

# SEMIOLOGY OF ADVERTISEMENT AND THE DISPLACEMENT OF DESIRE

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## The Question of Consumer Sovereignty

This essay examines the semiology of advertisement in contemporary market economies, to illustrate the fact, that the consumer's consciousness, far from being 'sovereign' as New-classical theory assumes, is systematically structured to serve the needs of capital accumulation. An attempt is made to show that advertisements are fundamentally a system of signs and symbols, and as such constitute a powerful language that by reaching into the innermost terrain of our psyche, influence not only our tastes and preferences but our very attitude to life.

## Commodities as Objects of Desire

Desire manifests the human impulse, enlarged by imaginative representation to transcend one's separateness through connection with the other. This "Other", may be the ineffable transience of a flower in bloom, or the eternal beauty of a take at sunset, another human being,

one possibility is actualized a new possibility is born".

If there was no longing in us, the creative endeavour unique to human beings would wither away. We would then be lifeless. i.e. mere objects.

Now objects unlike human being can be possessed, or used according to their function, but cannot be related to at a sensual level. Yet the dominant social form that desire takes in our society, is the "desire" for objects. This is an everyday phenomenon, that we are all part of and which we therefore take for granted. However when we subject it to serious scrutiny we discover that it is a truly fantastic phenomenon. How is it that desire has been displaced from its creative potential and directed to those strange objects called "commodities". How is it that we have come to live commodities and use human beings? To highlight the peculiarity of this inversion let us see it in the perspective of Bulleh Shah:

تین من دھن سب دیکھ لیا !  
جھگڑا بھوک کے اپنا سب لیا !

or the totality of existence. Thus desire expresses a highly evolved need to connect. It is desire that activates the dialectic between the actual and the possible. Here is how Sultan Bahu the great Punjab Sufi poet puts it:

"The distinction between the body, desire and property became clear at the moment which I set to light my hut and felt the warmth".

Thus for Bulleh Shah it is only of the dramatic moment of complete renunciation

جو دل منگے ہو وہے نہیں !  
ہو دن گیا اگرے ہو !

"That which the heart desires is always a step ahead of the actual. As soon as

of property that the magical illusion of commodities is overcome. A magic so

powerful that it obfuscates the distinction between desire and commodities.

The question that now arises is, how this magical spell is weaved in contemporary society, whereby commodities are re-presented to us through the media as images of fantasy. Their material attributes, are dimmed, and our disbelief is suspended to make us experience them as pure objects of desire.

## The Semiotics of Advertisements

Consider a motor-car advertisement. The car is not represented to us in terms of its real or material functions, but is instead re-presented to us through a set of images that shift us into a realm of fantasy (My Toyota is fantastic, it says). It appears to us not as a mean of transport, but as a receptacle of sexuality, efficacy and power. An after shave lotion does not merely have a pleasant fragrance, but gives to the person wearing it a "level of power". (Drakker after shave!) Similarly for example cigarettes are not just things that clog up the lungs. They give magical access to the glamour spots of Europe: Paris, London, Amsterdam. (Capstan the world over it says). Thus attributes which are organic to us as human beings, are transposed into the commodity through the device of advertisement. The subliminal suggestion is that without it we are nothing. By possessing it we enter a realm where we can reappropriate our qualities of grace and power; we gain recognition and become authentic through our possession. Thus a new cult has emerged in 20th century capitalist society. It is based on perceiving commodities as totems which contain qualities which we once possessed as human beings.

The grammar of the advertized image has three main elements:

1. It suspends our disbelief through the creation of a dream like formal. This is achieved through music, soft focus and editing.
2. The commodity within the ad is placed in a context quite different from the one in which we would actually observe it. The image of the commodity is achieved through association, or metaphor, just as in a dream. For example a tooth paste would appear not in the environment of a toilet but will have mountain streams or stately mansions as the back drop.

Cont. on page.32

*Cont. from page 15*

3. The advertized commodity is pulled out of physical proportion. Thus the ballpoint pen will appear bigger than the person holding it, and in the context of the ad will be the centre of attraction.

The power of these psychological devices is derived from the fact that through their dream structure they get an access over the unconscious mind. In the context of a dream format the clever advertizer can suggest attributes to us, which if articulated across the office table 9'clock on a week day would appear quite abused. The haunting eyes of the girl (who with a single sip of tea goes into a trance) and the poetic motion of Imran Khan's bowling run up, become integrated with the taste of the tea being advertized.

The culture based on an insatiable desire for commodities is of course an imperative of the growth process in a marked economy. If firms are to survive in a competitive environment, they must grow in terms of both the volume and range of goods. J. K. Galbraith has indicated two characteristics of large firms that are relevant here: (1) Their make have a long term time horizon, i.e. They can only recover profits over a relatively long period of time. The consequence of these characteristics of modern firms is that they are obliged to achieve security by controlling both the sources of supply of their raw materials as well as demand for their products. Therefore they can afford neither strictly sovereign states nor the sovereign consumer. Marx put it, "The capitalist system not only produces goods that satisfy needs but also the needs which these goods satisfy."

In days of yore the snake charmers of the sub continent carried a piece of lamb skin which they called a GIDDER SINGHI (and which you could acquire for a few rupees). As you heard the plaintive strains of the snake charmer's flute you were drawn into the charm and thought that if you carried the GIDDER SINGHI your dreams would be fulfilled. Today all commodities through far more resonant images which enter our unconscious mind. The grammar of the ad image subtly suggests that it is not the inherent function of the commodity, but its magical appeal that is important. It displaces our desire to connect with life into a greed for commodities.