event expenses, and overhead (BCA, 2005). BCA’s provocative *New York Times* advertisement (published October 16, 2002) queried the Eureka vacuum campaign with “Who’s really cleaning up here?” since less than 1% of the vacuum’s purchase price benefits a breast cancer organization. And BCA supporters such as Ellen Leopold, author of *A Darker Ribbon: Breast Cancer, Women, and Their Doctors in the Twentieth Century* (1999), have questioned the Komen Foundation for obscuring how its fundraising monies/expenses are distributed (Leopold, 2000). BCA’s list of pink-ribbon “crimes” is lengthy, and the grassroots advocacy group uses the derogative term “pinkwashing” to critique corporations that conjure up fuzzy pink campaigns which, at their core, have more to do with the colour green (money).

Seeking the cause

BCA—just like many groups that foster the pink “code”—is composed primarily of those touched by breast cancer. Six of the 14 members currently on the Board of Directors have or have had breast cancer, as does the Executive Director, Barbara Brenner. Not surprisingly, the 16-year-old group was also spearheaded by a breast cancer victim, who was joined by others similarly frustrated with the scanty and often narrow information about cancer’s causes and treatments provided by government agencies and other organizations. With its thousands of supporters, BCA loudly challenges researchers, government, and organizations to effect *real* change in the battle against breast cancer.

Within this challenge, pink is implicated a second time, this time for acting as a rosy red herring that softly suggests that “awareness” is enough. Bathing our landscapes in pink is lovely, but it does not demand change: pink does not force corporations to account for the realities of a toxic environment that causes cancer; pink does not challenge medical procedures that disfigure women while keeping open the possibility of recurrence, nor does it halt the “treatments” that cause substantial illness and pain; pink does not question government policies or pharmaceutical companies that push dubious, if not dangerous, drugs; and pink does not demand fundamental changes in the health care system. In short, the (earlier discussed) consensus movement built around pink works, in fact, as a blockage to real political action. Katie Silberman from the Center for Environmental Health in Oakland, California, decries the “insidious” roadblocks

generated from *within* the breast cancer community as a result of hundreds of thousands of women succumbing to what she considers another destructive malady—"pink ribbon-itis"—which prompts them to "race for the cure" instead of the cause (Silberman, 2002). So while the consensus movement exists in one "arena," it is in fact fraught: the conciliatory tone of those who find pink comforting is challenged by activists (like the BCA supporters) who argue that these pink-coloured glasses actually debilitate the movement.

Perhaps this frailty lies in the pink itself, a hue that the Pantone Institute "profiles" as little more than a pretty wallflower:

It [pink] is associated with romance, sweetness, delicacy, refinement and tenderness. Pink people are interested in the world around them, but *they do not throw themselves into participating with the ardour of the red person.* (Pantone, 2001, emphasis added)

It goes without saying that this "profile" of pink is extremely gendered. Embedded in this description is a series of presumptions about the "agents" who embrace the colour. According to this description, "pink people" would be satisfied with raising breast cancer *awareness* in lieu of seeking its cause. "Pink people" must be the ones partial to "pink ribbon-itis," the epidemic that codifies a colour only to transform it into a cosmetic that softens the very harsh realities of the disease.

"A mammogram leads to a cult of pink kitsch," realized Barbara Ehrenreich upon being diagnosed with breast cancer (Ehrenreich, 2001, p. 43), and the resulting perpetual pink ambush drove the award-winning journalist and social critic into a justifiable rancour: "Let me be hacked to death by a madman, is my silent supplication—anything but suffocation by the pink sticky sentiment embodied in that [breast cancer teddy] bear ..." (p. 44). In her 2001 *Harper's* article titled "Welcome to Cancerland," Ehrenreich rails against the teddy bears and pink-ribbon brooches, the pink trinkets and accessories (made by both survivors and corporations) intended to comfort the sufferer and signal her spot in the breast cancer sisterhood. Ehrenreich rejects the infantilizing and cheerful "prevailing pinkness" (p. 52) of society's response, the message that suggests ribbons and cuddly teddies are the means of dealing with this devastating disease. "[C]ertainly men diagnosed with prostate cancer do not receive gifts of Matchbox cars," she remarks (pp. 46-47).

Something other than pink got Ehrenreich through her "treatments"—something far less pastel: "What sustained me ... is a purifying rage, a resolve framed in the sleepless nights of chemotherapy, to see the last polluter, along with, say, the last smug health insurance operative, strangled with the last pink ribbon" (p. 53).

As BCA affirms on its white-on-black button: "Cancer Sucks."

The gendered political articulations of pink and its implications for creating "community"

Ehrenreich's rage indicates the need for a different kind of community of women in relation to the battle against breast cancer. As Lisa Cartwright argues in her exploration of visual media in the politics of breast cancer, "community" formation on the basis of health and illness

is always highly provisional and unstable, in part because group formation takes place on the basis of a condition or experience that is always strongly determined by more conventional identity categories. Illness ... must always be lived through other categories of identity and community. (Cartwright, 1998, p. 119)

The only identity category being promoted through the pink "awareness" campaign, however, is one of femininity, rooted in the signifiers of being a girl. (Pink does not connote the reality of hair loss, illness from chemotherapy, body wasting, et cetera.) Pink further works to collapse the illness, regardless of its form, under one gendered category: it does not distinguish between survivor, struggler, or supporter, but simply indicates gender. Certainly, the colour places "breast cancer awareness" in the public arena—and supporters might argue that this reflects the broader process of making the disease more visible: "from the taboo that surrounded it in the nineteenth century to its emergence in the limelight" (Orgad, 2005, p. 141). But all pink really does is make the hue of femininity more visible. Even if the ostensible "message" of breast cancer awareness being mass disseminated is embraced, the disease itself remains a fundamentally private affair. *Awareness* is public; the disease is private.⁴

Perhaps the most obvious question regarding the use of pink in the context of breast cancer is one also raised in feminist studies on breast cancer and online communication; namely, does the communication help to transform women's experiences and their cultural and social environment? Does it, in short, open up a space of dialogue and action for women (Orgad, 2005)?

Pink's "communication," as already noted, is transformative only in the sense of being publicly visible. It does not necessarily promote dialogue. As Ehrenreich realized, the cult of pink can actually become a means through which the intensely personal experience of cancer becomes "managed" or channelled by others. Pink teddy bears and other kitsch items work to signal the "appropriate" response of survivors, suggesting a comforting form of shared experience, but one that (as in the case of Ehrenreich and other BCA members) not all survivors support. This pink of breast cancer awareness, operating as a type of public property, can challenge patients' own control over their response to the disease. And if the essence of true dialogue is the freedom to participate (or not), the overwhelming application of pink means that many afflicted women find it difficult not to participate in the "pinking" of breast cancer. They are drawn into the communication by well-meaning supporters who may feel that gifting pink trinkets is the appropriate response to one who is battling the disease.

Assessing pink in public space

Collectively, this widespread recognition of pink as signalling breast cancer issues raises some interesting points on the particular nature of successfully codifying colour per se. First, we must return to the most ethereal instance of the "code"—the Global Landmarks Illumination Initiative, in which pink light becomes a spectral mass language and form of disembodied communication. Scholarly research on the history of electrification in America has shown that lighted landscapes or the electrification of the city historically had much to do with money and the marketplace: the lighting of street ways and store windows

was publicly experienced but driven by private, commercial interests (Nye, 1998). Estée Lauder's pink "illumination initiative" equally meshes commerce, light, and landscape, although the illumination is presented as a public service—a "light" to raise breast cancer awareness. Within this public service, pink is paramount. Lighting the Leaning Tower of Pisa or Empire State Building in white light would not convey the same message, although those *contesting* the pink might reasonably ask, "Why the Leaning Tower? Why these global landmarks?" As with all electrical illumination, the pink light edits the landscape by dramatizing portions of it, telling people what is (or is not) significant. But there is nothing particularly breast cancer-related about Graceland or Niagara Falls; in fact, more of a disjunctive correlation arises in beaming the pink light of breast cancer awareness upon the home of Elvis or one of the natural wonders of the world. If the goal is to raise breast cancer *awareness*, should the hospitals and cancer treatment centres not receive pink-light treatment? Or, in a move Ehrenreich and BCA might endorse, why not light up polluting and pharmaceutical companies in pink—thus drawing attention to (and raising awareness of) possible sources of breast cancer?

A second key point about breast cancer's pink stems from the obviously contested nature of the 'pink' concept, a challenge that prods us to revisit Walch's claim that "you can't say anything bad" about pink. Indeed, you can. Pink per se really is not the problem, although the sentimentality and bright-siding that pink both represents and inspires raises considerable ire in those who feel that militant activism—not pink-ribboned sentimentality—holds the "cure" for breast cancer.

Walch's advertence to the "health giving" expression "in the pink" is equally provocative. The *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* traces a variant of this verbalism back to Shakespeare, who pens "the very pink of courtesy" in *Romeo and Juliet* (II.iv.); here, pink means "embodiment" or "perfection," and thus logically connects with being at the "top point," or apex, of health. Note that neither of these usages pertains to colour—they both stem from the old English *pynca*, meaning "point," which is where the notion of "pinking" emerges, as well as the verb form's definition of "piercing" or "stabbing." Connecting breast cancer's pink with "in the pink," then, is at very best, a denial; at worst, a joke. Breast cancer literally *pierces through* one's health—and many women's journey to mastectomy begins with the tiny stab incision of a needle-core biopsy.

The irony of this pink, both coveted and despised, is that the virtue seen and grasped by pink's promoters is the weakness flagged by its detractors. Community, sisterhood, and awareness via pink—pink's sentimentality, cheeriness, and call for graceful acceptance—all of these "virtues" are contested by certain counter-publics who assert that militancy, intense questioning, and even anger must drive the struggle against breast cancer. Women protesting the use of pink do so because the hue conspires in diluting the "red" of activism—the heroic action, militancy, passion, and anger—into a rosy sentimentality of teddy bears, lighted landscapes, and t-shirts. Pink is red drained of power. And breast cancer patients who fully embrace pink, they argue, make social action merely incidental to that larger comforting pink of awareness and sisterhood. In challenging this,

more-militant advocacy groups such as BCA strive to ensure that pink remains a prop and not a crutch.

The problems of control

Contestation of the use of pink results in a situation unique to codifying colour per se. Scholars such as Rosemary Coombe (1998) have illustrated how different forms of control, such as those sanctioned by intellectual property laws, can actually provide a space for politicization and community formation. Widely recognized trademarks, for instance, can be appropriated, altered, and re-worked by grass-roots or marginal groups to serve entirely different agendas—"to create other meanings, alternative identities, and new forums for recognition" (1998, p. 134). With pink per se and the pink-ribbon campaign, however, there is not the same "space" to rewrite the text. How do you "bend" pink or turn it upside down? How do you recreate the meaning of a pink ribbon? Of pink itself? You could literally invert the form, as BCA Ottawa has done, with a pink-ribbon symbol that stands on its head (as a teardrop) to represent "the tears shed" when one (or a loved one) is diagnosed—although this very subtle twist does not address the "unribboned" pink flooding through public space. The only real alternative is to block the pink outright, as BCA's "Think Before You Pink" campaign urges us to do. Contesting the pink in this way is not merely a political act or challenge to commercialism; it also illustrates the push-pull of this type of colour use, which jostles between the *push* toward pink's promotion by individuals or grass-roots groups, as well as its appropriation by commercial players, and the *pull* demonstrated by pink's detractors, who are equally grass-roots.

Despite this tension, contemporary legal regimes work to sanction and endorse the breast cancer awareness movement's particular and public use of pink. In the United States, wordmarks such as Pink Ribbon™, Pink Ribbons Crusade™, Pink Ribbons Project™, Pink Ribbon Regatta™, Pink Ribbon Challenge™, and Pink Ribbon Celebration™ are registered trademarks, and all of these words referencing pink pertain to charitable services and projects intended to benefit breast cancer research and awareness. The pink ribbon itself is in the public domain, and if you e-mail the Komen Foundation, they will send you a "virtual" pink ribbon that you can use to decorate your website, e-mails, personal stories, and so forth. In Canada, the pink-ribbon *design* has been designated as an official mark under section (9) of the *Trade-marks Act*.⁵ Non-profit organizations such as the national Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation (CBCF) and The Cure Foundation were granted the pink ribbon (with pink as a feature of the official mark) in 2001 to promote breast cancer awareness and support education, research, diagnosis, and treatment initiatives. However, the control over this ribbon plays out on a commercial front—corporations pay the CBCF \$25,000 to use the image nationally for a year, but the Foundation allows individuals to use the pink ribbon for non-commercial purposes. And those who *do* hold title to an "official mark" (that is, a mark adopted by public authorities in the name of the public interest) have great discretion over its use—and could conceivably use this power to prevent critiques by those who disagree with its application.

Conclusions: How pink it is. . .

A number of observations emerge in exploring how the colour pink of breast cancer awareness “communicates” in public space. Indisputably, this use of pink is highly effective in terms of making the cause visible, and for some women, it functions as a helpful sign of community, sisterhood, and comfort as they battle the ravages of cancer. Pink’s associations with femininity reinforce the general “femaleness” of the disease, act as a form of comfort, and underscore the fact that neither breast cancer nor a mastectomy has any power to destroy one’s femininity. In this context, pink can be viewed as helpful and empowering. However, the commodification of breast cancer awareness, largely through cause-related marketing and promoting the colour pink, raises acute problems in suggesting that shopping for the cure or accumulating pink trinkets might be enough. This escalating pink promotion actually works to undermine the genuine community or “sisterhood” that groups such as the Pink Page Ladies and the Pink Ribbon Girls signal through their use of pink, because the colour itself comes to mean a range of things (survivor, supporter, awareness, profit ...).

In contesting this exploitation of pink by corporate interests, however, some activists such as BCA are left struggling over not merely the commodification of the cause, but also the ethos that they believe pink represents: namely, a “consensus movement” that is far too conciliatory and accepting and lacks real demands for change. For these activists, pink is a dangerous cosmetic that softens the anger, co-opts the dialogue, and conceals the real villains on the public stage. Pink is public, but it conveys a very limited sense of collective responsibility. Its exploitation in the context of breast cancer awareness and marketing works both to direct the social response to the illness (in terms of buying for the cure and applying pink to show support) and, more dangerously, to displace more aggressive political demands for responsibility in terms of women’s health.

Notes

France Telecom’s Orange Personal Communications Ltd. subsidiary owns the rights to Pantone No. 151 (orange) in the U.K. for all things related to its telecommunications services. It began court action in February 2005 against easyMobile for using a very similar shade of orange in promoting its cellphone services. The difficulty is that easyMobile is a subsidiary of easyGroup, which is well known for the signature orange shellacking its entire discount brand—a brand spanning jet planes, car rentals, Internet cafes, movie theatres, cruise lines, male toiletries, and pizza delivery.

Canada’s Green Ribbon of Hope Campaign was started in 1992 by the students of Holy Cross Secondary School in St. Catharines, Ontario, after the disappearance of Kristen French. The Green Ribbon Campaign, as well as the green symbol, has since been trademarked by Child Find Canada Inc. (TMA451100).

Originally, 100% of the profit from its Kiss Goodbye to Breast Cancer Lipstick went to breast cancer research. Yet as president of Avon Canada, Tony Anriganello, stated in 2002, “Sales of those [pink ribbon] items went through the roof. At the same time people didn’t buy other things ... That’s not always excellent from a business point of view.” As such, Avon changed its policy so that \$1 of every \$5 lipstick went toward breast cancer research (Anthony, 2002, p. E2).

This relates to Leopold’s critique of the “privatisation of breast cancer” (1999) and is supported by Orgad’s work on the use of computer-mediated communication for breast cancer. As Orgad notes, “despite the growing public discourse on breast cancer in the last few decades, the ways the illness is communicated confine it to a large extent within narratives of individual struggle, and discourage full recognition of the illness as social” (2005, p. 192).

Official marks are only available to "Public Authorities"—and while the government does not directly define this status, eligibility requires the entity to be non-profit, to benefit the public, and to have some degree of government financial support. Of course, demonstrating government financial support can be as straightforward as gaining charitable status.

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