

Hidden Agenda behind Constructed Imagery: Identity Politics in Indian Advertising

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Abstract

In the modern world where reality is mediated, the import of Coca-Cola, iPhones or Hollywood films is not merely a commercial activity of the West. What is more serious is the import of the idea of culture through these material 'icons'. The import of culture is to be viewed from a much more serious angle than the multicultural 'theory-of-acceptance' of globalization, propounded by the American academics. The paper brings forth the nature of global subcultures that are guided by the fundamental questions: What am I? Where am I? And who am I? The paper also analyses the qualities of cultures of the lower income countries that value survival, and higher income countries that value individualism and self-expression. The paper discusses the fundamental differences of the cultures that derive their principles from a system of ossified dogma as opposed to the cultures whose principles are derived from the spirit of reflective self-enquiry. From the above introductory references, the paper reflects upon the native cultures all over the world and their need to defend themselves against the deprecation of Western Cultural Imperialism. With special reference to the native cultural fabric of India, during the times when it was culture that defined nationality and the cultural geography that defined the boundaries, our paper discusses the outrages of western invasions. Our discourse focuses on the western deprecation through mass media in contemporary India which is in its path of material progress, through the intellectual and artistic medium of advertising and films. What follows next is an iconological interpretation of the imagery employed in certain print advertisements and TV commercials, and the way the imagery is expected to influence the identity politics of postmodern India.

Keywords: Advertising, India, Culture, Postmodernism

Introduction

When Andy Warhol declared the commodification of people, objects and works of art through his paintings, silk screen prints and films, during the 1960s, he was presenting himself as the

flag bearer of what in history is called the popular culture or to be more precise, in art, the 'Pop Art'.

The period also brought common people of the western world closer to the realities of the cultural logic of late capitalism. Reality came to be mediated, constructed, modified, edited, glossed and selected in post-modern cultural semiotics of the so called high modern western capitalism. Corporate culture became the wolf in sheep's clothing in the more liberal paradigm of theoretical discourse, otherwise known as contemporary theory. The value of everything, even life denigrated to abject commodification, when the so called progressive western societies had brand names for air and water, which were sold at a price. The rise of Pop art and the highly intriguing and creative advertising rose to the occasion almost hand in hand. Advertising came to be a message, more subliminal than direct, propagating a kind of postmodern rhetoric of consumerism and carrying with it the vestiges of the late capitalism of the west to the so called under developed cultures of the third world countries of the east. The hermeneutics of Semitic western culture, with their imperialistic theologies of intolerance, terrorism and genocide, found it compulsive to 'transform' the blacks of west to the whites of east except for their skin colour. Capitalism was chosen as the most appropriate ideological tool for this genre of postmodern imperialism. The developing nations of the east, particularly India were the target.

The Indian cultural fabric has been ravaged, ravished and raped brutally and continuously under centuries of subjugation and slavery. Unlike China and Japan, India couldn't bear the flags of its own version of modernism, in the post independent period which inevitably could have been rooted in values of traditional systems. Coupled with the contorted ideologies of the architects of post independent India, the western world could bring about a modern version of the classical imperialism, by leaving India no choice but to borrow the western paradigms of late capitalism. As a result, in the cultural map of the world India stands with a veritable identity crisis. As a thesis in rhetoric, a reading of the constructed imagery of the corporate offer particular academic merit. A seemingly innocuous image, when read through the angle of iconology and cultural myth, brings to surface the nature of the identity politics hidden within the images-the secret agenda.

Constructed images and the layers of signification

Visual language is a complex juxtaposition and appropriation of signifiers, coded to hold meanings of much more complex nature. Each signifier opens the door to a signified, which in turn becomes a signifier for the next signified. It gets interesting when the train of signifiers and signifieds reach the final station (which is again an arbitrary concluding point). The paper aims at decoding such complex signifiers in an advertisement campaign for a mighty corporate brand 'Vodafone'. The campaign "Happy to Help" ran its full course on all Indian Television channels in prime time and otherwise during 2007 and still continues to be running, and has emerged to be the 'best' and most recognized and most popular advertisement campaign in the history of Indian media and advertising. While this ushered in the coming of age of Indian advertising creativity, with the huge cross section of Indian population decoding exactly, the reality dressed up by Vodafone, the company could inject into native Indian sub cultures, complex sets of

exactly those aspects of culture which, in the west are now understood to be detrimental to progress. Borrowing the words of Barthes, the paper aims at tracking down the decorative display of what goes without saying.

The campaign as the text

The 'happy to help' campaign is a series of video format suited, technically for the television, which is crafted on the lines of neo-classic silent movies where the visuals speak to the mind direct making the need for the medium of written or spoken language almost void in the narrative. The 'mise en scene' within each frame itself forms the metaphorical content for the narrative sequence which takes the viewer through the various moods and emotions of the little girl and her pug (a breed of dog which gained popularity because of its uniquely identifiable snout through the medium of the campaign). Elaborately set background within which is set the girl, sometimes in the centre, sometimes in off centered manner, are metaphors that 'build up' the scene and also the acts of the girl. They also double up as the props in the story line telling a story on their own, enabling the expository act of reading between the lines possible.

Though the television commercial claims to be signifying the faithfulness of a dog or the metaphysical dogness to the telecommunication services offered by the company, towards its customers who are invariably humans, represented by the innocent (or ignorant) little girl. The reading of this intention goes thus, The human users who are required to be interconnected in the society, can be perfectly at peace even if they are abjectly ignorant of the technology that makes the connection possible. The services come here, as the dog, faithful to the humans almost unconditionally (the only condition is money). The irony lies here in the portrayal, as we begin to read between the lines and track the decorative display.

The first advertisement in the series has the little girl waking up between her sheets, cut to the next scene where she is packing up her school bag while pulling up one of her socks with some difficulty, the pug brings in the other socks presumably before the girl finds out one of her socks is missing. The pugs bring in a couple of things in the act of helping the girl even while the situation doesn't seek the help. Next, she pulls up a big backpack (school bag) as she steps out through the door, which the pug keeps following her. The subsequent scene opens inside the girl's school bus when she discovers she hasn't worn the tie (part of the inevitability of academic discipline). Naturally her expression reveals a worry, probably as to the consequences in school as her bus reaches. This is when; the solution to the problem is treated most dramatically with the pug running precariously behind the speeding bus grasping the girl's tie. The advertisement ends here with the brand logo and a few textual content articulating the services.

Snapshots of various scenes from the campaign:

1)



2)



3)



4)



5)



6)



7)



8)



9)



The advertisement that follows, shows the same girl sitting dejectedly on a bench inside a hall space where a few other girls are shown practicing ballet. The dancing shoes are missing on her legs. The next scene opens to the pug running from presumably a long distance of outdoors with the dancing shoes clutched between its jaws.

The company is happy with these advertisements for probably two reasons. The first one is obviously the message of uninterrupted network and back up services being understood by the target audience, who are almost the entire cross section of the Indian population. Second reason for their happiness, is subtle, which the designers of the concept, the company as passed on to the advertising agency for the filmatic execution. Or it could be the design of the agency itself, Ogilvy and Mather, which has its roots in the United States of America. This is where the 20 to 10 seconds of narrative time succeeds in piercing through the minds of a culture, and implanting the seeds of their imperialistic mission, through an almost invisible hypodermis.

Indian culture as essentially very different from world cultures metaphysically. The very concept of God itself is different from the western culture. God in Indian culture can be understood (but not defined completely) to be close to the unchanging, ever remaining reality known as 'truth'. Truth is as metaphysical as God, based on which the entire systems of culture and religion are founded in the east. This is exactly what the postmodern western theories reject or abandon anything that is metaphysical. By doing so the doors of perception are closed and any further dialogue between the east and the west on the modern aspects of the oriental cultures become impossible. This is again to be perceived as another side of the Semitic coin based on out-right bigotry and unwillingness to read further. The objective, by such a rejection is to establish a certain hegemony over the other cultures. This greed for domination arises from a deep psychological sense of insecurity in the event of the non-western cultures proving their credibility of acceptance and tolerance, setting standards for a new world order in future times. The origins of such a deep fear dates back to the time of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. In order to stick strictly to the topic of discourse, an examination this early period in western philosophy is deliberately omitted.

How the imagery is constructed

The campaign, as discussed earlier has two central characters, the little girl and the pug. Deconstructing the central aesthetics of this imagery from an Indian cultural point of view, presents the metaphysics of presence. By deliberately hiding things other than what is shown, the aim is to glorify the western colonial models as the norm and standard of a typical or ideal society. The focus is established at the presence, and also the 'presence' of absence of all the elements associated with the age of the girl which is undoubtedly below ten- particularly a society and a motherly figure which nurtures her. A 'study' of the imageries of signification and the gestural content of various situations the girls is constructed to be portraying in, namely the waking up, wearing shoes, packing bags, going to school, sitting by the stream, pulling the hose to water plants, sitting at the ballet class, swimming in the pool, sleeping in the tent, has the same metaphorical power as the humanoid image in Edward Munch's painting, 'The Scream'. In the words of Frederic Jameson 'The Scream' represents ' a canonical expression of the great modernist thematic of alienation and , anomie, solitude, social fragmentation, and isolation, a virtually programmatic emblem of what used to be called the age of anxiety. The unhappy imagery of the child in the 'Happy to Help' campaign makes this social alienation and social fragmentation obvious and concrete. Besides developing the existential model of isolation,

solitude and anxiety the image of the girl child in the campaign develops the hermeneutical model of inside and outside as well.

The hidden agenda of identity politics

There is another model on the lines of Freudian psycho analysis which the images of the lonesome girl in the campaign develop – the model of the latent and the manifest and also repression. The gloom and sadness of the girl is evident, as if it is natural and the girl did no acting at all from her part. The images also represent the dialectics of essence and appearance, falsity and consciousness and identity and ‘homelessness’. There is the enlightened objectivism and the worship of ego at its peak as the girl displays no care for anything, even the relentlessly helpful pug.

There is no smile, nor any trace of happiness. Caring and sense of belonging is completely absent. There is no trace of societal or parental upbringing in the behavior of the girl. The mode of representation of the girl, her attire-the dress and the hairstyle; the background, as seen through the vantage point of figure-ground gestalt, the colour of the interior walls, the materials the girl is surrounded with, why, even the bus she travels in, the streets are all essentially reminders of the Anglo Indian artificiality. There is a desperate attempt to ‘white wash’ things that are natural and Indian, to hide tradition and philosophy under layers of enamel paint, replace natural and ethnic with western and more ‘modern’ cloths or clothlessness. There is even an attempt to keep the narrow Indian road unnaturally clean (and typically un-Indian), in the scene where the pug runs behind the school bus.

In short, the construction of these models through the imagery casted in the campaign reveals an imperialistic intent-the hidden (or not so hidden?) agenda to pollute, degrade and dilute the essence of the metaphysical value systems of Indian intellectual traditions, which has fostered its culture and remained steady and strong gaining its strength from ancient times. The question is who does the company want to address with these imageries? What is the identity politics intended? Is it not to project the progress of India by stripping it off all things that are essentially Indian?

References

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