

MC Escher: the world's first data artist?

Data is often thought of as a new medium for artists, but it has long been central to the art world. MC Escher was a true data artist in that mathematics was central to his work.

He created art by understanding the rules and patterns of the world and through this understanding he liberated his creativity. He could follow or bend these rules to create art works that make the viewer think differently.

The creative industries can use data in the very same way. We use it to understand the rules and patterns of all aspects of communications, including culture, consumer behaviour and brand categories.

In , January 1935, Lithograph, Escher plays with a mirrored sphere and the perspective it gives by capturing the entire scene and distorting it at the same time. Data can be a mirror to the world. It gives us an understanding of how people are feeling and how as a brand you can choose to respond. Right now, as we continue to seek out the new normal, agencies and brands are more keen than ever to track rapidly shifting consumer behaviour and attitudes in order to create communications that resonate.

Many brands had very similar responses following the outbreak of the pandemic, putting out generic messaging around togetherness and identikit campaigns featuring user generated content showing people at home or on Zoom calls. Data can help you avoid this trap. By understanding what people really cared about or needed, some brands were able to respond in more meaningful ways. BT's Tech Tips, for instance, used search data to understand the technical challenges people wanted solving, and EE appealed to the UK's support of the NHS by

taking meaningful action.



Well before the pandemic, back in 2017, Snickers understood this need to provide a meaningful response. It built a tool to measure internet users' hunger levels and then offered a real-time discount promotion when consumers were really 'hangry', fitting in brilliantly with its wider 'You're Not You When You're Hungry' campaign.

But while data can hold up a mirror to life, it is not life itself. Trending searches or our bank account transactions and purchase histories don't tell the whole story. Just like you need to understand Escher was holding a sphere, you need to understand the shape of the data you are looking at and the context around it in order to use information in a creative way.

Data doesn't just reflect the world, it can also show you how to defy expectations and step out of convention. It helps you to understand the rules of formulaic content, and once you have gained that understanding, you can use your creativity to decide which rules to keep and which to break. Escher did this to powerful effect in which the water in the waterfall is

flowing upward. By understanding and then ditching the rules, you make life, art and advertising more interesting.



Modern data techniques are reminiscent of Escher's command of perspective. NLP techniques that de-code language help us understand the gaps between the way consumers and industries speak. Computer vision enables us to classify the visual world to identify visual conventions and distinctive content. But whether it's understanding words or images, formulas don't need to be blindly followed. Understanding the current formula just sets a creative challenge: how can you best break the rules to drive emotion, interest and action?

This convention defying approach is particularly important for industries such as financial services where the formalities of financial speak have been a barrier to equal access. I'm encouraged to see it changing, with examples like which uses humour to engage a young audience. For Direct Line's latest campaign, we used the category conventions of superheroes to defy typical insurance messaging. I hope that as the industry

learns to use data as a tool, this rule-breaking can become the norm.



In the art world, Aaron Koblin's visual expressions of data, and Luq R Dubois' musical compositions are perhaps my favourite examples of Escher's continuing legacy. Escher's is for me an illustration of the symbiotic nature of data and creativity. Data can be the output of creativity whilst also being a tool. Colours and shapes are themselves data points, and in the same way we turn images into data, we can also turn data into imagery.

Whether you're trying to entertain or educate, data can tell a story that makes people sit up and listen. *The Economist's* iconic campaigns, which use graphics and stats to tell an interesting story, show how data can be the basis for cut-through communications. The same is true for Spotify's 'Wrapped' campaign, which was informed by users' eccentric listening habits (like one person playing 'Sorry' 42 times on Valentine's Day).

People like to know their own data and be in the position to evaluate what that says about their choices and habits. Some

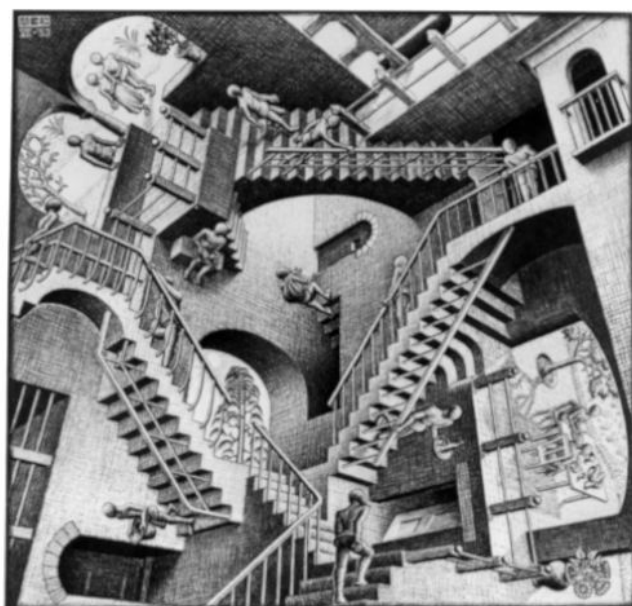
brands are adept at presenting users' personal data back to them in a creative way. Monzo, the financial services startup, allows people to track different aspects of their spending habits. But in their art, Koblin & Dubois have taken the expression of data beyond graphs and numbers, a direction I'd love to see brand creatives explore.

In this vein, British Airways harnessed data to inform the creative executions in its 'Magic of Flying' campaign, using custom built technology to track aircraft and adapt the display on digital poster sites as the planes went overhead.

Data is such a rich tool for artists, creatives, brands and communicators. Like Escher, we can see data as the sphere that both reflects and distorts the world around it. We can master the mathematical rules and give ourselves the power to manipulate them. And we can embrace the concept of data as symbiotic with the creative hand. But however we see it, data is definitively not the answer; it is the marvellous tool by which you reach it.

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