

Present Tense

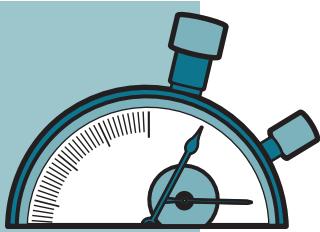
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Adapting American Visual Rhetoric in Post-Cold War Bulgaria

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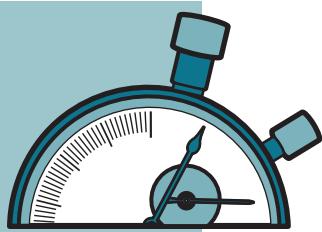
If “[t]he ways in which Europeans have tried to make sense of America,” as Rob Kroes writes, “constitute a special chapter in the European history of ideas” (1135), it would be difficult to imagine a more dramatic subchapter than that set in Eastern Europe immediately following the Cold War. In the early 1990s, the former Soviet block found itself suddenly showered with colorful western images, taking form not only in the purely visual rhetoric of new advertising, but also in new physical objects which might, for a price, be co-opted by citizens as their own, thus determining their own identities in what was to be, in both symbolic and real terms, a vastly changed society. This article examines adaptations of Western advertising’s semiotic strategies, looking at examples of how a certain section of Europe reads¹ foreign visual rhetoric that is finding its way into their urban print advertisements over the past 20 years – and how this reading is often done through the lens of a pre-existing social semiotics.²

If sense is to be made of Eastern Europe’s reactions to advertising’s rhetorical logic, a useful way of approaching its development might be through Jean Baudrillard’s concept that people have progressively developed relationships with objects, imagining advertising itself grouped into his four categories: 1) as tools to be used, 2) as merchandise to be exchanged, 3) as symbols, or as part of a symbolic

exchange, and 4) as signs explaining or defining an object’s value in relation to another object (64). This fourth and final use of objects, Baudrillard proposes, is what constitutes a consumer society.

Western commercial images, formerly viewed as symbols of revolt against Communism, were, in the 1990s, quickly recognized as hallmarks of a conquering political system, and are now finding their places as social signifiers (Baudrillard’s third category) – and yet they function in this category within already developed cultures by individuals’ adapting them to pre-existing local semiotics, in what Michel de Certeau might have called a “tactic” of rhetorical appropriation (480). Co-opted for personal uses, they often mimic Western advertising’s own visual rhetoric, while at other times they seemingly subvert its most basic rhetorical tropes.

After writing about a visit to Bulgaria in 1996, I returned ten years later hoping to judge whether my original application of Baudrillard’s theory on the evolution of consumer society still held up – or if the framework needed to be modified (Parker). Baudrillard’s theory posits that the *objet de consommation* is the foundation of contemporary western society: “The *objet de consommation* doesn’t take its sense from [...] an operational relationship with the world. It takes its sense only from its difference from



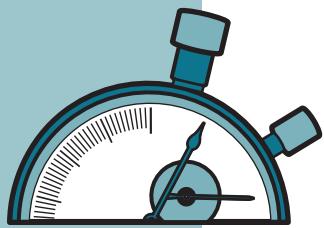
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other objects, following a code of hierarchical significations" (61). *Objets de consommation* give symbolic value to an object based on how the object relates to another. The principal "value," for example, of a shoe in a consumer society goes beyond its merit as a tool for walking, or as something that might be exchanged for another object, or as a symbol of the relationship between its seller and purchaser. Its final value lies in its relationship to other brands of shoes on a hierarchical scale, with ownership linking its owner, too, to this scale. Thus, writes Baudrillard, "while instituting class, consumerism makes itself out to be a function of democracy by pretending to be a function of human need" (50). Capitalism, in other words, through advertising, was touted by western corporations as a means of improving Eastern Europe's economic situation. Perhaps it will make some progress given time, a cynical Baudrillard might reply, but what is more certain is that it will institute a class system.

As Leiss, Kline, and Jhally have noted, "The most important function of product-related imagery is not to increase levels of consumer spending, but to transform the personal meaning of the everyday use of products as a whole" (231-232). Or, as Baudrillard put it more generally, "Goods and objects must be exchanged for a social hierarchy to manifest itself" (8). Class systems only exist where goods are exchanged, and the purpose of advertising's visual rhetoric is not only to increase the volume of this exchange, but to foster and maintain the class system it supports. Advertising, in short, persuades and reminds viewers of the existence of class. But, in a post-Soviet vacuum,

might it help to institute it? Had average middle-class Bulgarians made the psychological leap into consumer society? Were they beginning to see merchandising articles not for their inherent value as objects, but as markers of their own positions in a social hierarchy? Questions like these, of course, even with the help of surveys and marketing research, rarely find simple or direct answers. Particularly given the complex socioeconomic landscape in which they are being played out here, this article cannot propose to answer either question directly. Yet with the most meager fieldwork resources, armed with a camera, notepad, and bus schedule, I hoped to find indications of how events were developing by looking specifically for examples of Baudrillard's *objet de consommation*, and by categorizing the types of new advertising that might perhaps indicate awareness of it.

Before revisiting the country, I assumed American corporations were still the main producers of advertising images in the East, as they had been ten years ago. Instead, I found a country that had slipped onto a period of even more marked transition than the previous decade. Bulgarian companies and small business owners, now adept at using American advertising's rhetorical tropes to promote their own products, were themselves making Baudrillard's theories of consumer society and class differentiation more obvious. American corporations appeared to be losing ground to savvy local advertisers who had adapted their campaign images and models to local vernaculars. At the same time, Bulgarian society seemed to be showing marks of the social hierarchy models a consumer society inherently supports.



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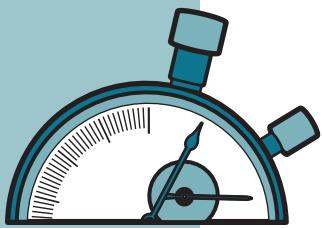
One of the most obvious visual changes in the urban landscape of this part of the world (and a clear indication of the first step on Baudrillard's scale of development, tools to be used) is the slow process of abandoning the traditional Soviet-era kiosks, where one formerly bought tobacco, newspapers, sewing items, rice, and other basic staples. While some are still in use [photo 1], many have been removed or supplanted by kiosks provided by multinational corporations, which serve as points of sale and advertising at once [photo 2], often leaving the original kiosks to vandals or posterity for local events and services [photos 3, 4], or to enterprising citizens who take them over for their own purposes. An abandoned newspaper kiosk in central Plovdiv [photo 5], for example, has become a makeshift plant store. Meanwhile, traditional food stands and canteens are being replaced with corporate-sponsored street dining [photos 6, 7, 8], in which patrons become a part of the site's rhetoric themselves through their self-display of consumption.

While late Communist domestic architecture was typically unadorned [photo 9] or carried fairly discreet advertisements for state-produced products [photo 10], it's now almost rare to see new construction that doesn't carry some sort of western corporate logo, however subtle [photo 11]. Western advertisements mold themselves into bus and tram stations in many urban areas [photo 12]. As ads become architecture, they often make the banal racy and the formerly racy look tame. A scantily-clad blonde in a dog collar crawls across the facade of an upscale Plovdiv commercial area on a background of copulating

rabbits to advertise a women's clothing shop [photo 13], while, in the same neighborhood, silhouettes on a local advertisement for a sex shop seem remarkably staid in comparison [photo 14].

Outdoor advertising in general has taken on a new scope, with Bulgarian ad agencies selling space to foreign and domestic advertisers alike. Meanwhile, as intercity roadways improve, outdoor advertising moves from city to country, replacing the formerly ubiquitous small outdoor advertisements for the national insurance company [photos 15, 16]. But perhaps more interesting is how western advertising's motifs have crept into Bulgarian-made advertisements. Photos 17, 18, and 19 show outdoor advertisements for a shoe shop, a cosmetics store, and a knife-sharpener's, all in the hand-made style typical of the mid-1990s, as shops and services began the process of privatization. Photos 20 and 21 show more recent ads, which have adopted both western advertising's motifs and its pathos of pleasurable consumption, as opposed to the utilitarian function of selling local goods and services.

Perhaps there is a saturation point to this permeation of the landscape with western advertisements. After all, some goods advertise themselves [photos 22, 23]. But one has to wonder, watching decade-old Coca-Cola Corporation billboards being welded together for reuse as makeshift vending stands [photo 24], has the original advertiser's message been subverted in the interests of personal commercial use? Or has it finally become so ubiquitous that a certain shade of red now in and of itself signifies caramel-flavored soda water in the collective mind of the Bulgarian consumer?



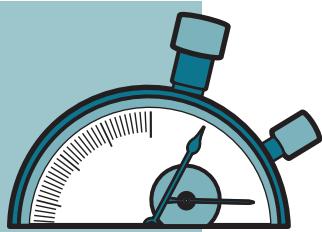
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All of these images are ostensibly working to promote something. But what they are also doing – and what Baudrillard would say is their most important function – is to make the ideas they represent more accessible to the public in general – and not only to subscribers or even to potential subscribers. They are not only enticements to join a movement, buy or give to a cause, and more than markers of an ideological presence. They are indicators of their signifieds' value in comparison with other signifieds, placing what they represent on a hierarchical scale. Bulgaria's curbing of western investment would seem to indicate a desire for a hybrid society, less open to the winds of capitalism than Russia, but far enough removed from strict Socialism to smooth the Euro-zone membership process. But, if a social hybridization still remains to be found, the hybridization of two semiotic rhetorics – one "American" and the other traditional – seems to have posed few problems on a local level, and the process has even been relatively rapid.

Leiss, Kline, and Jhally demonstrated that over the last century North Americans and Europeans had been taught to "read" increasingly complex advertising rhetoric. Noting that Western advertising's semiotics developed as a shift from text toward images, they note that the strategies employed by contemporary advertising cannot be understood without proper "training" or exposure. No single stage in the evolution of advertising, they posit, would have been effective without the public's exposure to the ads that came before it. Westerners understand the primarily visual rhetoric of contemporary advertising, because

over the past century advertisers have – very gradually – weaned us away from text. If Leiss, Kline, and Jhally are correct, we might assume visual rhetoric is the most sophisticated type of advertising – and that early consumer groups might initially be more receptive to textual persuasion. Certainly, what one sees now in the windows of most Bulgarian-owned shops is text – lots of text, in comparison with what one would expect to see in more economically developed countries. This probably mimics the traditional, pre-capitalist model, where a government seal or insignia was set alongside a text explanation of a product or shop [photos 25, 26, 27]. Where Western ads with text are visible in pharmacy windows, or on small billboards, passersby often stop – sometimes to examine the images, but also to spend a surprising amount of time reading the copy [photo 28].

Meanwhile, western advertisers still know the value of "useful advertising," and continue to use it in innovative ways. Aside from the long-ubiquitous café parasols [photo 29], advertising paraphernalia also sometimes replaces traditional outdoor furniture [photo 30]. And while American advertising was formerly most often used to signal points of purchase for any goods in the absence of local advertising, local vendors are no longer shy about placing their own handmade ads alongside American ads, [photo 31] perhaps making hand-painted signals more glamorous by association. Finally, western advertising finds its most common employment simply as a frame for locally produced ads. Framing associates the names or insignia of local points of sale or services with



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the already established rhetoric of a western brand's advertising campaign. With reverse framing, an international brand is sandwiched within Cyrillic text, contextualizing it locally [photos 32, 33].

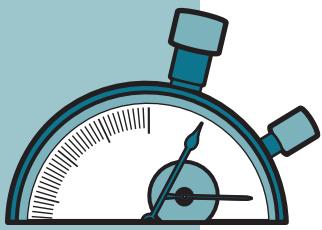
Is American-style consumerism, or its first overtures, creating a new class system here? If so, how different will this system be from the former system, where a clearer, more obvious hierarchy separated inner party members from the rest of society? If American-style consumerism requires the illusion of class mobility to support its own system of hierarchies, will new markets in Eastern Europe, where the average consumer has felt the full force of exclusion from prohibitively expensive goods, see through this trick as simplistic? Or will the average consumer soon be buying goods and services not for their practical value, but for the social standing conferred by a brand name?

Early indications might be found in Plovdiv's center, where an Internet café's cashier asks visitors if they prefer to be seated in the regular, or the VIP area. "Is the connection in the VIP area faster?" I asked, coming in to check my mail. "Are the computers newer?" No. The connection and computers are the same. But if customers pay a slightly higher rate in the VIP section, is there any difference between the two? Yes indeed, I was told. The VIP section is *on this side*. The regular section, the cashier nods, is *over there*. association as compensations for racism and to join me in the individual and societal conscious-building project of the new equality.

Endnotes

1. Gunther Kress describes "reading [itself] as sign-making" in *Literacy in the New Media Age*.

2. Visual rhetoric as a model for the study of images could be said to include earlier (structuralist) ideas of visual semiotics, though Roland Barthes's "Rhétorique de l'image" (published in *Communications* volume 4, 1964) certainly laid some groundwork for the term's meaning as generally understood today: visual expressions of cultural meaning – here, visual representations of the relationships Baudrillard outlines in his semiotic study of the relationships people have with objects themselves. Barthes, like Kress later, explains that images can only be examined (and can only be read) within a given cultural context: the culture for which they are intended, but also the culture which produces them. This article assumes the potential for disjunction between the two.



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Photo 1



Photo 2



Photo 3



Photo 4



Photo 5



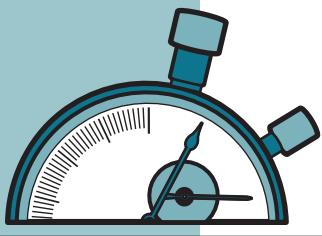
Photo 6



Photo 7



Photo 8



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Photo 9



Photo 10



Photo 11



Photo 12



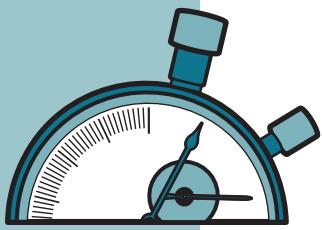
Photo 13



Photo 14



Photo 15



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Photo 16



Photo 17



Photo 18

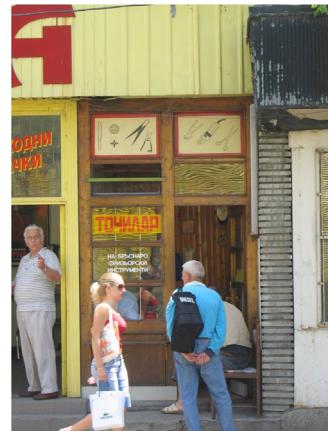


Photo 19



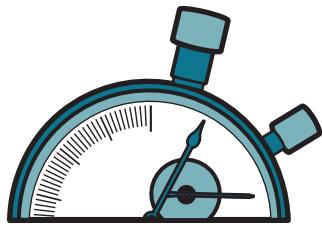
Photo 20



Photo 21



Photo 22



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Photo 23



Photo 24



Photo 25



Photo 26



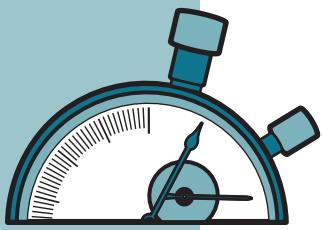
Photo 27



Photo 28



Photo 29



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Photo 30



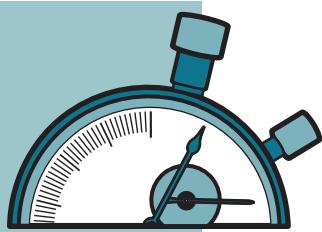
Photo 31



Photo 32



Photo 33



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Joshua Parker is an Assistant Professor of English Language and Literature at Fatih University in Istanbul with interests in narratology, semiotics, and expatriate fiction. While studying

Cultural Studies at the University of Paris and Art History at the Ecole du Louvre, he wrote a thesis on the symbols used in British, French, and American advertising and their (often misconstrued) interpretations abroad. A longer version of this article was presented at the America Studies Association of Turkey conference in 2008. His current projects include articles and a monograph on European cities in nineteenth century American fiction.

