THE DIALECTICS OF ADVERTISING: THE SEARCH FOR AN INDIAN TRADITION

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ABSTRACT

A study of contemporary advertising need to take into account the influence of western aesthetics of representation on Indian advertising as well as the intertextuality between advertising and other Indian art forms. On the basis that advertising in India is situated within and in continuation with a long tradition of representational formats that are uniquely Indian, this paper examines the sign-system of advertising in the Indian context using a semiotic approach. The author suggests that the organisation of time and space in a society influence both, the technical and representational aspects of advertising, and goes on to examine the cultural construction and desire, reality, and identity as factors that influence the reception of advertisements in a culture. This paper thus, presents an argument for taking into consideration the unique position of advertising in Indian society and exploring creative options offered through the development of an indigenous aesthetic tradition.

Keywords: Dialectics, Advertising, Postmodernism, Homogenisation, Psychoanalysts

The field of advertising, which in its contemporary form was established in the second half of the twentieth century, has now moved to the cultural centre stage. It works through make believe images which, by offering stylised images of social reality, present entertaining patterns. These articulate tangentially an aspiration for westernisation that had previously caught the Indian imagination throughout the colonial period and left powerful residues in every image-making field. One finds that the aesthetics of contemporary Indian advertising behave to a great extent been influenced by representational techniques used in western advertisements, possibly to an extent that has severely limited the exploration of the Indian aesthetic tradition as developed in other art forms. As in the case with other mediums of expression and communication in India, an impact of International styles & philosophies is not

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only inevitable, but also desirable, so long as it helps to further crystallise and define the identity of the subject under question. For instance, in the area of art and literature, both western and Asian philosophies influenced the work of modern artist and philosophers like Tagore and Aubindo, to give rise to a wholly indigenous art and philosophy.

Postmodernism blurs the boundaries between art and mass culture. Different styles and philosophies generate intertextuality through the mutual impact of one medium upon another. The ad world for instance, draws sustenance from Indian cinema, which provides images of love, glamour, happiness and sorrow to the advertising medium, as well as regular supply of film celebrities. Cinema itself on the other hand, has its roots in Indian’s folk theatre, music tradition, early modern paintings and of the romantic sentimental novel that had captivated the attention of the India reading public, influences that advertising doesn’t visibly incorporate into its images. However, buy going for glamour as entertainment as its single polar star, it has now acquired the solidity of a tradition in which superficial or topical fantasy alone occupies the cultural spaces reserved for significant patterns in other art forms.

For Indian advertising to develop its own aesthetics tradition, it is essential to treat it as a form of expression on a par with other art forms, a argument that has been suggested Seema Khaanwalkar (2001). Khanwalker conceptualises modern advertising as one of the communicative ‘Variants’ on a parallel plan with classical literature, folklore and religion and suggests that as advertising shares a base with other discourses, some thematic continuities should exist between these forms. Situated thus, within a long tradition of representation, advertising in India assumes a unique identity that cannot be considered in isolation from other Indian art forms as well as the specific organisation of Indian society and culture.

The task of establishing an Indian method or tradition of advertising is, of course, not an easy one, given that advertising is one of the battlefields where the battle between preservation of local lifestyles and the project of cultural globalisation is staged. Advertising then, in its contemporary form can be said to embody a janus-faced duality between homogenisation and differentiation. While putting on recorded my personal disapproval of any project that destroys diversity of language, culture and lifestyle, in consideration of the complexity of factors working towards creating a monolithic and undifferentiated mass of consumers, I believe that it would be reductive to blame advertising per se. This country has always had a special position for storytelling, evident in the popularity of oral and folk literature, mythology and cinema. Advertising in one sense, preserves the tradition.

Drawing from the theoretical traditions of semiotics and psychoanalysis, I will demonstrate that making advertising context specific involves elements beyond the visual inclusion of local images. (For instance, the use of Indian film and cricket celebrities by Pepsi and Coca Cola are examples of ads that are visually localised). It will be argued that in addition to incorporating locally relevant images, the project of localising communication needs to take into consideration structural and psychological factors that influence an audience reception of the message.
The relationship between advertising and the Indian audience has been a complex one, akin more to the exchange of furtive glances, rather than a direct gaze in addressing the others presence. This has been conditions by the socialistic attitude popular in a newly independent India, as well as the traditionally low status accorded to greed, excessive material consumption and immodest sexuality. Embedded thus within the divergent forces of traditional value system and the apparent face of modernisation through acquisition of modern products and acceptance of sexual imagery, advertising had to initially struggle for admissible acceptance within Indian civil society as well as academics circles.

In the western world, advertising became accepted as a legitimate area of academic study in the 1960s and 1970s and as a discipline was especially influenced by the semiotics of Ferdinand de Saussure. Theories have been published under the title of course in General Linguistics (1911) in which he identifies the need for a common cultural framework for the interpretation of meaning. Saussure’s theory is based on the relation between thought and language, and he argues that thought is a shapeless mass, which is only ordered by language suggesting that no ideas pre-exist language, language it self gives shape to ideas and makes them expressible.

The structuralise framework established by de Saussure had a great impact on several areas of study and his ideas were further developed by Roland Barthes (1972) in his seminal work Mythologies, where he analyse popular culture as a narrative text. Marshal McLuhan (1951, 1964) while exploring the technological impact of communication as is popularised through his statement ‘the medium is the message ‘and in particular through his analyses of advertising has made significant contributions to the field of semiotics and popular culture. Umberto Eco’s (1977) A theory of Semiotics forms the basis for the work of several authors in the field and another important work is Judith Williamson’s (1978) Decoding Advertisements where she very succinctly displays how advertisements operate at the level of signs uncovering the layers of codes that are put to use, and maintains that ads can be analysed un terms of culture and ideology that implicate the production of the texts. Erving Goffman’s (1976) analysis of the representation of gender illustrates ritual-like behaviour in advertisements portraying an ideal conception of the two sexes and their structural relationship to each other.

Barthes, McLuhan, Eco, Williamson and Goffman in their analysis of popular culture and advertisements have argued advertising needs to be understood from semiotic or structural point of view which recognises and attends to the unique characteristics of the medium- visuals text, technology—all of which play a role in the production of meaning of the advertisements in both denotative and connotative sense. The argument rests on the assumption that any work of representation in advertisements—print or television, involves a process of production where specific choices are made to select particular pictures and then connect them in a particular way to tell a story. For example, a magazine ad for pears soap shows a
slightly sepia toned image of women and a girl child with the caption ‘Pears Promises You nothing. The headline, copy, logo and picture on this page are deliberately linked in a particular sequence, and have a specific purpose behind using definite images, typefaces and fonts. The implication of the advertisement if it showed instead, a picture of a women and a man with the same caption would be quite different.

My case is that thereby a strong need to link this important body of material to the roll of advertising in India, where only towards the end of the twentieth century does one find the study of advertisements making its presence felt in academia. Advertising in India, with its focus on practice, often relegates theory to the backyard, and my endeavour to locate scholarly work in the area has led me to only a handful of publications. The existing work on Indian advertising spans areas from the linguistic analysis of advertisements, to perceptions of women and children in advertisements and the cross cultural comparisons of advertisements. The significant of semiotics as a method of making advertisements more context specific to Indian culture has been suggested by Khanwalkar (2001) in her article When is a Coconut Not a Coconut which argues for a diachronic analysis of advertisements, and emphasises the need for advertisements to invoke the historical and cultural backdrop and build this into their communication strategy. Another article which very briefly talks about semiotics as a powerful method for the study of advertisements is a column by Shoma Munshi (1995) (Images of Indian Women in the Media.

There remains, however, the need for a comprehensive study of ad texts as cultural products that simultaneously represent the dreams of a people as well as act as a sign system at a structural and psychological level to a uniquely constituted Indian audience. In this Paper I have drawn attention to the needed of the Indian advertising industry to develop an indigenous base located within the Indian aesthetic tradition.

The resistance encountered by advertising within Indian civil society and academia can be explained by the conflict it represents as a sign system. Advertising as a significant connotes modernity, capitalism, abundance, change and a general move towards ‘Westernisation’, all of which stand in direct conflict with in the Indian emphasis on detachment, spirituality and simplicity. In a manner then, advertising seeks to replace the natural elements of India society with the culture drivers of consumer society. While making a general statement about advertising as a sign system it is important to keep in mind the cultural and social diversity in India and the desirability and difficulty this presents in establishing one common cultural framework. This difficulty is compounded by the multitude of ways of organising individual religious ancestral and gender identities, and hence the increased difficulty of establishing meaningful global or international communication, where signs take on different meanings even across linguistic states.

Paradigmatically, advertising as a signifier, with in the structure of the Indian social system, acts as a substitute for other sources of useful information such as the village gossip
circle, oral communication or mythology and folk culture, oral communication or mythology and folk culture. Syntagmatically advertising operates as part of the linear arrangement between the search for identity and the lack represented by the unattainable image of the self, and the solution or ‘mirage’ of attainability represented by the product.

Here the desired paradigm of ‘ego-ideal’ or wholeness is represented by the core, where in another age or in rural culture, group identity is a sufficient substitute. The system or grammatical chain sets the substitute inside a social framework. What is important, however, is that as a sign system, advertising operates within a dynamic and transient cultural code. This is constituted by and defines the acceptable range within which advertisements must operate.

The Interface of Time and Space

At an individual level, advertisements share interface of time and space with their audience and the conceptualisation of notions of time and space have significant bearings on the process of communication and its interpretation in any society. Advertisements deal with the organisation of time and space on two fronts their own suspension in time and space, as well as the organisation of the audience’s concepts of time-space within their cultural framework.

In terms of their suspension in time and space, advertisements differ from most other products of cultural consumption such as cinema, operas, paintings, newspapers and so on, in the respect that they are usually imposed on an audience, and are not the prime object of consumption, but an object of incidentals consumption. Thus the audience can not predict the time and space where they will encounter an advertisements and the only control they have of avoiding exposure is to divert their gaze from the image. The characteristics of ‘imposition’ ‘has significant bearings on the reception of advertisements, as well as the structuring of their physical placement. Imposition explains why more and more advertisers are attempting to make the commercial content of the advertising message appear in seamless continuation with the news content of the medium it is encapsulated within, a trend that has given rise to print and television advertorials, and the immensely successful method of in film advertising.

On the other hand, it has been established that the time-space notions of Eastern and western societies differ in that the West organises time space in a linear manner and the east in a cyclical manner (Bernan, 1983; Harvy, 1989; Soja, 2000; CoomEawMY, 1918). Thus, the repetition of time and space within a visual message will be interpreted differently in different cultures. In Western society, an advertisement that depicts existence in two time frames or the transcendence between worldly spaces will signify different meanings that in eastern society, or more specifically Indian society where such transgressions between time and space zones are an accepted phenomenon, represented in popular form through the television versions of the epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata. The organisation of time and space within Indian
society as a fluid and permeable concept (Nandy, 1983) influences not only ‘how’ it can be represented to make interpretation of the message more effective. 

The blurred distinction between the past, present and future in Indian society allows for the creation of advertisements (noticed especially for ayurvedic products) that depict communication between a sage from the past and person from the present in simultaneous time frames: one would seldom encounter such representation in western world. Similarly, it offers possibilities to media planners to develop a message in totality within, for instance, the cyclical spaces of a local railway line, utilising the concept of journeys between different time and space zones.

The suspension of an ad text in time and space affects the representation techniques used both in terms of the message as well as technology. The relevance of an advertisement to an audience is influenced by factors that operate not only at a physical of technologically level. Form the study of visual representation in cinema, a field that has now established its own canons and has been influenced primarily by the work of Jacques Lacan, I borrow three concepts that influence the psychological relevance of images to spectator-reality, desire or fantasy and identity.

**Reality and Desire**

Reality in advertising is dealt with at two levels; one by trying to established there own reality of authenticity if the message, and two by trying to function within ;the spectrum of acceptable reality of the audience.

The concept of imposition as discussed previously, compels advertisers to use representational techniques that establish a truth-value (such as testimonials and ‘slice of life’), or that the negate the notion falseness by reducing the ad text to mockery. Goffman (1979) in his analysis of gender advertisements distinguishes representation scenes from real life and scenes from advertisements through the process of hyper re-utilisation, where standardised and exaggerated ritual characteristics are represented as mockery or other formed of unseriousnesss. The ritualisation that Goffman talked about functions so as to give a myth like character to the advertisement, which is compounded by the fact that the audience is aware of the half truth being represented in the message.

The concept of reality as applicable to cinema is written about by Baudry (1975), who uses a classically Freudian model to explain the ideological effects of the cinematic apparatus, and in particular the impression or reality it creates. Baudry argues that reality is represented as the fantasies of a ‘dream wish’ which unlike walking perceptions impose themselves on and submerge the subject. At once enabled by and enabling a sets of sleep, the dream, according to Freud (1989), involves a state of regression comparable to the beginning of psychic life, where perception and representation are not differentiated. The desire to recreate
this state of regression is, Baudry (1975) maintains, ‘inherent in our physical structure’ and has in the course of history given rise to a number of art forms, like painting and opera. Baudry further states that the dream state is most effectively brought about in the darkness of the auditorium brought about in the darkness of the auditorium with the spectator immobile and passive, gazing at moving images.

The issue of reality in advertising becomes complex due to the nature of the communication which usually lasts for less then a minute and does not enable the dream state that ultimately results into the representation of the dream wish or fantasy as reality. Further, since advertising is usually watched from the confines of one’s ones own living room, with out the effect of the dark cinema hall which creates the phenomenon of a ‘mass ceremony ’and a ‘collective gaze’ (Kakar 1983), the realisation of reality through fantasy gets further minimise. It becomes imperative for advertising then, to create reality with in the parameters of its form (in terms of time of viewing by the audience), and issue which is addressed by representing reality as the, mundane and real concerns of daily life, rather then a dream. Thus, reality as represented in advertisements usually is located with in a matrix solution for a real life problem such as not being able to wash clothes to their whiteness or make one’s teeth look their sparkling best, and is linked to a larger desire for love, power or successes. However, with in representation of the mundane, advertising attempts to shape perceptions of a real world which are far removed from reality and represent and unattemtable image, putting to use the conflict between reality that is attainable and a desirable fantasy which is perceived as being real. This explains the primary focuses of advertisements on glamour and power.

Since in different societies and in different target groups, the nature of reality varies, this has bearings on the representational techniques used to create meaningful communication. For instance, on comparing advertisements for children with advertisements targeted at adults, one often finds the scope of imagination in the two is very different, with monsters and adventures stories featuring more prominently in children’s advertisements. So also, in Indian society, where the conflict between the saas (mother-in-law) is a popular reality, one finds ads that represent a particular washing soap or cooking oil as the solution to impress the mother-in-law relationship, however, does not offer much excitement to the advertising industry in the western world. On the other hand the possibility of a mother putting her own interests over that of child does not belong to the realm of the real within the Indian imagination, hence an ad like that of Muller yoghurt, telecast in Western Europe, where the mother eats the child’s lunchbox would lie outside reality as perceived in Indian society.

Thus, reality and desire not only manifest as factors to be considered seriously in terms of representation in the message itself, nut also in terms of their acceptable spectrum; within different cultures. It would be judicious then, to examine desire and reality not only in then, to examine desire and reality not only in terms of; their manifestations within a culture (or definitions of desirable objects or characteristics), nut also the relevance of the concept of
desire and reality itself. It might be an over statement to say that in popular Indian culture, reality and desire take forms that are influenced by perceptions of the epics and mythology. However, it would certainly be an understatement to consider the Indian world-view as being formed independently of religious influences.

The answer lies somewhere in between, and one could say that in modern Indian, although religious sentiments continue to influences popular attitude, these are modified to suit contemporary living. Advertisements display varying degrees of sensitivity to such culture-specific parameters, operating both within the code of acceptance, as well as attacking stereotypical images of acceptability. A majority of advertisements for financial investments targeted at elderly of retired people shows them leading a life of detachment, yet a life of comfort and security. The representations in such ads are based upon the representations of contemporary vanyaprastha; after having fulfilled one’s duties towards the family and society. However, not all advertisements use stereotypical images of old age, and a television commercial for Phillips music system shows a frail elderly lady dancing to heavy metal music behind closed doors; the message implies that the music system is powerful enough even to make a granny dance. Here, the old woman is allowed to posses a desire for; entertainment, and in a manner, ritualised act of dancing reduces to mockery the image, in turn establishing the truth-value of message.

Identity

The third concept that I borrow from film studies is that of identity. This perhaps the concept; most relevant to advertising representation. Through the creation of the dream-state in cinema, it is apparent that spectators desire to be transported into a ‘fantasy’ world, allowing themselves to lose their real identify for brief period and assume the mask of another persona. Advertising offers to help the spectator to relocate of reconstruct their identify by offering for real possession the desired ‘mask; the role of advertising this context is strikingly similar to that of; mirror image’ as suggested by Lacan (1977), where advertising often functions as the mirror which one uses to form an ego identity. In a society where the media often result in a loss of identity, advertisements act as the cathartic solution that tries to give us back out lost identities. These are however, identities generated through; material consumption, creation a consumer society.

India has a long tradition of assuming foreign personae through the use of makes in dance, as well as in street and folk theatre. At a more spiritual level, this act is significant by the frenzied actions of people possessed by the spirit of goddess or an evil spirit. Thus the theme of assuming another persons identity has been a part of Indian culture, and advertising is situated within the same tradition. This then implies that the identity and role that the audience and advertisements can assume must fit into the cultural framework of a society. Thus an advertisements which represents evil through the sign of ten headed Ravna will we
accepted in the Indian subcontinent, but will be misunderstood in the west, where the figure of Frankenstein may be more suitable to signify evil. Similarly, an advertisement that requires the audience to slip into the role of super-mom, managing home, career and kids and equal efficiency is more compelling with in Indian society, which does not excuse being mother and wife.

Because the self-image represents a degree of completeness and perfection never to be attained, the image is narcissist self idealisation or, as Lacan puts it, a ‘mirage’ designed to parry the lack in being and ‘to preserve the subject’s precarious pleasure from an impossible and non-compliant real’. Thus, while all visual media allow to spectator to position themselves in the role of the ‘other’ or the mirror image, deriving pleasure from the unattainable, or the lack, advertising positions material products in this gap between the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’ providing a possibility of bridging the gap through a symbolic signifier. Hence, in the case of the super-mom role, the fantasy suggests possibility of fulfilment through utilisation of particular brand of chocolate drink, washing machine or car.

Sudhir Kakar (1981) offers an interesting analysis of “identity, in terms of its establishment in Lacanian terms, in Indian society is formed differently from that in western societies. He explains the ‘mother fetishism’ prevalent in Indian society through explorations of social and family structures, and their impact of the development of the concept of ‘self’ as different from the ‘other’ in Indian children. Kakar theorises that the process of identity formation occurs in Indian societies at much delayed time, and also offers an explanation of how the identification of the ‘self’ differs in girls and boys as a result of their positions within the family system.

The fact that identity if formed differently and at different times within a culture may have implication for advertising, which symbolically functions as the mirror that helps in the process of identity creations. The implication could either take effect in the form of an increased consumption of advertising and material culture as a direct backlash at the suppression of self identity within the social structures, or it may result in the shunning of advertising as a representation of the mirror image. The direct impact the process of identity formation has on advertising representation is that very often advertisements for children’s products in India are designed for an audience consisting of parents. Also the existence of a genre of advertisements which could be classified as ‘rebel’ ads are and are targeted at the teenage segment are further testimony to the increased importance being given to individual identity (as opposed to identity as part of a family or community).

The point I want to retreat is that the dynamics of advertising in any society operates through the dialectics of desire, reality, and identity with in specific cultural framework, and hence, such culturally influenced parameters need to be taken into account to make and advertisement more context specific and relevant to a particular audience. As the function advertising shafts from being one of entertaining, informing and inducing purchase, to that of
providing a brand experience, an exploration of traditional forms of communication such as a folk performances which allow the spectator to experience the even by getting involved in it, either physically or physiologically, can be invaluable. The high degree of permeability and selective assimilation exhibited in Indian society, a fact that is evident through its mythology and history, make it possible for the communication forms and representation techniques we use to represent a symbolic transgression and existence in multiple states through visual images. The possibilities offered by this phenomenon are numerous and exciting and when considered in totality with other culture specific factors such as those of time, space, reality and identity, the canvas of creativity available to the advertising industry is vast. Consider for example the creative potential simulated exposure to different media in continuum displaying the same message, or that both of the representation of multiple identities of a single persona in different media to build up a complete signifying system for the audience to comprehend, or simply the possibility of representing simultaneously the past and the present.

I have tried to demonstrate that advertising needs to be considered on a par and in continuation with other art forms in India that its dialectics within Indian cultural context offer possibilities of developing an indigenous aesthetic tradition. The intricacies of such aesthetics are an area that needed to be explored.

REFERENCES


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