

A Transcultural Reading of Television Advertising

Global television has enabled cultures across the world to meet within the virtual space and interact in terms of decoding, meaning making and appropriating messages. It is also the case of the Romanian audience, a local community of viewers who have long been exposed to highly censored and restrictive programming (under the communist regime) and who are now enabled to identify with the (western) communities they have aspired to. We intend to illustrate our case with TV advertisements, which, generally, provide abundant material for television viewers, with socio-culturally determined profiles, to re-construct meanings into either coincidental or disjunctive semantic outputs. Since the act of consumption is productive, we aim to show that in spite of the possibly conflicting readings of the poly- and multi-semantics of the ads, viewers can coalesce into interpretative communities irrespective of their cultural make and cooperate towards the production of a joint meaning. We consider that this is an illustration of transculturalism at the level of a local audience interacting with the symbolic representations of cultures elsewhere on television.

Introduction

We would like to highlight some of premises for our argument that advertising on Romanian TV can and does lend itself to transcultural reading. The TV signs¹, most visibly in advertisements, carry sometimes ‘surplus’ meanings that are not always available at surface reading. They conflate not only representations but also meanings of the second order: connotations or cultural meanings. When these cultural meanings transgress the socio-cultural coordinates of a distinct national community to meet those of another national ‘entity’, they multiply and diversify accordingly the semantic potential of the TV sign. The result might be that the subsequent readings of the sign by the different cultural subjects will not coincide, for the cultural frameworks applied differ, as expected. This is an instance of transculturation at work. To this we should add three more aspects to clarify the current television tableau for the Romanian audience, which, like audiences everywhere, can be reached by the global and local programmes through advanced technologies.

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Firstly, as has been noted by several media and communication scholars, the new technologies in communication, by which television too has been benefited, have led to a time and space contraction (McCracken, Lull, Appadurai). To be more explicit, cultures that are geographically distant from each other can now come into 'direct' contact within the virtual space. Television can mediate for the Romanian viewer a 'meeting' with 'exotic' representations, to which s/he will apply the local socio-cultural grid for interpretation.

Secondly, we have to consider the historical context of the Romanian television viewer. At the risk of oversimplifying the constituency of the Romanian audience by declaring it polarized, we will consider two discernible types: the one is the viewer who has a long-term experience almost exclusively of television under the former communist regime, and the other, the new television viewer, who is more culturally and technologically competent, a sophisticated multi-tasker, who can experience concomitantly multiple media (watch TV, listen to the radio, surf on the net, engage in chat, etc.), and who, by way of consequence, is the more TV-literate of the two. If the former has developed avidity for foreign imported production after having been deprived for so long of the 'capitalist' type of messages only to feel now saturated with the overrepresentations of the 'other', the latter has learned how to slalom between the surplus offers of programmes and channels of the new television. We must, however, give credit to both for their growing selectiveness and cultural competence when it comes to their viewing choices.

Their choice making is made all the more difficult by the literal bombardment of the proliferating programmes of the global television². The meeting of the global with the local engenders a cultural melding of which transculturation is the example we have in view.

Cultural values and products transgress national borders through the television medium and come in contact with a locality that boasts its own particulars. While some have mourned the end of cultural diversity as prefigured by the 'invasion' of the imperialist messages of television, which, it was said, would lead to the homogenization of cultures, it has been proved (Appadurai, Ang, Thomson) that the outcome is (exclusively) positive. The result of the global/local encounter is a cultural cross, rather than the cultural devouring of the one by the other, causing new forms to emerge. Out of the meeting of the domestic with the foreign, of the dominant and imperialistic ideology, which is highly mobile³, with the local, subordinate and aspirational⁴ one, which is comparatively fixed in space, hybrid forms emerge. The unfamiliar and exotic is domesticated even while it is absorbed or imprinted with local features.

Lastly, we have to take account of the exposure of audiences today to the programmes and messages of what has been labeled a postmodern television⁵. The defining characteristic of postmodern television is the openness of its messages inviting audiences to make their own meanings of it. It is a television designed for and fully aware of what has been increasingly defined as active niche audiences⁶ in contrast to passive mass consumers. Audiences can bring at the moment of decoding their own cultural predispositions to make sense of the television images and symbols. So even while the television has gone global and addresses all viewer communities with a dominant message carrying the interests of the economic and political 'aristocracy' in the world, the consumers, be they individuals or collectivities, are actively detotalizing the message and reconstituting it to gratify their own needs.

Foreign/exotic imagery in advertising

Of the multitude of advertising productions featured on Romanian TV I have chosen a series that is an eloquent case in point. The choice was motivated by the 'actors' in the ads performing the roles of Rastas – perhaps the prototypical outcomes of cultural mixing at work⁷ (social and racial, as well) - and for their 'co-nationality' with the coiner of the term transculturation⁸. So far, 'two episodes' have been aired of what seems to be a sequence of independent stories with slightly different plots which are variations for an identical message: Buy the new Fiat Panda. The two mini-films feature as leading characters two Rastafarians, in the first case, and in the second, four. In both cases, they seem to be far removed from their country of origin (the Caribbean/ Jamaica) and that of adoption (the UK, for most), performing in a mountainous scenery intimating a European country traversed by the Alps. In the first episode the two Rastas are riding in a Fiat Panda apparently in a prolonged joyride or drive test, get carried away with the sheer pleasure of pure driving and find themselves out of bounds and into a foreign land. They meet here a huge mountain dog with a long tangled coat resembling very much their own dreadlocks. As the dog seems to be one of their own sporting a coat that makes him the one familiar element in an otherwise alien location, one of the young men salutes him in Rasta fashion. The dog obviously makes no reply, which leads the young men to believe it is a case of mistaken identity. (*Hey, let's go man, this no Rasta dog!*) The second episode features four young Rastas huddled in the same Fiat Panda, this time enjoying collectively an identical snowy landscape somewhere in the Alps again (most likely). The breathtaking view seems to inspire them to howl out a

Rasta salute, which will cause an avalanche. The four barely have time to leap into the car, start the engine, and roll out of danger's way. Making a narrow escape, they stop, however, not far from the snow slide and one of them mischievously invites the others to relive the experience and celebrate the Rasta 'power' of stirring the unmovable majesty of the Alps. (*Let's do this again!*). Both exclamations are in broad Creole accent, while the message of the advertisement in Romanian translates as: *For every Fiat Panda 4x4 you get 10 000 km free.*

It is obvious that what invites a transcultural reading of this advertisement is, on the one hand, the combination in the storyline of symbolic images belonging to two cultures that are geographically removed from each other: dreadlocks for the non-conformist Rasta⁹ of tropical origins and the snowy mountains for a conservative cold (in the winter) European country (Austria or Switzerland). The element that compresses space and allows the two remote coordinates to intersect is still another symbolic image, the Fiat Panda - a metonymy for Italy as car manufacturer. On the other hand, and most importantly, the advertisement addresses a fourth party: the local audience of a formerly communist country of the Eastern European bloc – the Romanian viewers. All of these details are the significant elements of a syntagm that has to be made sense of and domesticated by the local audience. The problems may arise from the fact that the syntagmatic constituents are capitalist values which have not yet been completely absorbed by a 'national' community that is still in a transient stage to an authentic functional market of the western type (in terms of the former East/West divide in Europe). The members of the local cultural as the intended recipients of the message are most likely to read its metaphors by selecting from the paradigmatic dimension such

associations as dictated by reminiscences of their formerly subordinated status (a satellite country of the former USSR). However, the process is not so straightforward. It is not a matter of an aspirational 'subordinated' (through its westward ideals) audience accepting indiscriminately ready-made messages as intended by the 'dominant' encoders. Rather, the audience will make its own meanings that are determined by the socio-cultural and political conjecture.

Transculturation: conflict or consensus?

The inherent polysemy of advertisements is another factor that can lead to the multiplicity of meaning-makings. Apart from their intended message, which positions readers as a target group of consumers, advertisements subsume latent meanings made possible at the moment of decoding. The meaning making of advertisements is a process whereby audiences or the individual viewer map onto them a code system that can be, at variance, in line with, opposed to, or a negotiator of the dominant code employed by the encoders¹⁰. The straightforward preferred meaning of the two Fiat Panda advertisements would be an invitation to a particular group of consumers to purchase this particular make of cars. The persuasion operates indirectly – one has to read between the lines – but also with such universal concepts and values as reliability (of the car), autonomy (the 10 000 km for free), freedom (to travel anywhere). This interpretation is also facilitated by the stereotypes employed and the images appealing to a particular segment within the audience: young nonconformist carefree young people with a sense of adventure, possessing, nevertheless, the financial means to

purchase the car. The Rasta young men are the metaphors for a non-conformist and rebellious way of life, which in turn, define the majority of young people everywhere. They also play on youth's sense of adventure and disposition to travel to distant exotic places (hence the sharp contrast of their presence in a 'cold' country as suggested by the syntagmatic reading of the snowcapped mountains, the avalanche, and the furry mountain dog). Operating with such powerful symbols, the two advertisements can easily select within the overall audience a particular socio-economic and generational segment and subject position them as prospective buyers of Fiat Pandas.

However, 'deviant' meanings can too be extracted from the combination of text, imagery and symbolism of the commercials. Media students have remarked on the possibility of aberrant decoding¹¹, where there is asymmetry between the codes of the producers and the consumers. It is the appendage of the active audience to decode the media messages as fits its disposition, taste and needs¹². It is therefore to be expected for a collective local audience to make its own meanings out of the foreign media messages¹³. The message of the imported text is further compounded by the fact that it contains constituents of multiple cultural coordinates: the Caribbean's own or their countries of adoption/emigration, the Alps presumably in Switzerland or Austria, and Italy. The Romanian viewers have thus to draw on their general knowledge, cultural competence as well as on their television literacy so as not to miss any of the references. The intricacies of the ads are further complicated by the fact that the local decoders have different socio-economic scales and employ a frame for reading different from the encoders' own. Such disjunction can lead to conflict and to a distorted interpretation of the intended message/preferred meaning.

As a general rule, a meeting of cultures entails some amount of conflict. If transculturalism exemplifies a conflictual state, it also aims at resolution¹⁴. If no truce were met, the commercials, in our case, would have failed in their original intention: persuading viewers to purchase the car advertised. Just as they leave enough leeway for audiences to give their own interpretations and reconstruct meanings on their own socio-cultural and economic coordinates, the foreign producers also make sure it is narrow enough so as to prevent any exaggerated deviance. The local readers are invited, through the use of transparent metonymy, to come midway with their interpretation. They can appropriate the message and reassign it new, yet not semantically far removed, meanings. Perhaps the resolution is facilitated by the conjunction of the two interests: of the car makers to sell and of the targeted television viewers to buy the car in question. As well, there are two metatextual elements adding up to the reciprocal 'efforts' at coincidental meaning making: a discipline on the encoders' message to aim unwaveringly at the code system of the viewers' culture. In this sense, perhaps the producers of the two ads while making allowances for the financial potential of the average Romanian also play on their unscathed thirst to journey abroad and enjoy the liberty of unrestricted travel. The Romanian viewer is thus enabled, in his capacity of consumer of the ads, to negotiate his/her individual or collective identity vis-à-vis the foreign culture(s) imagined.

Each image in the two ads, whether symbolical or concrete, can offer a multiplicity of interpretations, based on the cultural frameworks of the readers. In the case of the Romanian viewer the interpretations can be narrowed down to a set that resonates with the local idiosyncrasies. Thus the car is the objective correlative¹⁵ for an alternative present for the audience of a formerly communist country. After having been denied for so

long the liberty of choosing a western lifestyle and being currently in a painful and prolonged economic transition, the local audience cannot avoid their aspirational needs influencing their interpretations. The Fiat Panda, thus, is literally the vehicle that facilitates contact with the geography aspired to. It can take one beyond the infamous Iron Curtain, which, unfortunately, given the living standards of most of the Romanians, still exists in an economic form.

Moreover, the transcultural reading of the two commercials can lead to deeper meanings playing on their metaphorical charge. The Fiat symbolizes for the Romanian viewer the freedom to travel, a liberty s/he has been long been denied for political and ideological reasons. The conjunction of multiple cultural images in the ads suggests that there is practically no geographical barrier for a Romanian proprietor of this car in the new socio-economic and political conjecture. Perhaps the same commercials broadcast in the West would not lead to such passionate readings and would have a more neutral and narrow impact. The act of interpretation allows for cultural specificity and at this level – of contextual reference – meanings take on ideological dimensions. The act itself of consumption is productive, for the viewers appropriate the texts as they come in contact with their everyday social practices.

The possibility of multiple readings by interpretative communities or the individual viewer is also one of the defining traits of postmodern television, which is referred to as multi-accentuality¹⁶. Each individual may participate synchronically or diachronically in several cultures and embrace particular beliefs, values, attitudes, beliefs, styles, etc. Membership of (sub)cultures is fluctuating and the viewer can negotiate his/her identity across the socio-cultural communities that are themselves constantly overlapping. On the one hand, the viewers can coalesce in interpretative communities as

dictated by their communion in media tastes and needs. On the other hand, they can choose to individualize their media readings. The possibility to form allegiances¹⁷ with groups elsewhere in the world, as made possible by the circulation of the media texts of the global television¹⁸ through the new technologies, is one possible resolution to conflicting reading. So, while the polysemy of the two car commercials makes them prone to multiple decodings and asymmetrical meaning making by the representatives of different cultures, their global circulation facilitates a consensual reading by coalescing viewers in an interpretative community. Viewers everywhere can give a symmetrical reading of the commercials mediated by their identical interest in a particular make of car. Or else, they may simply intend to enjoy the preferred meaning of the ads for which reason they accept wholesale the 'recommended' system of meaning.

An additional factor that contributes to disjunctive reading is the language of the commercials. The lines of the story are in English in a broad accent reminiscent of Rasta¹⁹ talk while the message about the car purchase facilities is in Romanian. Rasta talk is rather clueless as symbolism where it concerns the Romanian viewers. Few, if any of them, have at best a vague idea about Rastafarian ideology. Presumably, the young men's hairstyles, the famed dreadlocks, will prompt some associations, if any, with the revolutionary music of Bob Marley. In the absence of a substantial cultural (linguistic) competence, the symbolic value of the Rasta talk will remain opaque to the Eastern European viewer, even while it is transparent to the members of the multicultural communities in the West. The linguistic assignation is hardly accidental. Rasta talk is used for the exclamatives and the non-conformist defying exchanges, while the matter-of-fact and marketing logo is in Romanian. Both of these contrasting dimensions

interlock in the make of the car advertised: a functional, sturdy, small vehicle that stirs, on the other hand, a young man's sense of adventure and invites them to act on impulse. Just as it conjoins references to contrasting dispositions and moods, so the car imagines a context where cultures meet to combine rather than to clash. This is a symbolic rendering of the transcultural conflict followed by consensus.

Conclusions

TV advertisements lend themselves to multi- and poly-meaning making. This potential is amplified by the new type of television: global television. Their messages become accessible to an assortment of cultures and will be subjected to a wide diversity of cultural frameworks used as grids for interpretation. If the decoding of the message can, thus, result in conflicting outputs when the input is identical, this is attributable to the work of the multiplicity of interpretative communities existing within the worldwide audience as well as to the socio-cultural make and personal/psychological needs of the individual consumer.

It can be said, then, that the commercials carried globally have the power to coalesce viewers into a group accepting the preferred/intended message. However, the reading itself is, in reality, multi-accentual, for the individual/collective decoder negotiates or even opposes the intended message. In order to facilitate a non-conflicting decoding, the producers (encoders) might have to make extra efforts when they address multiple or alien (geographically or ideologically) cultures. While ads usually rely heavily on symbolism and rich imagery, theirs should be made, perhaps, more transparent. But even so, the transcultural vectors will orient the message

in different cultural directions. The viewers, as members of different (sub)cultures, will deconstruct the message and use the separated ingredients to mix their own cultural cocktails. The cultural blending is meant not to collapse the intended message into an unidentifiable rubble, rather than to produce a hybrid sprout in celebration of a consensus reached.

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Notes:

- ¹ John Fiske speaks of the TV sign being organized and interpretable at three levels called orders of signification: first-order signs are representational, second-order signs are connotative, third order signs are to be interpreted in terms of subjective responses which are shared, to a degree, by all members of a culture - intersubjectivity.
- ² Global television, through the new media and communication technologies, makes its programmes and messages available to all viewers across the globe.
- ³ McCracken notes that the media represent the dominant ideology and encode their messages in forms that favour a decoding in line with the preferred meaning: one that is in harmony with the interests of the political and socio-economic power bloc.
- ⁴ Antonio Gramsci's concept of a hierarchy among nation states, socio-economic or cultural groups, according to which those which detain economic power try to subordinate the others.
- ⁵ Eco speaks of the neo-television in contrast to paleo-television.
- ⁶ David Morley contradicts the theory of the direct media effects (exposure to programmes can narcotize viewers and desensitize them or, contrarily, induce violence in their behaviour.
- ⁷ Rastas claim their background to be of Caribbean origins, the region where there occurred, in the 18th century and thereabouts, a turmoil caused by a racial and cultural mix to the extent to which today the inhabitants of the islands can no longer trace exactly their lineage.
- ⁸ Cuban Fernando Ortiz coined the term in 1947 to describe the natural tendency of people to resolve conflicts over time, rather than exacerbate them. In contemporary culture, transculturalism focuses on such problematics as dissonance, tension, and instability as well as on the stabilizing effects of social conjunction, communalism and organization.
- ⁹ Rasta, or the Rastafari movement of Jah people, is a religious movement that reveres Haile Selassie I, the former emperor of Ethiopia, as King of Kings, Lord of Lords and the Lion of Judah. The name Rastafari comes from Ras Täfäri, the pre-coronation name of Haile Selassie I. The movement emerged in Jamaica among working-class and peasant black people in the early 1930s, arising from an interpretation of Biblical prophecy, black social and political aspirations, and the teachings of their prophet, Jamaican black publicist and organiser Marcus Garvey. The Rastafari movement has spread throughout much of the world, largely

through immigration and interest generated by Nyahbinghi and reggae music—most notably, that of Bob Marley. By 2000, there were more than one million Rastafari worldwide. About five to ten percent of Jamaicans identify themselves as Rastafari.

¹⁰ Stuart Hall in his seminal paper about the encoding and the decoding of television messages distinguishes three types of operations by viewers: one that is in line with the dominant code, another that negotiates the meanings, and still another that decodes the message in an oppositional way.

¹¹ When the message is encoded according to a set of codes that does not coincide with the one used for decoding, the result is aberrant decoding. Eco 1972 noted that this is a frequent occurrence in the mass media.

¹² Katz et al. (1973) – uses and gratification theory. According to them the mass media fulfill five basic needs of the consumers: cognitive, affective, personal integrative, social integrative, and tension release needs.

¹³ Recent work by Katz et al. (1990) reconsiders the theory of the ‘hypodermic needle’ model of international effects whereby American (imperialist) values are injected in the hearts and minds of third world citizens. Katz remarks that audiences do not accept them wholesale but overlay their interpretative schemata onto the imperial messages.

¹⁴ Lewis makes a point of transculturalism being more than conflict but also resolution. If it deconstructs central meanings, it has something to offer as replacement.

¹⁵ Grant McCracken (1990) coined the term. It refers to the ways in which products are advertised in ways that are designed to capture emotional conditions, social circumstances, and lifestyles that have

been purposefully displaced and made distant in the ad. Commodities are made available for the consumer to regain that which was made to appear as out of reach.

¹⁶ Postmodern television is designed to appeal to different audience groups. John Bignell, the media semiotician, asserts that the codes of television are affected by the relationship between the ideological structures of the programmes and the social and cultural positions of viewers.

¹⁷ Anthony Giddens (1984) speaks of the ‘time-space’ convergence. Essentially, it refers to the bringing together of viewers and places and events that were previously distant or unknown. It enables him/her to identify with dispersed yet knowable communities and to thus join virtually regional, national or transnational collectivities.

¹⁸ Chris Barker (1997) defines global television as one which through technology, ownership, distribution and audiences operates across the boundaries of nation states and language communities. London and New York

¹⁹ Rastas believe that their original African languages were stolen from them when they were taken into captivity as part of the slave trade, and that English is an imposed colonial language. Their remedy for this situation has been the creation of a modified vocabulary and dialect, reflecting their desire to take forward language and to confront the society they call Babylon