

SCREENLAND

That Much-Despised Apple Ad Could Be More Disturbing Than It Looks

Tech companies are running low on new experiences to offer us. A new ad for the iPad contains revealing hints of where they could go next.

By Peter C. Baker

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If you haven't yet seen the new and already-infamous Apple ad — the one in which a giant mechanical compactor violently crushes a bunch of musical instruments, books, sculptures, art supplies and toys, turning them into an iPad Pro — then Apple's executives are probably happy. They've seen the headlines: "Apple iPad Ad Is Bad"; "Why the Stink of That Bad, Bad iPad Ad Won't Go Away"; "Apple's New iPad Ad Is a Neat Metaphor for the End of the World." They've seen the mocking posts on social media. They're aware that Hugh Grant has weighed in. ("The destruction of the human experience," he wrote on X. "Courtesy of Silicon Valley.") In response, Apple has done what it hardly ever does: It apologized. "We missed the mark with this video, and we're sorry," one of its vice presidents said. Apple won't air the ad on TV. It wants to move on, and it wants you to do the same.

But I can't quite move on, and I'm sure I'm not alone. The ad — titled "Crush!" — is simply too good. I don't mean that it's clever, wise or uplifting. I mean that, like many Apple products, it was clearly made with exacting, no-expenses-spared attention to detail. The slow-motion, high-resolution focus on each object's destruction — the way we watch up close as they bend before breaking, as if resisting the inevitable — has a visceral effect that's hard to shake. The electronics company LG made essentially the same ad in 2008, as an advertisement for its Renoir camera phone, but it lacked that Apple touch. Unfortunately for Apple, "Crush!" achieves every ad maker's goal: It imprints in the mind's eye.

Just as transfixing is the real-world back story it implies. Picture it: A team of experienced, well-paid professionals spent months refining a strategy. Ideas were pitched, culled, refined, mocked up. Eventually, after countless steps, a winner emerged, and somehow it was *this*. They could have depicted all that gear being cheerfully

shrunk and squeezed into one iPad, awaiting creative fun. Instead, they went with just demolishing it all. Did no one point out that people are increasingly wary of tech companies' impact on the creative professions? That people have soured on Silicon Valley's apparent desire to monetize human creativity in as many ways as possible, from extractive streaming arrangements to harvesting human-made art as A.I.-training material? Did no one sense how *bad* this would look? It's not just that the ad is a car crash — it's that the people who poured so much work and money into something so off-putting appear to have thought they were orchestrating a parade.

It wasn't so long ago that tech companies could advertise by telling us about new possibilities. Whatever their flaws, they really were injecting genuine novelty into the human experience: Suddenly you could carry thousands of songs in your pocket, take a decent picture on your phone and instantly share it, make a video call to someone on the other side of the planet. It wasn't hard for ads to set an optimistic tone; they simply showed people using new products in their daily lives and having new flavors of fun doing it.

This has largely ceased to be the case. We're no longer accustomed to the Apples and Googles of the world wowing us with new products. They have tried — with the Metaverse, with assorted wacky headsets — but for years now, nothing has really stuck. Instead, there are refinements and variations on existing products. The difference from one phone to the next is mostly for connoisseurs to parse. Improvements in processing power make little difference for average users. Online stores and streaming platforms are basically indistinguishable. From the people who brought you the iPod, here come ... some TV shows?

Even the companies themselves often seem at a loss for something to say about new products. For all its lavishly detailed smashes and splatters, "Crush!" contains not one representation of something a human might use an iPad *for*; it contains no humans, full stop. All we learn about the new iPad is that, in addition to being the "most powerful" ever, it's "also the thinnest," as though anyone were walking around finding iPads unbearably chunky.

The campaign for the new Google Pixel phone has similar deficits. A key feature advertised is the A.I.-powered "Magic Editor," which makes it easy to manipulate photos. One user is shown altering a shot of a man throwing a child in the air, making it look as if the baby went higher than it did. (She also erases everyone from the surrounding beach.) This isn't a new experience; it's a new tool for falsifying the record of experience. A recent Photoshop ad is even more bizarre, showing a young woman taking a picture of her subway car, editing it to look like a restaurant, then AirDropping the image to

everyone in range. No one has ever done this, and if someone ever tries to AirDrop you a file on public transit, *do not accept it.*

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But people didn't just find "Crush!" puzzling or ineffective. They found it gross and offensive. This is because we haven't just discarded our expectation of novel new technology. We've also replaced it with a growing awareness of tech's aims: the data-harvesting, the desire to increase screen time at any cost, the monopolistic business practices, the A.I. tools that threaten artistic careers. After a decade during which it felt as if computers were empowering human creativity, they now feel like a symbol of the forces that stand in creativity's way and starve it of oxygen. We make ourselves feel better about these developments by trashing evidence of them — like "Crush!" — on social media. We retweet Hugh Grant. We gawk indignantly when tech sells solutions that no one wants: Did you see what the chief executive of Bumble said? That maybe the future of online dating is two people having their A.I. "concierges" talk to each other? Who *are* these people?

I wouldn't be surprised if tech companies started to internalize this public distrust — and compete to broadcast how well they understand our fears. Soon after Apple released "Crush!" Samsung released a spot of its own with the hashtag #UnCrush. It shows a young woman walking through what appears to be the scene of the Apple ad, surveying the wreckage. She finds a battered acoustic guitar that survived the destruction and starts strumming it, humming out a melody. She consults sheet music on a Samsung tablet. "Creativity cannot be crushed," reads the overlaid text.

It's a warmer, less menacing ad than Apple's destructo-fest, and we can probably expect more of its kind: cozy reassurances that *this* giant tech company is operating with utmost concern for all that is most precious to us. Shake off the warm feeling, though, and you see that "UnCrush" is as hollow as its predecessor. It's an ad for the Samsung Galaxy S9 tablet series, the company's first to be billed as "A.I.-powered." How does A.I. enhance sheet music? The ad contains no suggestion. Its only real content is: *Whatever Samsung might be, it is in some unspecified way not Apple.*

Watch the two ads back to back, and you see that they're more similar than different, equally vague in their hand waving about similar products. In this sense, we may come to see the harsh repulsiveness of "Crush!" as a useful gift — a reminder of the sort of rot to look out for as ad makers learn from their mistakes. We're used to distrusting ads because of their tendency to deceive. "Crush!" might be something different: an unintentional artifact of the truth, not yet compressed beyond recognition by the machine.

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