Critical publicity/public criticism: reflections on fieldwork in the Bombay ad world

William Mazzarella

Department of Anthropology

University of Chicago

mazzarel@uchicago.edu

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Prologue

My tiny Premier taxi shudders to a halt at the Mahalaxmi traffic lights. Immediately, an group of boy hawkers, wearing tattered shorts, efficiently fans out among the lines of waiting cars, searching for likely customers. The mid-day sun is oppressive and a cloud of exhaust fumes is already hanging over the junction. The boy who finds me is clutching a couple of books carefully wrapped in transparent plastic. 'Deepak Chopra, sah! One hundred rupees only, sah!' The book, which is in English, is titled: The way of the wizard: twenty spiritual lessons for creating the life you want*. I remember how, about a year earlier, I had seen the millionaire New Age guru Chopra on American public television, peddling yuppie mysticism to an earnestly reverent audience. More recently, I had come across Chopra in the Indian press arguing that the cause of poverty was an individual inability to realize 'wealth consciousness'. Asked by a journalist whether he was ready for* sanyas [renunciation]*, the urbane doctor replied: 'Renunciation is in the consciousness. If I think myself into anonymity, that would be* sanyas *for me. I long for it but it won't happen tomorrow.' The traffic suddenly lurches forward, and the hawkers scurry back to their traffic island.*

Introduction

Advertising and anthropology have never been more closely allied than today. Agencies, who used to show a marked preference for psychologists, now routinely advertise for anthropologists to fill slots with ambitiously devised titles like 'future planner.' Anthropologists, in their turn, are delightedly discovering that some of their erstwhile models of culture (particularly the old structuralist ones) suddenly seem to have all sorts

of commercial applications. This, it seems to me, is an occasion for both fascination and foreboding. I write this essay out of the conviction that this marriage, apparently made in heaven, cries out for critique. By 'critique' I do not necessarily mean an oppositional commentary. Rather, I intend a rigorous analysis of the conditions and implications – both formal and ethical – of a particular set of beliefs or practices.

Such a critique, even in the rudimentary form offered here, will necessarily take us far beyond the relatively narrow confines of advertising and anthropology as professional practices. It will require us to situate the alliance between anthropology and advertising in relation to the worldwide ascendance of consumerism as a model of social participation (one dimension of what is generally known as 'neo-liberalism'). At a time when citizenship is everywhere being reimagined as consumption, advertising is one of the key sites at which normative visions of social life are expressed and explored. And in an age of globalization, culture – that hoary terrain – has returned as one of the key idioms of this exploration.

But this is not just a critique of the advertising business. It is equally and reciprocally an exploration of what it might mean to 'do' an ethnography of such an institution. I went to Bombay, India in the late 1990s to study the production of advertising in the context of globalizing consumerism. I quickly became aware of several contradictions or tensions in this practice. Initially, as I discuss below, I assumed that these contradictions had to do with the apparent mismatch between the smug plenitude of advertising images and the prosaic struggles of life in the city. Soon I came to understand the project of advertising as less self-contained, more internally contradictory, and – most

importantly – as necessarily engaged, *beyond the volition of its practitioners*, in the politics of everyday life.

Relevance and doubt

In the beginning of my fieldwork in Bombay, I had a kind of mantra. Whenever someone asked me what I was doing, I would say I was studying advertising and globalization in India. On the face of it, my timing was good. Facing a dire foreign exchange crisis in the summer of 1991, the recently installed Congress government of P V Narasimha Rao had pushed through a series of reforms intended to 'liberalize' the Indian economy. The Nehruvian dream, it seemed, was finally being dismantled: after four decades of import substitution and government licensing, foreign investment was now ardently being courted. Most of the pro-liberalization lobby argued that the reforms could not be sectorally selective, that India would have to take, as the phrase had it, the potato chips along with the computer chips. By the mid-1990s, a host of foreign consumer brands were jostling for space on Indian shop shelves, and the Indian advertising business was going through a period of explosive expansion.(1)

Given this context, my mantra seemed eminently intelligible to many of the people that I approached in the Bombay business world. At the same time, and for the same reasons, my interest in the cultural politics of Indian advertising fared less well with other local constituencies. Many of my intellectual and activist interlocutors responded with barely disguised contempt, or with polite boredom. Was not the advertising business, they asked, simply a refuge for overprivileged, overpaid, overgrown children; faddish corporate fops with nary a care for the travails of the 'common man?'(2) Did I

think I would learn anything about the 'real' India from these people? Why was I bothering with urban English-medium advertising that the vast majority of the country's population could not understand, made for goods that they would never be able to buy? Finally, was there not something rather unsound about my own position, a researcher on a generous American grant, hanging out with a socialite elite, in a city where most people didn't even have a solid roof over their heads?

Returning home from these encounters, I would try to buck myself up with the thought that these objections were only a symptom of an ossified and out-dated notion of political relevance, one that, to its own detriment, refused to take into account the crucial mediating functions of commercial imaging in contemporary public culture.(3) Still, the criticisms continued to gnaw at me; the disjunctures they pointed to just seemed so visible, so palpable.

Some of it was obvious and empirical, the stuff of countless magazine articles on the contradictions besetting economic liberalization in India: most of all, the yawning gap between the sudden availability of shiny new consumer goods and the miserable condition of much basic infrastructure. Microwave ovens were becoming available to some, but it was almost comically difficult to procure a reliable supply of cooking gas. Cable television and mobile telephony were readily available (the former, in particular, for relatively little money), but getting a basic terrestrial telephone connection required an exasperating amount of bribery and months of tireless effort. Fancy imported cars gleamed in shop windows, but roads were so poorly maintained and so overcrowded that attempting to drive was often hardly worth the aggravation.

This general scenario, familiar enough as a gloss on life in many 'Third World' cities, found a direct parallel in my own daily experience of doing fieldwork. This was particularly true of the first few months of my research, when I was spending my days inside the Bombay office of a transnational advertising agency network, trying to do what we anthropologists stubbornly but rather vaguely call 'participant observation.' Each time I left the air-conditioned office of the ad agency where I was doing my fieldwork, I felt a small shock. During the day, the space within the four walls of the office, with its computers, its cubicles, its conference rooms and its fax machines had served as a kind of simulacrum of the smooth-edged world of the ads that were being produced there: all executive resolve, sharp angles, and globalized rhetoric. But in the evening, I would step directly into a warren of mid-town Bombay streets, crowded with human and animal bodies, packed with transactions, noises, and smells of all kinds, a realm of highly embodied and personalized exchanges. From street-corner entrepreneurs to the violent power politics of the Bombay drug and movie mafia, this was a world radically different from - and yet imaginatively imbricated in - the immaculate capitalism of the billboards.

In fact, I found myself buffeted between a consciousness of contradiction and an even more disturbing intimation of *continuity* between the hypo-abled bodies of the dispossessed and the hyper-abled, cell-phone toting billboard bodies, looming over me from their backlit perches. At first I had predictably enough interpreted the constant spectacle of suffering and mutilation at Bombay's road junctions as a kind of opposite to the ingratiating language of advertising. My liberal visitor's inevitable guilt and revulsion had in some obscure way still been tempered by a (certainly equally misplaced) social realist ethos of balance and perspective; a categorical separation between 'authentic'

suffering and ‘staged’ advertising. But soon my mind started playing tricks on these complacent categories. One night, a list of advertising principles that I had copied down that day in a newspaper archive seemed, with a sickening logic, equally to apply to the advertising executive and to the person behind the arm that was being extended into the back seat of my scooter rickshaw: ‘1) draw attention; 2) arouse immediate interest; 3) impart information as quickly as possible; 4) convince viewer/reader; 5) induce action’.

Transparency and opacity: a new sense of ‘the field’

Many of my initial conversations with Bombay ad people did little to dispel my anxiety. As an anthropologist professionally socialized to look for the telling detail, the unexpected articulation, I found myself increasingly frustrated with the quality of my interviews. Given that I was studying a group of professionals whose livelihood depended on impression management, it was perhaps hardly surprising that the overt content of many of these initial conversations seemed less than spontaneous. Qualitatively, their statements shared something with the way that ads are often illuminated: full on and depthless, with the attention focused on hyper-realistic tactile surface detail at the expense of shadow and perspective.

And then there was the circularity of the information that I was able to glean. On the way home from my appointments, perusing a local business magazine on the commuter train, I would often find my precious interview material duplicated almost verbatim in one current article or another. As an ethnographic observer, hungry for an ‘inside’ perspective, it was particularly unnerving suddenly to perceive myself as the last in a long line of journalists.

Initially I was naïve enough to expect that some sense of the contradictions involved in the work of advertising in India would emerge spontaneously in the course of my interviews, that my informants would somehow 'own up,' in a confessional mode, to the ethical dilemmas with which I assumed they were wrestling. But of course many of my informants responded like the agency boss who leaned contentedly back in his chair when I asked him how he felt about the changes brought about by the economic reforms of the previous few years. Puffing on a cigar, he beamed: 'I feel extremely good! There is not universal agreement, but there is certainly a swing in favor of free commerce, which I believe is going to be critical to the economic development of the country. Seven or eight years ago, if you had asked the man in the street, he would probably still have been anti-business. But now people are beginning to understand…' At this point, the conversation would segue into a familiar and impersonal litany: the advantages of competition, 'the Indian consumer's' dawning brand consciousness, the residual agonies of government 'red-tapism', 'ad-hocism', and 'authorityism'.

On the one hand, like any ethnographer, I was a meddling visitor in a world that was quite obviously in many ways distinct from the one that I would call home. On the other, my informants and I were also, in each others' eyes, occupants of specific professional categories – 'ad man,' 'academic' – that were translatable (if not fully equivalent) across our respective lifeworlds. With the handful of informants who gradually became personal friends, these categories became less important. But in more formal situations, such as when conducting interview appointments, I frequently found that this apparent categorical transparency in practice produced a kind of opacity. As senior members of a global business elite speaking to a junior member of a global

academic elite, many of these informants chose to address me in a reified idiom – marketing discourse – that acknowledged our mutual standing yet, to my initial frustration, appeared to give nothing away.

The obverse of this more or less smooth exterior was, in a sense, just as predictable: late night despair, after one too many drinks. At a crowded bar, a young copywriter from one of the big agencies morosely warned me that dangerous things were happening to India. The United States were just the latest neo-imperialist installment in a long-line of pretenders. 'I'm just scared of a white world,' he said. So how did he reconcile his views with his job, I wondered. 'I'm a fucking hypocrite,' he shot back, 'the lowest of the low'. He then spoke sentimentally of quitting the ad business and becoming a documentary filmmaker working in the slums, showing people 'the real India'. Later, disconsolately stepping across cracks and rumpled figures on the pavement, he muttered: 'Everything's advertised…this shirt I'm wearing which is sold to me in a shop that's advertised by a man who's advertised…' We made an earnest date to meet the following afternoon and visit that pre-eminent site of urban authenticity – approved and certified as such by no less an authority than the *Lonely Planet* guide – the slums at Dharavi. But when I called the next day, the copywriter's sister informed me that he had left for the day to play cricket.

Soon enough I found myself ensconced in the Bombay office of a transnational agency network, and the tenor of these early encounters gave way to an immersion in the day-to-day process of advertising production. I became more attuned to the pragmatic worlds of my informants, and I began to work out how to bring into concrete focus the large-scale theoretical abstractions that I had carried with me to India ('the cultural

politics of globalization' etc.). It was a necessary, and ethnographically reassuring, first step.

But looking back I realize that my concern to situate my study at a particular 'site' also drove me down a blind alley. In my pursuit of the 'real reality' of Indian advertising practice, I spent a great deal of time chasing processes and practices that I imagined to be just around the next corner, behind a closed office door, articulated in a meeting to which I had not been invited. At the same time, my sense of the disconnection between the minutiae of life in the agency and the world outside its doors grew steadily more oppressive.

What I was struggling to envision was a different, more complex sense of the field in which I was doing fieldwork. Here, the contradictions were not between what the advertising business did and what went on in some other realm, some 'real world' of the streets. Rather they were internal to a wider field, a field which included all these places and moments as nodes, nodes at which the public circulation of images and discourses took on temporary forms – in advertisements, to be sure, but also in political rhetoric, on television, in everyday conversation, in public debate.

Certainly, in retrospect I can enumerate my research strategies, such as they were, according to conventional labels. I did 'participant observation' for several months in the agency. I did 'interviews' with practitioners all over the city. And I did 'archival research,' both of primary source materials and of magazines and newspapers. But such a list captures very little of the peculiar and shifting shape of 'the field' as it took shape around me. Increasingly, I saw myself exploring a kind of dynamic force-field, a space of circulation comprising a series of sites that were public, private, and ambiguously located

along the continuum. I literally imagined myself following images and texts as they moved through this field. Sometimes they would disappear from view altogether; other times, they would pop up simultaneously and confusingly at multiple locations – on billboards, in magazine articles, in casual conversations. Sometimes they appeared in surprising combinations; often, their *avataras* came across as heavily overdetermined. Always, I had the sense that I was trying to inhabit and understand (*not* overview) a kind of totality, but one that was open-ended and part of larger routings and collisions that were taking place far beyond Bombay.

Culture and accountability

> "To speak of culture was always contrary to culture. Culture as a common denominator already contains in embryo that schematization and process of cataloging and classification which brings culture within the sphere of administration"
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> (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972[1944]: 131)

I mentioned above that there was, in the beginning of my time in the field, a kind of surface affinity between what I said I was doing and what my agency informants said they were doing. In other words, my project was expressible in terms that echoed those of marketing thought. When I was applying for research money, during the year before I went to India, I framed my project as a study of the Bombay ad business as a point of cultural mediation in a time of globalization. The core questions – which I found resonated very closely with what some of my agency informants, particularly in account planning and brand strategy functions, were thinking – included: How were global brands

being translated for local markets? What sorts of 'Indianness' emerged and were perpetuated in the process? How did the business, in its dealings with multinational clients, manage the need to insist that Indian consumers were both Indian *consumers* – that is, hungry for all the accessories of a globally-defined middle class life – and *Indian* consumers – that is, consumers whose hearts and minds could only be reached by respecting their cultural particularity (see Kemper's chapter in this volume for reflections that are both geographically and conceptually adjacent)?

Both my agency informants and I were asking these questions in a context where cultural identity and cultural difference had suddenly become both big business and good governance. In politics (and within those fractions of academia who understand themselves in part as governmental consultants), optimists spoke of multiculturalism and pessimists of the clash of civilizations. In business the globalization of consumer markets had made possible, if not inevitable, the rise of culturally sensitive marketing.

As an anthropologist working in the late 1990s, my 'take' on this context was, however, radically different from those of my informants. Indeed, since the 1980s, the affinity between the grand old culture concept and the taxonomic needs of globalizing bureaucracies and consultancies had given rise to a great deal of concern in the discipline. Initially, this unease was in the main expressed as a crisis of representation, as an anguished desire for a mode of ethnographic writing that would not essentialize its objects.(4) Then, as 'globalization' moved to the forefront of the anthropological agenda in the early 1990s, attention also started turning more squarely towards the cultural politics of transnational corporations and quasi-governmental organizations.(5)

The apparent convergence between advertising people and anthropologists over the culture concept has been used to make an ideological claim on both sides. The claim is that both parties are really doing the same thing: that is, discovering an underlying and already-existing cultural order.(6) What is avoided here is any consideration of the multiple mediations – advertising and marketing among them – that serve to rework and reproduce what we think of as culture and cultural difference.(7) After all, one of the central articles of faith in marketing is that marketers do not invent or impose consumer preferences; rather they track pre-existing and objective empirical consumer information by means of research, the better to respond to real consumer needs. With the globalization of consumer markets, the culture concept became one of the most important ways in which this stance was maintained, for what could be more deeply embedded in consumer psyches, more resistant to arbitrary tampering, than culturally grounded consumer preference?

For me, the uncomfortable upshot of all this was that, to the extent that my presence in the agency made any structural sense at all, it was as a potential purveyor of essentialized cultural knowledge. This assumption was not, most of the time, squarely spoken. Nevertheless, it put me in an awkward position: in order to fulfill this expectation I would have had to abandon the question that interested me most: namely, how did advertising itself work as a mode of cultural production? I well remember the look of mounting alarm on the face of one of my agency hosts during an early discussion of my research plans, as he began to sense my interest in turning the ethnographic lens upon *his* practices rather than on those of the official objects of marketing and anthropological

research alike: ‘ordinary people’, a.k.a. ‘consumers’ in all their cultural peculiarity. To his great credit, and with his boss’ approval, he nevertheless just let me get on with it.

Whether the ethnographic eye turns towards the internal workings of an agency, or whether it looks outwards towards the public fields through which advertisements circulate, I would suggest that we owe it to advertising to do what nowadays it least expects us to: to take it seriously. Just as we should not placidly accede to the fiction that advertising simply responds to consumers’ desires, so we should not peremptorily dismiss it as fraudulent. Its languages – whether we like it or not – are our languages, its spaces are our spaces. What we need to do is to examine the hows and whys of how advertising intervenes in these languages and spaces.

One way to move into such an examination is to think about the cultural politics of advertising images in formal terms. Once we accept that such images are neither ‘mirrors’ of society (in Stephen Fox’ phrase), nor radically detached from the social worlds through which they circulate, then the way is open to thinking about how these images become part of what Daniel Miller (1997) has called ‘projects of value’. Projects of value are more or less successful attempts, by individuals and institutions, to generate value and meaning out of the elements of public culture – images, discourses, signs. The practice of advertising is one such project of value (or rather an institutional assemblage of many such projects of value). And, I would, argue it is an exceptionally important one. Not because what advertising people do with images matters more than what other people do with images, but because the practice of advertising is so deeply implicated in the general contemporary movement towards both the ‘marketization’ of public life and the ‘imagification’ of the market.

In its relation to this general movement, advertising could be described as a 'hegemonic' project; its spokespeople and its institutions certainly enjoy a certain sway around the world today. But it is crucial to recognize that advertising is not watertight, that its basic building blocks (images and texts) will not, as it were, 'sit still' for any length of time. The poetry and potency of images and texts will always exceed and trouble the instrumental limits of any given agenda – commercial, disciplinary, or subversive. This is because they are already embedded in social life, which is to say that they are riddled with all the dense encumbrances of history, experience, and identification.

At the same time, this is not just a story about the impossibility of fixed meanings or authoritative claims in advertising. Rather, the densely social resonances of these images and texts give them the quality of a kind of symbolic commons (one might perhaps call this 'culture') that cannot but impose certain obligations on their users. To the extent that advertising draws upon a common symbolic and affective account, as it were, it becomes entangled in a kind of ethical debt. Ostensibly, the repayment resides in the form of the functional satisfaction that the advertised object promises. But in fact the equivalence is misleading, because, in addition to the exchange of cash for commodity, a symbolic investment is taking place on the part of consumers (and of producers) of advertising. This is an investment in an imaginary domain that far exceeds the unique selling propositions of individual goods. Most generally, this is an investment in happiness, transcendence, self-transformation, a Good Life for individuals and collectivities.

To the extent that the figure of the consumer-citizen takes over from earlier kinds of approved political subjectivities – the subject of the nation, the subject of development – the burden of these absolutes comes to rest upon its creators' shoulders: the advertising business, street-side philosopher of the consumerist dispensation. In the face of this impossible responsibility, the claim of marketing ideology – that advertising is merely a response to actually existing society – is understandable. Furthermore, it is not wrong in its disavowal; the materials on which advertisements are built *are* collective, because they are social. What is disguised here is that the advertising business is necessarily *also* professionally constrained to proclaim proprietary expertise in the public deployment of these materials. Otherwise, there would be no reason – other than the simple conveyance of 'information' – for the advertising business to exist.

I spoke earlier of my unease, in the field, over the tension between what I perceived to be the smooth surfaces of the language of advertising and the palpable struggles of urban life in Bombay. Moving beyond the confines of the agency walls, thinking increasingly of the larger public field inhabited and transformed by advertising, I came to see how deeply the claims and practices of the business, far from being irrelevant to 'the common man,' had become caught in the contradictions of a society imagined in the image of consumption.

Liberalization and globalization: predicament and opportunity

The peculiar social formation known as mass consumerism achieved public and political prominence in India in the early- to mid-1980s. At this stage it was still largely an internal affair; the avalanche of foreign brands and transnational satellite television

stations would not descend until 1991. From the beginning, consumerism was touted as a kind of sensuous antidote to the castrating agency of state planning, with its peculiarly bureaucratized rhetoric of austerity. Advertising was crucial to the selling of the consumerist dispensation. This was not simply because it made consumers aware of goods, but – more profoundly – because the advertising business, particularly through the rapidly expanding medium of television, promoted its services as an authentic and direct engagement with the embodied needs of Indians at large. The tactile quality of commodity images could, apparently, reanimate the self-realizing energies that years of political exhortation had shriveled. At the same time, the newly imported discipline of marketing promised to extend the mobilization of the consuming populace beyond the elite Anglophone enclaves with which, until then, most advertising had been identified. In this way, consumerist seductions strove towards a populist legitimation.

But this equation was also internally contradictory. Many of the products and images that were the most important examples of the ad industry's power to mobilize collective aspirations were, by definition, upscale and aimed at relatively exclusive market segments. The paradox was, in turn, mediated by the claim that far from being elitist, such 'aspirational' imagery merely granted *all* Indians the pride of an equal right of desire. Again the isolationism and shoddiness of the planned economy were attacked: now Indians would be free to dream world-class dreams. As a prominent Bombay copywriter told me:

> I have always believed that it is not that the beggar on the road dreams of being the most well-off beggar. He has the right to dream of being a king. So he dreams of being a king, I dream of being a king. So everyone wants the sun and the moon

and the stars. It's not that people dream in segments – that I will only dream this much because I am here. Everyone has the right to dream.

Of course, the fact that the Indian ad business was making these kinds of claims in a public cultural context where doing something about the extreme poverty of half the population had become a mainstay of political legitimacy made the proposition both more striking and more difficult to support.

The tension between an urban consuming elite and the poverty of the rural 'masses' was a classic figure of post-Independence Indian politics. To some extent, the advocates of consumerism in India pointed towards the rapid expansion of a new 'middle class' as a possible amelioration of this polarized field. But if the middle classes were, on one level, the mainstay of the consumerist apologia, they were also, in a different way, a problem quite as vexing as that of the poor. The Green Revolution of the 1960s, the new entrepreneurial dynamism of the 1970s, and the new money pouring out of the Persian Gulf between the oil crisis in 1973 and the onset of the Gulf War in 1990 had given rise to a new class of 'vernacular rich;' wealthy businessmen, farmers and traders who did not share the habitus of the older, English-medium elite. Here was a vast market for upscale and expensive products, and an enormous reservoir of that crucial fuel for marketing: aspiration. But many corporations and the advertising agencies that represented them were deeply torn between a wish to appeal to these *arriviste* classes and a deep-seated reluctance to be identified with such imagery.

The copywriter had assured me that consumers didn't dream in segments. But sometimes, I found, it was nevertheless still desirable for them to dream in nations. Alongside the 'Hinduization' of national politics, the globalization of markets had

brought the question of Indian cultural identity/integrity back into public focus in the mid-1990s.(8) With the dramatic influx of foreign brands into India after 1991, the local advertising and marketing industries found that their existing task of coordinating locally relevant images and narratives was now cross-cut by a new axis: the mediation of the local and the global. However, the new situation also brought a fresh contradiction to these relationships, a kind of crisis of value: many of the brand images that had seemed so desirable when they were largely out of reach lost much of their luster now that they had become readily available. My executive informants, who found themselves caught between global clients who expected them to add value to their products and local consumers who seemed all too indifferent, produced an apparently paradoxical discourse. The structure of the discourse wasn't new – it recapitulated the tension at the heart of two centuries' worth of Indian experiments with modernity.

On the one hand, my informants loudly berated their foreign clients for their 'value arrogance:' did they not realize that Indian consumers needed to be addressed in ways that respected their essential cultural specificity? On the other hand, these same executives had nothing but scorn for the apparently condescending way in which many transnationals had tried to 'Indianize' their advertising or their products: did Indians not deserve the same quality as everyone else? Either way, the transnationals were trashed for their neo-imperialistic assumptions.

Of course, these executives knew full well which side their bread was buttered on, and they managed to salvage for themselves a highly strategic role. Positioning themselves as expert brokers between the ambitions of their clients and the cultural inscrutability of Indian consumers, they turned what had initially been a profound crisis

of value into a virtuoso display of legitimation. Rhetorically, they now appeared as a new kind of popular hero: defending Indian cultural integrity against transnational imperialism. The measure of this magic was that globalized consumerism, of all things, was suddenly being presented as the guarantor of Indian cultural revitalization.

At the same time, this legitimating discourse was necessary precisely because my informants' predicament was so volatile. The legitimacy of the advertising business has always and everywhere rested upon the claim that the industry brings together a uniquely intuitive understanding of concrete images with a rationalizing and panoptic marketing expertise. As the advertising business, and the media through which it operates, become increasingly global in scope, so national culture becomes one of the key idioms through which it may claim local expertise vis-à-vis its clients. By the same token, executive claims to exclusive expertise are more than ever threatened from above as well as from below. Against global standardization by distant corporate headquarters they must argue local specificity. But against upstart local illuminations, they must equally argue the priority of global standards of quality and coordination.

Efficiency and intensity

These and other structural tensions, which on the surface might appear to be matters internal to marketing, took on a far wider political significance. This was firstly because the legitimation of mass consumerism necessarily involved claims about human nature, social life, and the possibilities of communication writ large. But it was also a result of the fact that these claims were increasingly gaining mainstream acceptance outside of the business world.

For decades, the Indian private sector had routinely railed against the communicative strategies of the Indian state.(9) But starting in the mid-1980s, and in conjunction with the dramatic spread of commercial television in India, commercial marketing expertise started gaining a new authority in some influential political circles. Parties, religion, and the nation-state itself were being branded and these brands were increasingly being mobilized as parts of comprehensive multi-media marketing strategies.(10) The more the business moved into the limelight, the more it was expected to provide a model not just for selling products but for communication *tout court*. The upshot of this was that the advertising business found itself in an impossible situation, precisely *because* its tenaciously nurtured dream was finally coming true.

As I have argued elsewhere, it was often in conversations about the genre known as 'public service advertising' that the tensions became most tangible. Many advertising people would speak passionately and eloquently tome of the 'electric' power of their art, a power to effect social change far beyond the capacity of existing political initiatives (Mazzarella 2001, in press). If public service campaigns had often fallen short of their aims, I was told, it was because of the failure of government to hold up its end of the deal, to ensure the requisite infrastructure.(11) And yet my conversations with Bombay ad people about public service advertising often concluded in a diminuendo: the grand generic claims that practitioners often made about the transformative power of advertising, particularly in a 'developing society,' gave way to a sober reflection on the limited compass of isolated efforts, as if the deployment of advertising campaigns were analogous to individual actions.

The small victories that trickle-down might bring sat uneasily alongside the libidinally charged visual incantations of the billboards. As one creative star (who had received awards for his own public service work) reflected:

> There is an effort going on. What's Lever spending its time on today? It's trying to find a market to replace those sticks for cleaning your teeth in the villages. I'm not saying that the industry is socialistic in its thinking. But in its process of exploring newer markets, it will have to go with the needs which will help improve the lifestyles of the people…The process will happen. I don't think [the industry] has any intention anywhere in the world to work towards a social cause. But if you're progressive in your market expansion also, in your *own* agenda, it's bound to have some impact on making lives a little better. If I had an ambition that my car should shine every morning, that's my own agenda. And so I find a boy sitting out there and I say 'hey listen, I give you ten rupees a month, you're begging out here, come and shine my car spick and span every morning.' With my own motive I've actually generated something somewhere…But I guess as the economy grows, at least some good things can happen. Some bad things will also happen, but some good things will also happen. There will be exploitation of labour, but then there will be labour to begin with [laughs]! There is no labour! There is an unemployed guy who gets employed and *then* he gets exploited [laughs]! I think there is a sense of responsibility that you need to have. I'm not saying that I'm any Mahatma Gandhi, but if you again go back to the basic premise 'respect your audience,' whether it would be a Mercedes buyer or

whether it be a chap who's going to buy a branded salt, you'll have to respect your audience.

This cautious realism has the ring of a modestly sensible proposal, so much so that we are prone to forget, for a moment, how much of an advertisement has nothing to do with the kind of functional considerations at play here. The subcategory of public service advertising, by addressing precisely those issues that are conventionally deemed to be the object of 'development' (literacy, birth control, agricultural practices) performs two ideological functions. First, it helps to legitimize advertising *per se* in terms of aims that are widely held to be ethically desirable, and which mimic the official bases of the legitimation of states in 'developing' countries. Second, it encourages the impression that there is a smooth continuity between these aims and those of mass consumerism more generally. By implication, and sometimes by overt argument, the backlit images of cell phone-toting executives are understood to reside on a continuum that also includes government-sponsored messages about fertilizer.(12)

In other words, the political legitimation of advertising takes place in a zone of 'development' concerns. But the other end of the continuum, the imagescape of cell phones and jumbo televisions, where in fact advertising does most of its work, is not considered to be political – except in a purely negative way by those who (like the activists I referred to above) would dismiss it as irrelevant. There is thus a desperate need to fill this lacuna with a concerted analysis of the cultural politics of advertising practice. And it is in just such an analysis that I see the most fruitful engagement between advertising professionals and anthropologists.

Critical publicity

I borrow the term 'critical publicity' from Jurgen Habermas (1989[1962]), who used it to refer to a (perhaps idealized) kind of public debate that would be free of the debilitating distortions of commercial interests. I do not share Habermas' privileging of discourse over images; my discussion so far should have made it clear that it is precisely the relation between the two that we need to explore. But I do think that it is crucial that we continue to carve out spaces of conversation that are minimally constrained by corporate balance sheets.

The really important parallel between anthropologists and advertising professionals is not that they both seek to understand something called 'culture.' Rather, it is that they are both public cultural practices. The question is what they might be in a position to teach each other. There is an irony in the fact that it is anthropologists, whose works have such limited circulation, that have gone to such great lengths to explore their own responsibilities vis-à-vis a politics of representation. Advertising professionals, on the other hand, operate the most comprehensive mechanism of public cultural intervention ever invented, but have generally interpreted the question of responsibility quite narrowly. The habitual language of 'industry standards' and 'self-regulation' restricts consideration of the impact of advertising to questions of 'fairness,' 'content' and 'truth;' in short, to parameters that are generally internal to the credibility of individual campaigns, understood as tools for selling particular products.

But advertising is of course never just about the products it dramatizes. Nor is its content limited to propositional claims. The ways in which images, sounds, and text come together in advertising cannot be evaluated separately from some sense of the wider

resonances, projects and responses that those elements are imbricated in, in situations and settings that may at first sight seem quite distant from the ostensible aims of a given campaign.

It is true that the advertising business, in one of its public guises, likes to see itself as the trickster inside the business machine (just as anthropologists sometimes like to see themselves as jesters at the court of social science). It prides itself upon a certain unconventionality, a commitment to 'pushing the envelope' and 'lateral thinking.' It is not uncommon to find ad people including phrases like 'When the world zigs, you should zag' in their mission statements and client pitches.(13) But for all the talk of 'thinking outside the box,' this thinking must still take place *within* a literal box, a box marked 'Dove,' or 'Ray-Ban,' or 'Videocon,' a box defined at its base by the inexorable bottom line.

The advertising business, like any business, encourages and rewards only the sort of critical reflection that is likely to be profitable within the terms of the enterprise, defined instrumentally. But to say that workers in the business are not rewarded for the kind of reflexivity that calls the accepted borders of the enterprise into question is not to say that they do not regularly, often agonizingly, engage in just this kind of reflexivity. To be sure, most of the executives and creatives that I knew in Bombay loved the adrenalin rush (and the incomparable salaries) that came with the job. But as we have seen, they would also regularly turn despondent about what some of them saw as a kind of gilded cage. The walls of this cage defined, ultimately, a relation of impotence: between the circumscribed and impoverished rationality of professional practice on the inside, and, beyond, the fearsomely complex public travels of the images themselves, for

which no single set of actors could reasonably be expected to take full responsibility. No wonder that the outcome of the despondency was so often cynical anger, ironic detachment, or defensive boosterism.

But the impotence goes both ways. Built into so many of the calls for anthropology to be 'publicly engaged' or 'relevant' is the notion of a radical separation between an Ivory Tower – within which a rarefied 'life of the mind' seeks refuge from the crush of the street – and a World of Business, in which all is cut-throat instrumentality. It is this kind of binarism that leads to the idea that the relevance of what academics do depends on dragging hapless professors, blinking like moles in the sunlight, into the so-called Real World. By the same token, it is this kind of binarism that encourages those who work in business to believe that public debate is a kind of inessential good, a luxury, or – worst of all – 'politics.' Both anthropology and advertising are endeavours that cannot help but overflow their own borders. For that reason, they both point to the possibility of critical engagements that would problematize the boundaries of 'expertise' – and, above all, of that most cultural of measures of value, 'utility' – that help to police our public conversations.

Some will object that it is to be expected that concerns for profitability and efficiency will come first for those who do not enjoy the eccentric and luxurious working conditions of research campuses. By extension, one might ask, what room, in the everyday running of a business, can there be for a pesky anthropologist who is not directly focused upon contributing to the bottom line? My response must be to insist again that advertising is, at heart, a public cultural intervention at least as much as it is a business venture. In fact, it is a business venture *because* it is a public cultural

intervention. And until this fact is taken seriously – which means giving both sides of the equation equal priority – we will be stuck with the kinds of experiential, ethical and political disjunctures that I have outlined here.

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Notes

1. Measurements of the size of the advertising industry worldwide tend to be calculated in terms of 'capitalized billings,' in other words, the amount of money that the agencies charge their clients. Since only a fraction of this money actually ends up with the agency, such figures give a rather inflated impression of financial clout.

Nevertheless, the expansion of the Indian ad business in the period 1980-2000 was nothing short of astonishing. (I have adjusted the following rupee amounts according to historically relevant exchange rates). Sarna (1982, a and b) suggests that the industry grew from 37.38 crores of rupees in 1975 (US$ 44 million) to 89.11 crores in 1980 (US$ 111.4 million). An OBM Media Bulletin from 1983 is more boosterish, figuring 236 crores for 1980 (US$ 295 million) and 296.9 crores for 1982 (US$ 312.5 million). Karlekar (1986) offers 200 crores for 1981 (US$ 232.5 million) and 400 crores by 1986

(US$ 317.5 million). Some impression of the exponential growth that followed can be gained from figures cited in Jeffrey (2000:58), according to which the business grew from 930.9 crores in 1990-91 (US$ 423 million) to 5,331 crores in 1997-98 (US$ 1.4 billion), at an average rate of growth of 30 per cent a year. Steven Kemper notes that there were 93 advertising agencies in Bombay in 1960 and 425 by 1988 (Kemper 2001: 35).

2. It would be interesting to compare and contrast the twin discursive reifications in Indian public discourse, 'the consumer' and its older counterpart, 'the common man'. Both are, of course, habitually and strategically deployed as shorthand for distinct versions of 'the public interest'.

3. Jawaharlal Nehru himself, the first Prime Minster of independent India, had railed against consumerism in his seminal text, *The discovery of India*:

> With all its splendid manifestations and real achievements, we have created a civilization which has something counterfeit about it. We eat ersatz food produced with the help of ersatz fertilizers; we indulge in ersatz emotions, and our human relations seldom go below the superficial plane. The advertiser is one of the symbols of our age with his continuous and raucous attempts to delude us and dull our powers of perception and induce us to buy unnecessary and even harmful products.
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> (Nehru 1948[1946]: 469)

4. The watershed text here is Clifford and Marcus 1986. The issue has generated a bewilderingly vast literature, both inside and outside of anthropology. For further musings on the problems – and the uses – of essentialism, see Spivak 1988 and Hutnyk

2000. For a set of reflections on the fates of the culture concept, some years after the initial moment of crisis, see Ortner (ed) 1999.

5. In some respects, though, earlier anthropological attention to the cultural politics of tourism had prefigured this concern. For inaugural statements, see MacCannell 1976 and Graburn (ed) 1976.

6. In anthropology, the locus classicus of this argument is Sahlins 1976, Chapter 5. Sahlins' position here must be understood in the context of its time, as a culturalist polemic against naively materialist explanations. Since then, however, his general argument has been thoroughly domesticated by marketing theory and consumer behaviour research, the better to present cultural preferences as 'given' and thus exonerate the culture industries from critique.

7. In his acerbic way, Theodor Adorno reflected on how elements of consumer culture are often justified with reference to a quasi-anthropological notion of tradition:

> High-pressure publicity and continuous plugging to institutionalise some obnoxious type does not make the type a sacred symbol of folklore. Many considerations of an apparently anthropological nature today tend only to veil objectionable trends, as though they were of an ethnological, quasi-natural character.
>
> (Adorno 1954: 233)

8. Rajagopal 2000 offers a compelling meditation on the affinity between the rise of a televisual Hindu nationalism and the ideology of consumerist liberalization in India.

9. Manufacturers and advertising agencies had also frequently sought to collaborate with and consult for state projects. As I describe elsewhere (Mazzarella in press, Chapter 3), these collaborations tended to heighten the mutual suspicions of both sides.

10. In a sense, of course, the 'branding' of these entities has an ancient history. Sovereigns and subsequently political parties, polities cosmic and secular have always used identifying and emotively charged insignia. In post-independence India, advertising sporadically intersected with politics. The pro-business Swatantra Party brought in flamboyant Bombay creative Kersy Katrak to work on its campaign in 1966; Katrak went on to work on promotional materials for the opposition Janata Party in 1977 and 1980. The decisive consolidation of the relationship between full-service marketing and national politics came in 1984, when Rediffusion took charge of the Congress Party's campaign and Trikaya handled the communications of the opposing BJP. This is not to say that the transition has been smooth. In fact, one of the points made by several commentators is that the increasing marketization of Indian politics tends to marginalize older, perhaps more rigorous, forms of grass-roots political mobilization (Rajagopal 2001; Brosius 1999).

11. In a sense, the isolation of public service advertising *per se* is misleading, since, according to the ethos of mass consumerism, *all* advertising is a kind of public service. That is to say, it claims to facilitate the realization of a better society. I thank Shuddhabrata Sengupta for raising this point.

12. The words of Gurcharan Das, former head of Procter & Gamble India, and long-time commentator on the Indian business scene, neatly express this implication:

> In a country like India, which has poor communications, the farmer has a right to know about the latest pump that has been invented by Batliboi. He can know about this pump in the most efficient manner through advertising. […]In an information-starved country like India, advertising [...] is also socially desirable. It is an important means to inculcate socially beneficial behaviour such as family planning and dowry abolition, conservation of energy, preservation of wildlife and forests, and living in communal harmony. […]The most unfortunate consequence of the advertising tax disallowance is that advertisers have had to cut off the already slender connection of the countryside with the modern world, depriving rural areas of the opportunity to share in the benefits of the twentieth century, which include consumer products. This is almost as bad as depriving them of the right to free speech and the right to vote.
>
> (*Economic Scene* 1983)

13. This particular motto was delivered by British creative star John Hegarty on a visit to India in 1998.