

## IPAD SANTA

*Bert Vandecasteele – bert.vdc@gmail.com – 30.01.13*

It's two days before Christmas, it's absurdly hot and Milka is doing a promotion at Hauptbahnhof. Now as far as chocolate in Berlin goes, I always figured Hauptbahnhof was more like the Ritter Sport sector, what with all of the usual posters depicting the esthetical insides of their exotic flavours like „Olympia“, „Mousse au Chocolat“ and „Erdbeerjogurt“. They turned chocolate advertizing into a geometrically perfect art form – like Körperwelten, only „Quadratisch. Praktisch, Gut.“.

No Ritter Sport posters today, though. Nowhere.

As the travelers – myself included – drag their bags across the busy, futuristic train station halls, Hauptbahnhof is Milka town. It's a winter wonderland, where children wrapped in thick layers of clothes prance around a snowy meadow, catching falling stars while listening to merry tunes. Well, at least that's what's on the screen – in actuality, these kids are flailing around a very sad and cold train station bumping into every possible passer-by while their movements are being filmed by a hidden camera and tracked onto the screen. The illusion might work for the kids – mainly because their dancing keeps them warm – but for the parents standing by the side, freezing their butts off, it's nothing but a low-polygon nightmare.

But the video game isn't for grown-ups – it's for the kids. And when they win – and personally, I suspect this thing is rigged so even that kid in the back of the class that eats dirt could – a tightly dressed, strangely sexy purple-and-white Milka woman wearing Milka earmuffs and Milka leggings, gives them, you guessed it, free Milka chocolate.

I automatically come to a halt. Marketing disguised as a video game to stimulate my intellect? Cute hopping kids for my paternal instincts? And beautiful women for not particular reason? Christmas has come two days early.

A kid with a yellow cap seems to play for the heck of it and goes crazy seeing itself (can't tell

whether boy or girl) on the big screen. His father is staring at one of the lila girls, getting an opportunity to see the vision of the Milka chocolate empire incorporated in the body of a hot 20 year-old underpaid model instead of the usual Milka cow. All the while his wife watches from afar, stuffing her face with free chocolate and probably wondering what the fuck happened to her life.

But that wasn't what caught my eye and made me do a double-take. What caught my eye was this: Whenever the kids win the game, a digitally animated Santa, dressed in Coca-Cola colours (which is a shame as he'd be a perfect Milka Cow) waggles onto the screen and congratulates them. What he says might seem random at first, but it's not: it's a mixture of randomly selected phrases like „Ich freue mich!“, „Lecker! Schokolade!“, „Du bist der beste Sternenfänger!“ or just the one-word „Scharf!“.

For a second, I wondered whether a video game algorithm was selecting these sentences. But that would leave room for bugs like „Du bist“ and “SCHARF“ or “Leck“ and “mich“. I think the parents would take offense and Milka's digital Santa would be branded a pedophile in the Bild Zeitung next to a Michelle aus Brandenburg who loves to play with her kitten (and models for Milka in her spare time).

So I looked around. And surely, I found what I was looking for: in the back, hidden behind a lonely Ritter sport advertisement, stood a man about my age wearing a dark brown rain coat. He looked a bit like Herr Flick from the Gestapo in Allo Allo, who in turn looks a bit like the bad guy from the old Willie Wonka and the Chocolate factory from the seventies, who in turn looks a bit like Hitler.

His hands are firmly gripping his iPad. He's got a focused look on his face. And what is he looking at so intently? No, not the kids. (Jesus.) He's looking at the screen!

I glance at the screen once more. As a little boy wearing a turquoise ski-suit (really, parents? Turquoise!?) wins, Santa emerges on the screen. Suddenly, the guy starts tapping on his iPad like a mad man.

Suddenly, I get it. This guy is programming the video game as we go along. He is controlling Santa, instructing him what to say and do. Like a puppet. This is Being John Malkovich – only in real

life and chocolate-themed.

So, yeah.

This guy is Santa!

I'm gonna let that sink in for a second.

Pretty awesome, right?! I mean: say you meet those Milka models at a party, and you talk to them because you're a horny 20-year-old and that's what you do and you go like „Hey what do you do for a living“ and they go „Handing out chocolates and giving young dads uncomfortable boners“. I don't know what you'd think, but I'd think: bo-ring. Might as well be a bank clerk or an accountant or kill yourself. But this guy, say you walk up to this guy and ask him „Hey what do you do for a living“ and he goes „I'm Santa“ - BAM! You're instantly hooked. So many things to ask! „But I thought Santa wasn't real?“ and he'd go „But I'm standing in front of you“ and you'd be believer all over again and shakingly sit on his lap and it'd be a Christmas goddamn miracle!

Seriously. I would take so much pride into doing his job. Imagine me being Santa. I look good in red. I would man the sleigh – I mean the iPad – with pride. I would make those little kids so fucking gleeful with Christmas spirit they wouldn't know what hit'em.

Not this guy, though. He's just standing there, pressing buttons, hidden behind the Ritter Sport enemy lines. All the while he could be standing out in the spotlight. He could jump out at the kids and yell: „Surprise! It's me, Santa! Ho ho ho!“

Ach, I think: maybe he's just having a bad day.

But then I get worried.

What if he has a burn-out? What if he's depressed? Jesus Christ, what if he's so depressed he reprograms his iPad and *hacks Santa Clause?! Santa would show up on the 20 meter tall screen wearing nothing but a thong and nipple stickers à la Janet Jackson, going „Schnappe meine Sterne!“. Imagine the pure minds he would ruin!*

Maybe I should act? Maybe I should take a card from the gun-wielding republican soccer

moms? Maybe I should step in and confiscate his iPad „to protect our children“?

Only then something else happens. A miracle. For the first time, he looks away from the screen. And looks directly at me. His blue eyes are staring into mine. He looks like a deer in headlights. Scared. Suddenly, I pity him. He's just another unhappy guy, living at the edge of sanity in a cold, dark metropolis that'll fuck you up if you're not careful.

I could save him, you know. We could shut the Santa operation down, get in a cab and take off wherever they don't celebrate Christmas – maybe Thailand or Israel?

I look at him, mustering courage to speak. To divulge my master plan. I brace myself for the tsunami of emotions that might come crashing down over me once I tell him I get his cruel fate, that I understand.

“Hey”, I say, my voice a bit raspier than I'd like.

He looks at me confusedly, a frown forming on his face.

We stand in silence for a bit as I look for words to express my deepest concern for this poor, lost soul. He must see the immense concentration on my face. Helpfully, he utters one word: “Watn?”

I finally start speaking, my voice quavering as I do. “Ich... wollte sagen... also... naja... dass ich es verstehe. ...Verstehst du?”

He looks me dead in the eyes, probably also trying to find the perfect words. I think about how I touched this guy, how this is one of those cases where one person reaches out and truly, deeply touches someone and changes his life forever. A true Christmas miracle.

Only instead comes this:

„Stehst im Weg, Spacko.“

Oh.

I take a step to the side and say:

„Frohe Weihnachten.“

He looks back at the screen.

„Jau, geil, ho ho ho.“

I take my bag. Well that settles that, I think as I move out of Milka Country and towards the ICE to Munich. Guess some people don't *want* to be saved.