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PARIS, LONDON AND BRITTANY

THE GAMES OF INNOVATION AND CHANCE

BY PAUL AUDI*



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ALWAYS

1938

1998

FOREVER

While the word “innovation” clearly indicates a relation to novelty, it still does not reflect the close connection generally found between the introduction of something new into an established order or system – which is its definition – and those two phenomena that are appropriation and luck.

Of course, what one always sees, first of all, is the sufficiently interesting emergence of something new, or a renewal; the inception of something that, in any case, results from a change, a rupture, a discontinuity. But two of its constituent features usually remain obscure. First of all there is the fact

that innovation presupposes and always rests on the appropriation of a given, to which is assigned a finality that goes beyond the one for which it was originally instituted. Then there is the fact that, to a large degree, this appropriation has much more to do with chance than with the resolute implementation of a method, the scrupulous application of a programme, the felicitous consequences of assured anticipation, or a pondered prediction.

These two conjoined components mean that innovation is not so far away from creation, which, as we know, consists in bringing into existence something that

* Paul Audi is a philosopher. His work explores the relation between ethics and aesthetics.

did not exist before, and that perhaps had never been imagined. However, while a creative person will certainly seek to innovate, that is, to contribute, at least on a certain level, something new, something not seen before, something unknown, it is not necessarily the case that the innovator will act as a creator, in the sense that an innovation does not need to

conjure something out of nothing. Some would say that innovation is to creation what artisanship is to art. It is certainly tempting to think so, even if it would take a long reasoned argument to justify such an assertion. Let us simply observe, instead, that rather than creation, which is clearly not the same thing as innovation, we should talk in terms of “creativity”.



Studio Harano-Peradi

PARIS – LONDON THE BIRKIN BAG

The year is 1984. A woman is seated next to a man on the Paris-London flight. Perfect strangers. The plane takes off. The woman rummages for something in her shopping bag. It falls, spilling papers. The man helps her pick everything up and they start to chat. The woman speaks with a strong British accent. She complains about not finding a bag to hold all the stuff she likes to tote around. The man reaches into his pocket and takes out a red leather notebook, then the pencil from the holder attached. His name is Jean-Louis Dumas, and he heads a house founded by his great-great-grandfather. He is endlessly curious, especially when it comes to unexpected challenges. He listens to the woman and, as she speaks, sketches this bag that did not exist in Paris and will be designed before they arrive in London. This legendary bag drawn among the clouds will find its place alongside the famous *Kelly* in the windows of desire and take its name from the young Jane: *Birkin*.

What never comes to the fore, then, is the fact that innovation, in its very creativity, depends on certain conditions. What are these? As has been said, the first condition for an innovation to occur is that there should be an invention to work with. For when an innovation appears it is always against the background of an invention. An innovation depends on

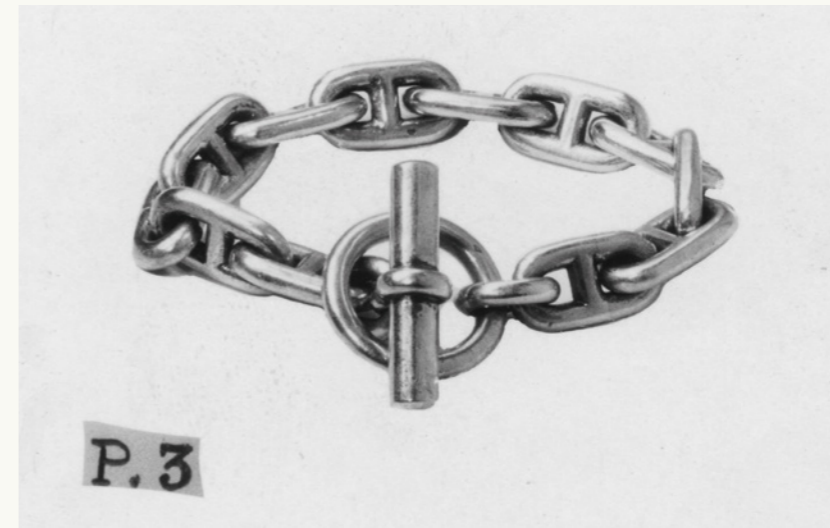
an invention insofar as it exhausts itself in the appropriation and exploration of that invention's potentialities. To say that an innovation arises in the wake of an invention already recognised as such is to say that it acts mainly on something invented. In reality, though, it is the invention itself that ordains innovation, by the simple fact of giving rise to objective productions or



Serge Guenard

PARIS THE DOUBLE TOUR STRAP

Martin Margiela is eyeing a suitcase. From 1997 to 2003 he will be artistic director of Hermès women's ready-to-wear collections, but for now he is a student who divides his time between Antwerp, Paris and London and loves to wander through flea markets. This case that has caught his eye is unusual. It is fastened by a long leather strap wound twice around its body. "*Double tour, hmm, intéressant*", Martin Margiela says to himself (we presume). So the young man gets himself a leather strap and, back at home, wraps it about his waist. Again, it goes around twice. And very fine it looks, too. The student resumes his activities and matures, as does his art. Then one day, in 1998, he remembers that suitcase strap passed around his middle and invents the *double tour* strap for the *Cape Cod* watch, designed by Henri d'Origny. Which is how observation of a simple suitcase years before became the creative spark behind a fashion classic.



Photography and printing Draeger/Archives Hermès

BRITTANY THE CHAÎNE D'ANCRE BRACELET

Robert Dumas is on holiday by the sea. The son-in-law of Émile Hermès (he is married to his daughter Jacqueline) loves to saunter along the shore, looking for pebbles to add to his collection. Now, in this small Breton harbour, his roving gaze settles on an anchor. The interlacing links of its chain send his mind haring into a parallel dimension where he recomposes what he sees: the anchor chain becomes a bracelet around a woman's wrist. Simple, so obvious once it's there, this transposition is extended in the coming years to tableware, ties and watches. Inspired since forever by the equestrian world, the spirit of the house had been swept by sea spray, and invigorated.

practical applications – in other words, all those things that are part of what we call the implementation process.

Whether out of the desire to experiment or the concern to improve, the innovator always appropriates and implements (meaning, applies his or her own solutions to) an invention in order to “make a difference” in a given area (commercial competition, for example) where it seems extremely important that this difference should exist and be seen. In fact, one effect of an innovation is even to stabilize an invention by making it exist in a given socio-economic environment, just as it will give said innovation

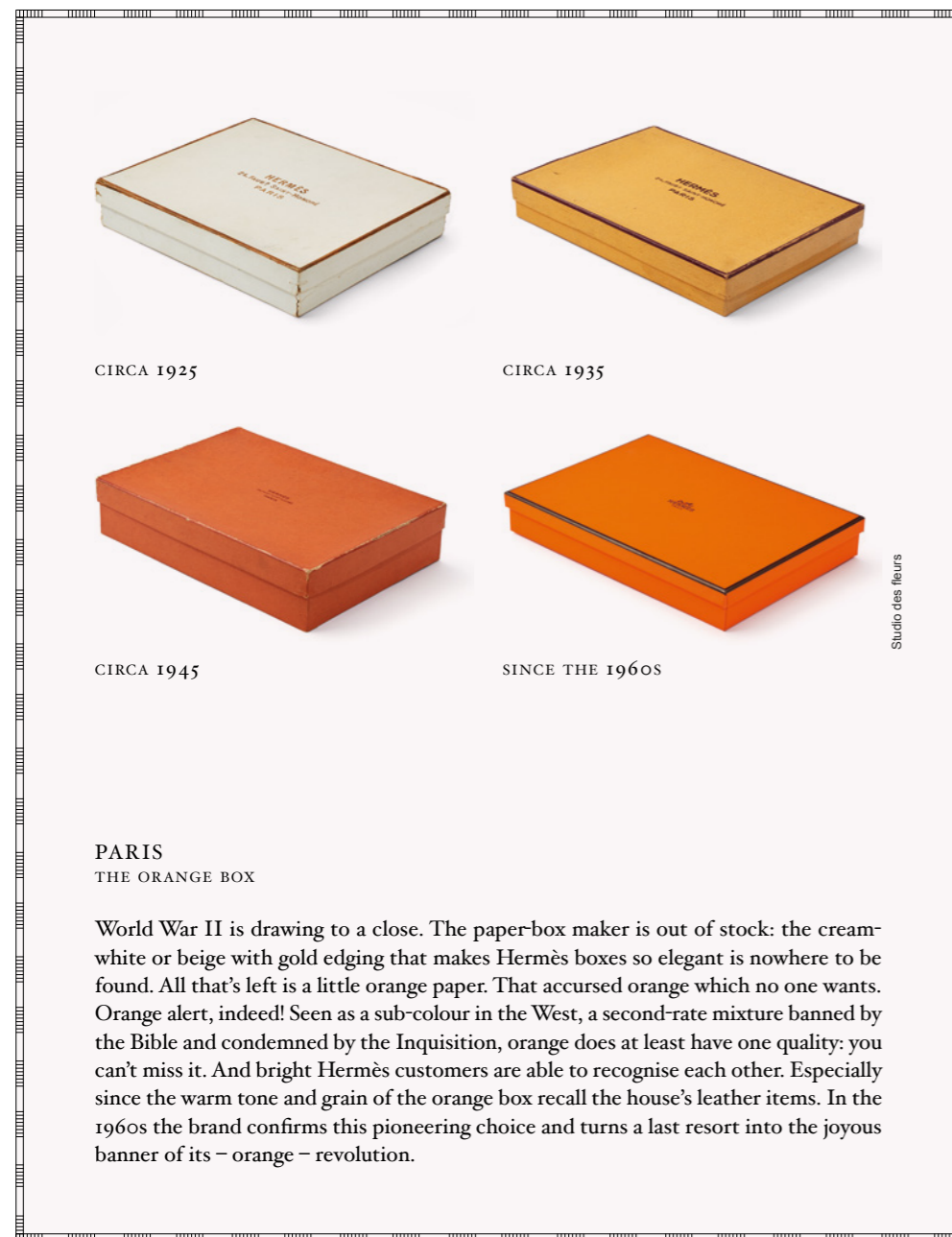
the chance of enjoying success, the success that comes from the approval shown by a certain public.

As an example, consider the touch screen on computers. This is not so much an invention, strictly speaking, as a technological innovation that took advantage of already-existing technical inventions which had been duly instituted, i.e., validated, made public and shared with a view to collective use. If innovation occurred, it was insofar as this computer peripheral resulted from the combination of two heterogeneous and originally unrelated functionalities: the display function on a monitor and the

pointing function that locates and orients commands on the monitor's digital surface. The innovation here consists wholly in the idea and implementation of this combination which no one had thought of before. This device was new not only in its form but also in its function, which has renewed the way this kind of apparatus is used. It came about because of the need,

both economic and ergonomic, to reduce the number of peripherals acting on the system in question. It is no surprise, then, that the innovation was a success with consumers and producers alike.

The second condition for innovation is even less frequently observed: it is the fact that the innovator needs to be lucky. Luck, which means chancing upon a productive



PARIS
THE ORANGE BOX

World War II is drawing to a close. The paper-box maker is out of stock: the cream-white or beige with gold edging that makes Hermès boxes so elegant is nowhere to be found. All that's left is a little orange paper. That accursed orange which no one wants. Orange alert, indeed! Seen as a sub-colour in the West, a second-rate mixture banned by the Bible and condemned by the Inquisition, orange does at least have one quality: you can't miss it. And bright Hermès customers are able to recognise each other. Especially since the warm tone and grain of the orange box recall the house's leather items. In the 1960s the brand confirms this pioneering choice and turns a last resort into the joyous banner of its – orange – revolution.

application for the invention, constitutes a capital dimension of the act of innovating. The innovator needs to know how to make luck work for him, how to seduce and tame it when, all of a sudden, and quite unexpectedly, it appears before him. The great innovator is someone who has given the unforeseen free rein, who has even made it his ally, a collaboration as stimulating as it is productive. To innovate is to rely on this unexpected partner in order to succeed. Why? Because such is chance that it serves both to reveal and to catalyse unsuspected potential. Consider the painter Francis Bacon, who thought long and hard about the role that “accident” is supposed to play in art-making, in the creative process itself. He recognised that he could never be sure if it was pure chance or the manipulation of chance: “in my case,” he said, “I feel that anything I’ve ever liked at all has been the result of an accident on which I have been able to work. Because it has given me a disorientated vision of a fact I was attempting to trap.”¹ These are the words of an artist attuned to the benefits of disorientation about which Gilles Deleuze wrote this insightful observation: “Chance, according to Bacon, is inseparable from a possibility of utilisation. It is *manipulated chance, as opposed to conceived or seen probabilities.*”² This commentary applies perfectly to innovation. Not only does innovation never bank on conceived or seen probabilities, but the fact of letting fortune take the lead, of opening up to the manna of the moment may, while not particularly “creative” in itself, quite possibly turn out to be a factor for innovation if and when chance ends up being manipulated in a very precise direction: in order to reorient or reassign to something else that which, by definition, serves as its original support, namely, the terms of an invention.

For our example this time, think of the zip fastener that Émile Hermès first saw when he was travelling in the United States during World War I, and that he brought

back and put to a completely new use. Having obtained exclusive French rights to this patented invention, this ingenious mind had the idea of displacing its field of application and modalities of use in order to adapt it to the luxury leather goods on which Hermès had built its reputation, thereby creating an original product born from the meeting of industry and artisanship, of beauty and utility, of fashion and routine, of cleverness and simplicity, and of elegance and necessity.

Intrinsically, then, invention and innovation go hand in hand. But they cannot be taken as the same thing. It is the fact of trying to improve or reorient the fruit of an already instituted invention that most clearly distinguishes an innovator from an inventor. He grasps the invention with the same vivacity as he grasps chance, and he appropriates them both to ends that in some cases will appear to him only after the event. But if, when he implements an invention in an original way, it is always with a view to improving or changing something, it is first and foremost in light of that originality that we should conclude that he is effectually innovating. Thus, there is no innovation that does not secretly pay homage to an invention, or that does not indirectly salute the virtues of chance. Providing, of course, that one has the talent to successfully manipulate this stroke of chance. And this means making it lucky, by giving something signally new the chance to emerge and become effectual.

Whether in terms of its practical outcome or its gratuitous outcome, innovation always takes up a given invention with the aim of experimenting with its effects in unexpected, unsuspected fields, or of making chance productive in ways remote from everything already tried and tested. And so it is that in exploring the field of possibilities, and even by trying ingeniously to extend their scope, it is the future itself that the innovator institutes, as a partner in the game.

¹ David Sylvester, *Interviews with Bacon*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1980.

² Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, New York: Continuum, 2003.

