

# Missoulian

## Bigger, faster, better The culture of more, more, more has escalated into the extreme - and it seems it will only continue

**BEN BLOCH for the Missoulian | Posted: Thursday, September 30, 2004 12:00 am**

Last month, a New Yorker article by Kevin Conley discussed how theme parks, in order to compete, have to keep designing roller coasters that climb higher, go faster, and loop harder than the last best predecessor.

The current crème de la crème of roller coasters, Cedar Point amusement park's 420-foot-high Top Thrill Dragster, requires that riders remove all sharp jewelry because the g-force of the downward free fall is so strong, an errant piece could shoot up and pierce a fellow rider like shrapnel.

It's a simple technological equation: To maintain our interest, a thing (anything) has to advance, get bigger, more dangerous, faster, and provide more thrills. With that notion lodged in my mind, I couldn't help but think of how escalation, this product of our desire, impacts all aspects of the world around us.

And by examining how escalation operates in life, we gain access to an important aspect of how art works its magic. Following are a few examples from life, before I discuss the concept in art terms.

Take the realm of sports. Thirty years ago, people basically only skied downhill or cross country; now we have snowboard half-pipes, hot-dogging, heli-skiing and kite-boarding.

Likewise, the art of skate-boarding and moto-cross biking have been transformed by ever more dangerous (and ever more beautiful) gravity-defying tricks.

But perhaps the most dramatic example is the emergence of extreme fighting, which grew up in the 1990s with the introduction of the Ultimate Fighting Championship, a no-holds-barred tournament in which the contenders fought in a cagelike ring, and were free to use any means necessary to defeat opponents in hand-to-hand combat. The matches would pit the toughest street fighter against a Jiu Jitsu expert, and it was not uncommon to see brutality unheard of in regulated boxing matches - eye-gouging, head-butting and purposely tearing at wounds.

Though these competitions - sometimes deemed to be the human equivalent of a razor-clawed cock fights - were eventually outlawed in the United States, the star fighters (a group consisting of behemoth men from all over the world) are now looked upon as heroes in Japan, where matches continue to take place regularly in front of stadium-sized crowds.

Then, of course, we have the ever more bizarre world of reality TV, a whole new paradigm of entertainment that depends heavily upon escalation to maintain audience interest. It has grown from simple shows like "The Real World" and "Survivor" to spouse swapping and plastic surgery makeovers.

The next wave of these shows, apparently, includes a prize-winning competition where the goal is to find the highest-quality sperm with which to impregnate a female subject. This seems significant (and extreme), as the quality of one's DNA is a scientific fact, and reveals an almost fascist-like tendency for these shows to begin escalating their tension by adding the cold facts of objectivity to our already heated emotions.

Outside of the world of sports and entertainment, we see evidence of this phenomenon pervasively. Take, for example, the popularity of ultra intense breath mints such as Altoids, the size of consumer SUVs (the latest of which is said to dwarf the Hummer), superstores such as Home Depot, Costco and Wal-Mart, energy bars and drinks, communication technologies, prescription and recreational drugs, water slides and video games.

Art is no different. It doesn't live or excite us unless it grows upon itself, and often this involves an increase in intensity that matches the culture in which it exists. For any artwork to truly thrive, it must possess a certain quality of newness, an intensity of creativity

that often shocks and disturbs.

In the early 20th century, Kasimir Malevich shocked the world by painting an extreme vision of absence: a white square on a white canvas. Later, artists such as Sol LeWitt and Robert Rauschenberg got more extreme with the idea of nothingness by redirecting the focus from objects to the thoughts that precede them.

This tendency toward reduction, however, proved to be a kind of dead end. So we were fortunate when Andy Warhol came along and exploded through this impending stagnation by showing us - with his Campbell's soup cans and celebrity portraits - that the whole of culture can, indeed should, be looked at as art. By defiling the purity of fine art, Warhol opened up a whole new potential for subject matter.

Soon afterward, Chris Burden, in a now-famous performance (which at the time befuddled audiences), shot himself in the arm for the self-proclaimed reason that it was an intense - and extremely painful - sensation that he simply desired to experience in his life.

Art today, as it continues to merge with life and to build on the past, becomes inarguably more extreme by following an expanding reality into the realm of the virtual, where it can now exist as a bit of computer code launched off into cyberspace.

Missoula artist Ben Bloch is a freelance writer whose column appears regularly in the Entertainer. Reach him at [BBloch4775@aol.com](mailto:BBloch4775@aol.com).