



Founded five years ago to exploit a quirk in German media law, Schein Berlin designs ersatz products for use in TV shows, film, even video games.

# Total Fakers

You say that like it's a bad thing. But for Schein Berlin, designing fake products for TV and film is very, very good.

---

By **Jude Stewart**



**Picture the supermarket checkout belt** spilling over with its bright cornucopia: a postmodern Dutch still life. A clutch of verdant canned vegetables sits between a squat box of Altril, that trusty laundry detergent for the German hausfrau, and this week's *ALEXA* magazine, whose cover asks searchingly, "White Jeans: Which Ones Don't Make You Look Fat?" A bottle of Glenwood single malt looms in the background, envy and privilege clinging almost palpably to its neck. Those Morphin headache tablets suggest a girl fallen on tough times, but the Safermo condom pack perks up the scene somewhat. Whose groceries are these?

Step back to peek at the shopper, but tread carefully as you do: The cameraman is hard on your heels, and we're losing daylight.

Welcome to the world behind the screen, as designed by Schein Berlin. Working out of an old nuts-and-bolts factory on the city's scrappy-chic thoroughfare Kastanienallee, the firm started five years ago to exploit a quirk in German media law: It's verboten to place real products in a TV show or film without explicitly labeling them as paid advertising. (Imagine a Bond flick in full compliance, bubbling madly with disclaimers like VH-1's *Pop-Up Video*.) Enter Schein, which designs fake everyday products of all kinds for use in TV shows, films, even video games. Their territory has extended beyond merely replacing real brands to inventing a panoply of props for Hollywood movies. (Fittingly, "Schein" means both "appearance" and "fake" in German.) Churning out soap, beer bottles, sex shop signage, law firm stationery, and even TV shows within TV shows, the boys at Schein are more than just armchair experts on what makes consumer brands tick. Enter Schein's looking-glass world, and you may find your own work, reflected back with the tiniest wink and skew.

#### ENJOY COCOLA!

"Until recently, German TV shows weren't allowed at all to earn money from product placement," says Henning Brehm, a designer with close-cropped brown hair and a round, impish face haloed in scruff. He works on Schein projects with fellow designer Jan Hülpmisch and photographer Daniel Porsdorf and creates real prod-

ucts at his own agency, Design Tourist. "The idea was to ensure that private companies had no influence over a TV program's content outside of the commercials," Brehm continues. While restrictions have relaxed for private channels, publicly funded TV stations cannot include undisclosed advertising within a show's content—a rule still strictly enforced, as broadcasters ARD and ZDF learned in 2005 after surreptitiously inserting product placements within shows.

"Even as restrictions have loosened, our products are often still more attractive, because [real products] involve all kinds of complicated contracts with the rights holders," Brehm says. "It just slows down an already chaotic, last-minute production schedule." Not only do "rights-free" products sidestep an increasingly complex set of EU product placement regulations, there is another unexpected benefit: "Product placement can actually have a negative impact on selling ad time," Brehm says. "With Pepsi products as part of the show, Coca-Cola doesn't buy ads." For long-running TV shows with reruns, flexible ad sales tactics are crucial.

Schein's game depends on instinct, speed, and volume. For the German TV show *Gute Zeiten, Schlechte Zeiten* (In Good Times and Bad), the firm typically cranks out a dozen new products per week—more than 500 so far. "Usually we can figure out most of what we need to design, just from the descriptions of people in the scripts," Brehm explains. Zip through the script, hit grocery stores and the internet, bang out some sprightly fakes, run their would-be brand names past the copyright office for conflicts, and poof! A bewildering variety of plausible fakes is born. Then, of course, come the last-minute requests, like a beer that teachers might drink after a handball match or a women's magazine flipped through distractedly at the dentist's office. Not only is the work cycle built on speed, but the results are similarly fleeting. In an interview with news site Deutsche Welle, Brehm describes an entire Russian supermarket Schein created for the 2004 film *The Bourne Supremacy*: "We spent half the night taping and stacking cartons, then we watched the film and were really disappointed at the way the camera simply rushed by."

Film work has its leisurely side, though: With longer lead times, the Schein team members can immerse themselves in researching



Stills from the 2004 film *The Bourne Supremacy*. Schein designed posters, exteriors, and interiors, and the products that fill them.



*Use this issue...  
as a TV dinner  
tray for watching  
Project Runway*

**Racing through  
so many examples  
of sham brands brings  
up big-picture questions,  
like: What makes a  
brand convincing in  
the first place?**



"A brand's power to convince comes from the marketing budget backing it," says Brehm. "Our work is about creating brands that don't confuse viewers, but rather just lead them along."

**“We definitely have fun with naming,” Brehm notes. “But you can’t push it too far.” Well, not *always*.**



and creating an integrated look. Their work on the 2005 feature *V for Vendetta* offers a remarkably comprehensive example. “All the institutions had to be designed: The ruling party, police, military, TV stations, newspapers, and the postal service were integrally connected to the story,” Brehm says. “The question was, how would life have developed under these conditions—namely, a dictatorship in Great Britain?” Their zealous interpretation touched posters, TV stations, public transit, even the Queen-less currency.

*Downfall*, the 2004 drama that imagines Hitler’s last days in the bunker, pushed Schein into historical territory, researching and reproducing World War II-era brands and props, while stirring a faintly repugnant stew of history at the same time. “Working on *Downfall* left us with a bitter aftertaste,” Brehm recalls. “The research required visiting a lot of shady websites.” Re-creating actual, hateful symbols—unlike the slick comic fantasy world of *V*—provides strong proof of the talismanic power of brands, either to invigorate a story with pleasant verisimilitude or taint it with a nauseating whiff of the past.





Use this issue...  
to get friendly  
with Lexicon and  
Gotham Rounded



From left: Designer Jan Hülpmusch, photographer Daniel Porsdorf, and designer Henning Brehm of Schein Berlin.

The agency's most recent projects smudge the lines between reality and art even more: postwar street signs and products for 2006's *The Good German*; a film adaptation of *Treasure Island* (complete with collectible treasure cards); and the Berlin-based TV detective drama *R.I.S.*, for which Schein will design graphic elements, as well as stage and shoot all crime scenes.

#### BRANDS, REALITY, AND THE TINY GAP IN BETWEEN

Racing through so many examples of sham brands brings up big-picture questions, like: What makes a brand convincing in the first place? How can brands navigate that narrow space between convention—all the design trappings that reassure us that, yes, this is soda, soap, moisturizer—and the baby steps into new visual language that make a brand stand out? Brehm reframes the question: “A brand’s power to convince comes chiefly from the marketing budget backing it, the advertisements that hammer that brand into our memories,” he points out. “Naturally, we don’t do that with our fake products. Our work is mainly about creating brands that seem authentic, that don’t confuse viewers, but rather just lead them along.” Also, no one sinks advertising dollars into a brand that doesn’t itself exude some magic. In its purposeful restraint, Schein’s work offers a study in mediocrity, of safe decisions you’d never invest in, versus the calculated, brilliant leap you would. “Oh, we’re harsh critics,” laughs Brehm. “What we’ve really learned is there are plenty more real brands that look like fakes than you’d realize!”

So what constitutes that critical tiny difference? Brehm looks to evolution for clues. “Designs evolve over the years, with limited differences between them and everyone eyeing everyone else,” he avers. “Real revolutions just don’t exist. We realize most brands are the result of patterns consumers have learned over years, which makes it easy to ‘invent anew’ on top of that.” Thinking about brands in evolutionary terms not only helps Schein release fully adaptive brands into the world quickly, it also suggests an object lesson for designers looking to break out. If you can pinpoint the

reasons behind your competitors’ habits in the wild, you can seek out adaptations no one has tried. Most will squawk and fail, dodo-like, but a few will trick your predators and your prey.

Brehm’s theory of evolution addresses other questions: Why have brands arrived at these peculiar design conventions? Why are detergent designs so futuristic, when the product is not? Why has it been largely taboo to use black on food packaging? Like the appendix and like nipples on men, each design rule once served a purpose. Brehm sees Jane Jetson behind laundry detergent designs: He points to “a mix of competence and supposedly high-tech inventiveness (“ultra,” “oxi”) along with subcategories like fabric softener and detergents for woolens, whose bottles played on clichés of the female figure.” Never mind that this is all irrelevant to teenage boys today, pressed into doing laundry by a working mother; old design rules die hard.

Like pocket ecologies in biological evolution, conventions also arise differently based on habitat. Take Germany’s Consumer Product A—beer. “German beers all look very similar: coats of arms, specific typefaces, and a defined mix of colors,” Brehm says. “It’s rare to find a red beer label in Germany, unlike in America. Germans go for green, brown, gold, and silver. Right now, German manufacturers are copying each other in a new trend, in which beer doesn’t come in dark bottles anymore but in translucent ones, with names like ‘Gold,’ ‘Sun,’ or ‘Fresh.’ You could easily add ‘Summer’ to that list.” If “Summer” represents the middling solution, then a totally clear or frosted bottle, or a wittier name suggesting brightness, zing, or sunburns and frankfurters, might push a new brand into the foreground.

More than anything, Schein’s work points to the fact that the “real” brand-world is an imaginary reality we dream up, and then live in, daily. Supermarkets, billboards, and all the screens that beguile our idle moments are wallpapered with our longing. German cultural philosopher Theodor Adorno said it best: “In appearance is the promise of what doesn’t appear.” Fakes can telegraph the deepest truths—everything that we long for and cannot find.