

# **“Very Bombay”: Contending with the Global in an Indian Advertising Agency**

**William Mazzarella**  
*University of Chicago*

## **Indian Soul, International Feel**

An executive from the Indian advertising agency Mudra remarked to a business journalist, “Only advertising that has an Indian soul and [an] international feel will work in the marketplace of tomorrow” (Arathoon 1996). I came across these words in the autumn of 1997, as I was beginning the major part of my fieldwork. I had come to study Bombay advertising professionals as cultural brokers, as mediating players in the game of globalization. The scrupulous symmetry of the executive’s statement was immediately reminiscent of some of the phrases that I had imbibed during the preceding years as a graduate student. *Globalization*—insofar as the term referred to something that could be generalized—was, in Roland Robertson’s words, “the twofold process of the particularization of the universal and the universalization of the particular” (Jameson 1998:xi); the key issue of the age was “the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization” (Appadurai 1996:32).

As programmatic interventions, these and other statements on globalization had certainly helped to open up a fresh conceptual space, one that encouraged critically minded anthropologists to move beyond an earlier fixation on cultural imperialism contra the resilience of local cultural worlds. Inspired, I imagined my own project as an attempt to put ethnographic flesh on the conceptual skeleton. The advertising business seemed an ideal site: the node at which culture meets capital, global brands encounter local markets, and affect weds utility. In the event, my intuition proved fruitful, not least because it allowed me to explore the constant tension between the neat symmetry of such programmatic statements (whether in marketing or in the social sciences) and the messy engagements with concrete experience that the practices of globalization necessarily involve.

My fieldwork would, as is customary, take me down roads that I could barely have imagined at the outset. I became embroiled, for instance, in the question of how the Indian advertising business had articulated mass consumerism as an alternative social ontology to centralized state planning and how later, it developed a culturally marked and proprietary information commodity

called “the Indian consumer.” I discuss these processes in detail elsewhere (Mazzarella 2001, 2002, in press). As the geopolitical polarity of the Cold War receded, as foreign brands streamed into Indian spaces of commerce, and as new media—first transnational satellite TV and then the Internet—shifted the contexts of local imaginaries, the mid- to late 1990s was a time of heightened anxiety about the meaning and value of “Indianness” vis-à-vis a global field.

One of the registers in which this anxiety manifested itself was in the attainment, by Hindu nationalist organizations, of mainstream political legitimacy, a process that culminated in early 1998, when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) managed to form a lasting coalition government in Delhi. Characteristic of this period was the growing sense that cultural-political spectacle was increasingly being articulated both in a commercial idiom and by means of commercial media, not least television (Brosius and Butcher 1999; Kaur in press; Mankekar 1999; Rajagopal 2001). The narrative and visual repertoires of this new mass-mediated politics also increasingly played with the possibility of displacing the sanctity of the village as a sign of a specifically Indian genius with figures of urbanity (Mazumdar 2001, n.d.; Nandy 2001; Sarai 2002).

The advertising business occupied an ambiguous place within these processes. Its booming fortunes during the 1980s and 1990s were of course intimately tied to the explosion of commercial television and specifically, the elaboration of more entertainment-oriented programming after 1982 (Gupta 1998; Rajagopal 1993; Shah 1997).<sup>1</sup> From wartime propaganda services offered during the final years of British rule to the current video symbiosis that obtains between politicians and the commercial media, the advertising industry’s interventions into national politics have nevertheless always been volatile.<sup>2</sup> The reasons are complex and have perhaps become even more so as the boundaries between citizenship and consumerism are blurred. Both constructs, of course, involve a claim to universal relevance, the first on the basis of belonging to a territorially delimited nation-state, the second on the assumption of a shared quest for self-realization through consumerist desire. As the optimism of state-led developmentalist modernization started to ring hollow in the 1980s, the market-oriented consumerist paradigm seemed poised to offer an attractive alternative, particularly to the up-and-coming “middle classes” and those in the private and media sectors who would cater to and define their interests. At the same time, the social legitimation of the mass consumerist dispensation required that the advertising business try to move beyond its predominantly urban, Anglophone identifications.

From the very beginning, and more so as import restrictions were relaxed in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the project of Indian consumer citizenship grappled with a series of tensions. On the one hand, aspirational consumerism spoke in a language of universal address, even as its aesthetic efficacy depended on an exclusionary calculus of social distinction. On the other hand, its promise of membership for Indians in a global “ecumene” of world-class consumption was uttered in the same breath as the claim that globalization was in

fact all about recognizing and acknowledging the cultural specificity of Indian desires.

In the course of my agency fieldwork, these tensions played themselves out repeatedly, but each time in distinct configurations. In the present article, I examine the predicament of an Indian consumer-electronics corporation I will call EMW, which, because of the sudden influx of foreign brands after 1991, suddenly found itself *marked* as “Indian.” I consider EMW’s dilemma from the perspective of the advertising-agency team that was charged with producing ads for a subdivision of the corporation, a mobile phone service provider that I will call EMW Mobile. In a nutshell, the persistent problem was to reconcile “Indianness” with “globality.” The brand was strongly identified as Indian, but the product category (cellular telephony) demanded transcendence of place. For that very reason, its dilemma was usefully illustrative of some of the paradoxes at the heart of the dream of consumerist globalization: transcendence versus embodiment, the universal figure of the consumer-citizen versus the moral-aesthetic priority of the culturally specific consumer. But we shall also see that the fixation on “the Indian” as an expression of “the local” (vis-à-vis the global) also worked, in more or less explicit ways, to support the perpetuation of an elite metropolitan politics of distinction.

Tensions such as these are of course not simply abstractions. Rather, they make themselves evident in practice. The practice at issue here is the production of advertising, which I regard as a particular kind of commodity production, the production of commodity images. Realizing value out of commodity images is a matter of what one might call “affect management,” the ongoing attempt to harness a volatile, often explosive, oscillation between affect-intensive images and their discursive elaboration. This work of harnessing, as we shall see, combines particular types of performance with various kinds of claims to authoritative knowledge. Some of these claims take the form of “intuition” or “hunches”; indeed, this kind of spontaneous creative insight is a key part of the mythos of the advertising professional. Other kinds of claims are more formally elaborated, from specific exercises in market research to the universalizing theory of branding, which seeks to routinize the volatility of commodity images by means of metaphors of personhood and gift exchange. The materials from which commodity images are made are of course always already socially mediated; that is to say, they carry polyvalent but historically determinate accretions of reference, connotation, and indexicality. The work of advertising wagers on generating value out of a fortuitous deployment of these resonances. But by the same token, it remains beholden to—and sometimes hobbled by—the experiences it invokes.

At first sight, it might seem as if the story I am about to tell is a narrative of failure. Indeed, the agency did eventually end up losing a part of the account. I would argue, however, that it is the impasses that are instructive. On the most general level, they do not simply offer an ethnographically specific window on the cultural politics of globalization. They also point toward some of the flaws in our received models of so-called late capitalism, particularly insofar

as these models suggest that global capitalism is now driven by the circulation of free-floating signifiers, images abstracted away from concrete lifeworlds, an increasingly hermetic self-referentiality. Certainly contemporary capitalism depends more than ever on the complex routes and collisions of commodity images. But this fact makes it more, not less, implicated in an everyday cultural politics; more, not less, subject to the unpredictably generative conjunctures of capital, history, desire, and experience. Furthermore, we do not have to posit an opposition between culture-industry spectacle and grassroots practices of consumption for these dynamics to become evident. Both the impasses and the imbrications—for they are two sides of the same coin—are internal to the productive process.

### Global Indianness

In the context of my fieldwork, “globalization” had, for once, a rather precise meaning. It referred to the events that took place after 1991, the year the Indian government inaugurated a series of reforms that, *inter alia*, resulted in the flooding of shop shelves with foreign brands.<sup>3</sup> Billboards all over Indian cities and towns, newly launched satellite-television channels, and the print media positively exploded with appeals to desire and identify with a *mélange* of brands in which Philips stood cheek by jowl with Videocon, Levi’s with Sunnex.

The implications of these events were, however, a matter of a great deal of debate. The cultural politics of globalization, particularly in its dazzling consumerist register, exercised reporters and editors in the current-affairs press. On talk-show TV, pundits and trendsetters argued for and against. But for the Indian advertising and marketing business, the period after the reforms of 1991 brought a specific strategic question to the fore. As the managing director of one independent Bombay agency put it to me, in quasistucturalist terms:

What I think is happening is that because you now have non-Indian products, versus [before] 1991, when all products were Indian . . . a marketing position now becomes available which says “this is Indian.” So the environment has created a positioning opportunity. And in that sense, “Indian” has therefore become a differentiator in these few years.

Indianness, then, had become a potential “position” within a globalized field. On the one hand, writer Gita Mehta remarked, “As the pace of India’s exchanges with the outside world accelerates there is a growing demand both inside India and abroad for some comprehensible definition of what India actually is” (1997:163). On the other, as corporate-identity consultant Wally Olins put it in an October 1997 *Financial Express* article titled “Crafting Corporate Personalities,” “Over the next decade or so, Indian companies will have to perform world-class, look world-class, and convince their customers, and above all themselves, that they are world-class.” What was required, then, was a global Indianness, a world-class Indianness. Superficially, this aim coincided

with the principal enticement used by proponents of market reform: that Indian consumers would finally be liberated from the shoddy goods churned out by the flabby domestic industries that for decades had enjoyed the protections of the “permit-license raj.” At a deeper level, however, the equation concealed a contradiction. Consumerist globalization, as it was sold in India, prophesied an era in which the national origin of products and consumers would no longer matter, a “borderless world” (Ohmae 1990) of universal excellence. And yet at the same time, it posited cultural difference as the very foundation of consumer preference, an organic bulwark against the neoimperial schemes of the transnationals.

An entire industry sprang up around the proposition that Indian consumers were culturally unique and thus had to be targeted by corporations in ways that resonated with their native preferences. Indian-branded *producers* were in a more complicated situation. Some of them were in product categories that were readily amenable to an overtly Indian identification (luxury hotels, ethnic chic clothing, upscale body-care products). Others, like EMW, had established their brand credentials by offering Indian consumers access to foreign technological excellence. As it turned out, EMW would take the lead in articulating this dilemma in advertising.

In a series of EMW print ads released in 1996, Amitabh Bachchan, a legend of the Hindi cinema and by then sufficiently aged to project a certain paternal urbanity, gazes out of the left-hand side of the picture. The ads are copy heavy, with the text arranged in such a way as to imply a monologue issuing from the great actor. “I’d love to be an American,” Bachchan remarks,

and enjoy the power my country holds. I’d love to be an Englishman, watching my language spread through the world. I’d love to be a Frenchman, a native of the world’s fashion capital. Art capital. Wine capital. I’d love to be Brazilian, whenever the World Cup is on. I’d love to be Italian, revelling in my country’s inimitably styled sports cars. I’d love to be German. Thorough. Professional. Efficient. Punctual. . . . I’d love to be Japanese, proud of what my country has achieved in just a few decades. . . . I’d love to be Caribbean, teaching the world to reggae and relax. I’d love to march ahead with a billion countrymen, like the Chinese. I’d love to be an example-setting Singaporean. I’d love to be proud of my country. I’d love to make people envious just by saying I’m Indian. I’d love to make you believe it’s possible. I’d love to make you believe in yourself.

Here the question of the potential value of Indianness within a global repertoire is posed directly. Another ad in the series unwittingly evokes a Hegelian politics of recognition. Where the first ad conjures up a global division of identity, the second puts Indians in the subordinate position of the slave, in the Hegelian sense, dependent for their sense of self-worth on the approbation of another:

We Indians. Why do we have a need to impress all foreigners? Why do we think fair skin is beautiful? Why do we think local means cheap? . . . Why do we never get mentioned for having the killer instinct? Why does it take us 16 years to get a medal at the Olympics? . . . Why do we think anywhere “abroad” is a better place? Why do we feel so good when others say India has potential? Why do we act as if

having potential is an achievement? Why are we so easily contented? Why do we blame our failures on fate? Why are we down here in the third world, when we all know we could easily be up there? Why don't we believe we could do it? Why don't we believe in ourselves?

This ignoble condition is certainly not the result of a lack of faith. If anything, Indians positively overflow with belief. A third ad states:

We believe it's bad luck if a black cat crosses our path. . . .<sup>[4]</sup> We believe an itchy left palm means we'll get money. And it's a jackal's wedding if it rains when it's sunny. . . . Putting a black dot on your baby's cheek wards off the evil eye. . . . When we believe all this may actually be possible, when we don't find such wisdom strange, then what is it that keeps us from also believing in ourselves, for a change?

The point is not to transcend such native faith in favor of some singular, rationalized modernity. Rather, this energy must be channeled away from its dissipation in so-called superstition and toward a value-generating entrepreneurialism. EMW, by means of Amitabh Bachchan's face, offers itself as the conduit that will enable the slave to achieve self-recognition through his own work, his own power of belief. Drawing on the recombinatory resourcefulness of the *bricoleur* and its formalization in indigenous scientific knowledge, the brand provides the mediation between self-respect and confidence on the world stage. A fourth ad states:

Have you noticed how we think? We have discovered uses for every part of every coconut tree. We find washing machines perfect for making lassi [a yogurt drink particularly popular in north India]. We think of throwing in turmeric powder to plug leaking radiators (and it works!). . . . We have methods to predict how much rain the monsoons will bring. We can launch satellites on shoestring budgets. We can make supercomputers on our own. And we still don't think we're good enough. We still don't think we can surprise the world. We still don't think we can believe in ourselves.

Formally, then, the EMW ads present the brand as the cosmopolitan custodian of Indian pride. Local and global are smoothly reconciled, and the new age of aspirational consumerism heralds a triumphant end to the indignities of a developmentalist history that has relegated India to a position "down here in the third world."

In the 19th century, the cultures of the world, arrayed in their booths at the great world expositions, were generally given a concrete embodiment in the raw materials or manufactures (a division that itself expressed the political economy of colonialism) associated with each area (Karp and Lavine 1991; Pred 1995; Richards 1990; Rydell 1984). By the late 20th century, what was striking about a campaign like EMW's—and in this it was quite representative of its genre—was that it dispensed as much as possible with references to specific products. The *brand itself* was the basis of the identification that the campaign attempted to conjure.

This apparent disconnection between the circulation of commercial images and more concrete referents is precisely what has been interpreted by many as a mark of postmodernity. Conversely, the disconnection animates the liberatory promise of marketing as well: if value can be generated through a play of images that float free of the political economy of old-fashioned commodities, then perhaps the work of the commercial imagination can shrug off the oppressive weight of history.

I was lucky enough, once I returned to Bombay in September 1997, to find myself participating in making the advertising for EMW's subbrand, EMW Mobile. What I found was that the smooth reconciliations of the corporate ad campaign belied a more turbulent and contradictory situation. And although the marketing imagination might seek to float free of history, I quickly realized that it was precisely in the realm of the imagination that the persistence of experience—what Michel-Rolph Trouillot calls “the burden of the concrete” (1995:22)—made itself manifest.

### **Beyond *Mera Bharat Mahan***

The reforms of the post-1991 period forced EMW, which was founded in the early 1960s, to reconsider its position. Company lore portrays its founder as a valiant entrepreneurial underdog, emerging victorious over the chafing restrictions and entrenched privileges of the planned economy. The company's really decisive period of growth came with the consumer-appliance boom of the 1980s. Under Rajiv Gandhi's selective relaxation of import duties in the middle of that decade, foreign components became more affordable, and a number of joint ventures were set up between Indian companies and East and Southeast Asian suppliers.

Prior to the entry of foreign brands as direct competitors, EMW had not really needed a unified corporate identity. Structurally, the company was divided into separate units, each comprising a series of product divisions. Each of these was managed as an individual profit center, with its own ambitious sales targets. Generally, each division also made its own advertising and marketing arrangements; little attention was paid to unifying the brand image of the corporation as a whole. The structural divisions persisted, but faced with the onslaught of foreign brands, EMW's corporate leadership decided in the mid-1990s to employ a Delhi advertising agency to develop a coherent and cohesive brand identity for the corporate “motherbrand.”

The brief that EMW gave to the ad agency required it to address both the sharpening of the corporate brand and the vexed issue of Indianness at the same time. The directive was to develop “a corporate campaign to lend EMW a cohesive identity across all brands and portray it as a true blue Indian multinational.” According to a spokesman for the agency, the idea was to “place [EMW] on the ‘trust Indian’ plank. Not that patriotism is a last resort, but because Indian stuff need not always be inferior.” The copywriter remarked, “We've cut the bullshit out of nationalism. . . . It's Indianness without *Mera Bharat mahan* [my great India]” (Singh 1996). The figure used by the copywriter



was telling—it is the phrase emblazoned in rainbow lettering on the back of every diesel-belching heavy-goods truck on the rutted network of national highways. These crowded roads marked the physical extent of India as a territorial nation and of the developmentalist project of the independent Indian state. From the perspective of the liberalizers and the globalizers, however, it was a space of lumbering, imperfect communications, the very opposite of the cosmopolitan “technological sublime” (Jameson 1991:32–38). The copywriter’s metaphor invoked the liberalizers’ dismissal of state regulation, a vision of “politics” as nothing but vested interests, blockages, and resistances in a space of flows that would otherwise move at, in Bill Gates’s market-friendly cyber-utopian phrase, “the speed of thought” (Gates 1995). And it lent that invocation a distinctly down-market flavor, suggesting an India that was, from a cosmopolitan perspective, both earthbound and outdated.

On paper, the choice of Bachchan as a celebrity spokesman was inspired: he had established himself in the 1970s as a “Bollywood” icon by playing angry-young-man roles, characters whose native wit and aggressive individualism enabled them to buck the system in an era of government controls and corruption. By the 1990s, Bachchan’s real-life self-reinvention as a sleek (if not particularly successful) entertainment entrepreneur drew on the rebellious resourcefulness of his erstwhile screen persona but downplayed its (in any case fictional) proletarian anchoring. Leavened with the gravitas and pathos of his seniority, he now seemed ideally suited to represent the serious business of transnational corporate warfare.<sup>5</sup> In the words of one EMW executive, “We used Amitabh Bachchan as an icon to say that we are not shy of our Indian origin and take pride in being a global Indian citizen” (Gupta 1998:101).

By the time I found myself ensconced in the Bombay agency that was handling the advertising for EMW Mobile, however, such equations seemed far from anyone’s mind. And yet this was not because they were irrelevant to the work at hand. In fact, as we shall see, they would reemerge as constitutive contradictions at every turn.

### **Solidly Indian**

Two problems dogged the EMW Mobile account from the outset. The first had to do with the relationship between image and narrative, or in advertising parlance, the relationship between sell and tell. Despite poor sales and subscription rates, Indian mobile-phone operators had been unable to agree on the terms of a generic advertising campaign to promote the advantages of mobile telephony per se. This failure was itself indicative of the cultural politics of the market. Although the Cellular Operators Association of India (COAI) had commissioned a Bombay agency to produce a generic campaign, the project had stumbled on the metropolitan service providers’ distaste at any attempts to “broaden” the appeal of the category in such a way that it might appeal more directly to provincial traders and other noncorporate consumers. As an executive from the agency that designed the stillborn generic campaign put it, “The operator who’s running a corporate-status kind of campaign in any of the metros



gets a bit worried. Because then the association of the category moves away from what he's been trying to project as an individual operator." The favored metropolitan figure of "corporate man"—the generic inhabitant of a global "cityscape"—also cloaked other anxieties; it provided a licit visual shorthand for an illicit (but very important) segment of the cellphone market, the criminal underworld.<sup>6</sup>

The effect of this on the advertising for the entire product category was that eye-catching spectacle predominated over specific discursive appeals. In the battle for market share, each of the corporations operating cellular services in India was busy pumping up its own brand. The situation was aggravated for EMW Mobile by the fact that they were trailing behind their Bombay rival, a company that I will call SamTech, in the subscription stakes.<sup>7</sup> The thoroughfares of Bombay, like those of other Indian "metros," were cluttered with billboards and neon signs flashing the benefits of one brand over another, but less was said about why anyone might want a mobile phone in the first place.<sup>8</sup>

The second problem was situated along the local-global axis and was specific to the relationship between EMW Mobile and SamTech. Both companies were Indian-foreign joint ventures, but the SamTech brand had effectively been able to carve out an international image, thus heightening by default the relative provinciality of EMW Mobile. Here, EMW Group's long-standing presence in Indian markets was an ambivalent blessing. Although it meant high levels of brand recognition and connotations of reliability and warmth, it also tended to position EMW Mobile as the local brand in a product category where globality was at a premium.

Consumer focus groups commissioned by the ad agency helped to clarify the relative connotations of the two brands with what, for the client and agency alike, was depressing starkness.<sup>9</sup> SamTech scored well on both "brand personality" and perceived quality. Research respondents, prompted to describe what kind of person SamTech represented, replied that the brand was masculine gendered, somewhere between 20 and 30 years of age, dynamic and aggressive, with international connections. EMW Mobile, on the other hand, had an age perception of 30 to 40, a tendency toward feminine gendering, a completely Indian identity, and a general association with "solidity" and "family values."

The ambivalence of EMW Mobile's Indian identification was heightened in relation to the category of mobile telephony. On the one hand, mobile phones, viewed as instruments of communication, could suggest intimacy and human connection. On the other hand, mobile phones also represented one of the most ostentatiously high-tech wings of consumer technology. In this more spectacular capacity, the connotations of mobile telephony revolved around globality, abstraction, and the transcendence of place.

The consumers polled in the agency's focus groups tended, again, to map this division onto the difference between EMW Mobile and SamTech. EMW Mobile's Indianness meant stability, closeness, and reliability. As one focus group participant reflected, "because they are Indian, they will understand Indian needs." In this sense, its Indianness made it a "warm" and "approachable"

brand. SamTech, on the other hand, was deemed “international and more efficient but also cold and distant.” Although the warmth associated with EMW Mobile seemed an ideal basis for brand loyalty, it offered little in the way of spectacular potential and eroticization. As another research respondent offered, “EMW Mobile is like my wife. . . . SamTech is like a beautiful colleague in my office. . . . We all know who we would choose.”<sup>10</sup>

EMW Mobile and SamTech were competing in a product category where any innovation introduced by one company could be duplicated by the other within days. All that remained was to build preference on the basis of brand image. It was in this context that EMW Mobile decided to introduce a new product. In terms of components, it contained nothing that was not already available. The only functional benefit that it offered was relative convenience: for the first time in Bombay, a mobile-phone handset, a prepaid SIM card, and a charger were to be made available in a single package.<sup>11</sup> The purpose was to make mobile telephony a retail product like any other, which could be more or less tossed into the shopping basket along with the groceries.<sup>12</sup>

Faced with the challenge of designing the packaging as well as the advertising for this new product, and aware of the results of the focus groups, the logical strategic decision for the agency would have been to follow in the footsteps of the Amitabh Bachchan brand campaign: to construct an image that would reconcile the intimate comforts of locality with the transcendent promise of globality, thus also aligning the subbrand with the larger corporate brand. But it was to prove easier said than done.

### **Making RightAway**

The new product was the perfect counterexample to the myth of marketing, namely, that products are created in response to the needs of consumers. On the contrary, this one was custom made to serve the short-term needs of the producer: to arrest the attention of consumers and quickly boost subscription figures. It so happened that these requirements paralleled those of the agency, which, in the light of EMW Mobile’s comparatively disappointing performance vis-à-vis SamTech, urgently needed to capture the attention of its client.

After some discussion, the agency team settled on the name Contact. The packaging visuals were an interpretation of a concept line that the copywriter had come up with: “The Contact pack as your survival kit in a harsh urban environment.” The copywriter gave this line to one of the agency artists, who in turn leafed through one of the large glossy Image Bank catalogs that agency creative rooms are typically littered with, along with American and British lifestyle magazines.<sup>13</sup> The artist finally decided on an image that he felt to be appropriate: a young man with his hand outstretched toward the camera, fingers magnified by a dramatically receding perspective, ambiguously suggesting both a desire for connection and a fashionably slackerish gesture of refusal. Finally, the visual conceptualizers in the agency’s studio proceeded to place this image against a bright swirling pattern of red and green, overlaid in turn with the EMW Mobile logo. The word *contact* itself was rendered in a deliberately

futuristic typeface. The overall effect suggested MTV or video games— fast, high-tech, loud. The aim, as the copywriter explained to me, not without a certain self-irony, was to achieve “maximum shelf-throw.”

Although the agency team was generally pleased with the design, some concern remained about the name. Certain members felt that Contact did not adequately convey the “product promise,” the ease of instant access and connection. Mulling over alternative possibilities, the art director on the account finally came up with RightAway. The copywriter readily fell into line, reflecting that RightAway had more of a “retail feel,” whereas Contact was more “philosophical.” All the elements of the commodity image were now in place. But the most important part of the production process was yet to come: performing the commodity image to the client.

### **The Commodity Image in the Flow of Practice**

In the critical study of advertising, structuralist-semiotic approaches have enjoyed perhaps the most striking prominence. I am thinking here of the seminal works of Roland Barthes (1972, 1977, 1983), the early writings of Jean Baudrillard (1981, 1996, 1998), and in the Anglo-American context, Judith Williamson’s highly influential study *Decoding Advertisements* (1978). The single greatest contribution of these interventions was that they moved the debate on advertising away from a vulgar-materialist and dubiously moralistic preoccupation with “true” versus “false” needs. Earlier critics had frequently suggested that advertising diverted consumers from a healthy (and, it was implied, honest) relationship with goods by imposing fraudulent meanings and thus encouraging unnecessary and socially harmful desires. This line of thinking was in fact shared by both liberal and radical thinkers in the 1950s and early 1960s; it was a basic tenet of John Kenneth Galbraith’s *The Affluent Society* (1958), and it even informed the reflections of as sophisticated a cultural critic as Raymond Williams, who wrote:

If we were sensibly materialist, in that part of our living in which we use things, we should find most advertising to be of an insane irrelevance. Beer would be enough for us, without the additional promise that in drinking it we show ourselves to be manly, young in heart, or neighborly. A washing-machine would be a useful machine to wash clothes, rather than an indication that we are forward-looking or an object of envy to our neighbors. [Williams 1980:185]<sup>14</sup>

The structuralists, on the other hand, started from the premise that goods—as much as representations of goods—were signifiers. As such, they had no inherent meaning; rather, it was their position within shifting structures of signification that rendered them meaningful and useful within particular settings. Some of the structuralists, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, stayed true to elements of a Marxist optic, often by means of rather vague references to the relationship between “base” and “superstructure.” But structuralism had its own internal logic to fulfill. The structural properties of advertising considered as a kind of text were the real object of interest; the social relations that comprised

their contexts of production were sometimes acknowledged but never directly engaged.<sup>15</sup>

Baudrillard's work pushes this trend to its logical conclusion. We might well be sympathetic to Baudrillard's rejection of "a spontaneous vision of objects in terms of needs and the hypothesis of the priority of their use value" (1981:29). But by equating use value only with functionality, Baudrillard effectively eliminates the entire dimension of concretion, embodiment, contingency, and practice from his analysis. He demands an understanding of goods according to "social logic and strategy" (1981:36), terms that suggest an engagement with specific conjunctures and located struggles. But in Baudrillard, these terms always ultimately refer back to a seamless and self-fulfilling "code" (1996:193–196), an all-pervasive signifying system that admits of no interference or interruption. The greatest irony of all is that Baudrillard's position, while ostensibly critical, in fact resembles nothing so much as the totalizing vision of marketing itself. There, too, we find a world mapped according to the structurally relative signifying relationships of brands and product categories, indeed a code by which social relations are matched, quasi-totemically, with relations between goods.

In fact, the totemic logic of culture-industry production was identified by Marshall Sahlins (1976), the first anthropologist to think seriously about the social place of the advertising and marketing industries in industrial societies.<sup>16</sup> Sahlins invokes Baudrillard directly and is similarly concerned to demonstrate what now becomes the "cultural" determination of use values. But where Baudrillard sees only an ideological "alibi" of "functionality" in the concept of use value, Sahlins argues that Marx understood that uses were culturally and socially relative. Marx's mistake, according to Sahlins, was to sacrifice this insight because it didn't square with his universalizing reading of history.<sup>17</sup>

Having raised this crucial point, Sahlins's argument is then, to my mind unfortunately, subordinated to the requirements of a structuralist polemic. Rightly pointing to the social embeddedness of use value, Sahlins proceeds to offer advertising and marketing not so much as key sites for a contested elaboration of cultural meanings but rather as key sites for the instantiation and discovery of an underlying and always already operational cultural logic. Consequently, he moves from the indisputable fact that advertising does not emerge out of nowhere to the disputable suggestion that it is an index of an existing cultural organization:

For these hucksters of the symbol do not create *de novo*. In the nervous system of the American economy, theirs is the synaptic function. . . . Like Lévi-Strauss's famous bricoleur, [the culture-industry worker] uses bits and pieces with an embedded significance from a previous existence to create an object that works, which is to say that sells—which is also to say that objectively synthesizes a relation between cultural categories, for in that lies its salability. [Sahlins 1976:217]

My immediate objection here is that the advertising that “works” is not necessarily the advertising that “sells,” at least not in every case the advertising that sells *goods*.<sup>18</sup> More generally, however, we are still stuck with the critically disabling affinity between structuralism and marketing dogma. For better or for worse, the story goes, advertising makes sense because culture makes sense. Questions of ideology, power, and agency are elided. Advertising professionals are, in Stephen Fox’s phrase, merely “mirror makers” (1990). “Society” and, in particular, “culture” assume an a priori status, absolving the analyst of the need to reflect on their contested constitution, the dialectical play of reification and deconstruction that is everyday cultural politics at any site, whether street corner or corporate boardroom.

More recently, ethnographic studies of the advertising business have tried to recuperate some of the concretion that was lost along with the structuralists’ dismissal of materialist conditioning. Brian Moeran’s detailed work on Japanese advertising practice (1996, 2001) foregrounds precisely the complex and contested process of production that underlies what Fox describes as “the smooth, expertly contrived finished product” (1990:329). Daniel Miller’s Trinidadian forays contextualize the dynamics of production within a wider public cultural field, as part of what he calls “projects of value” (1997:149). And Steven Kemper’s discussion of Sri Lankan advertising (2001) offers several interesting points of proximate comparison to the material I am presenting here. Others, such as Robert Foster (1999), William O’Barr (1994), and Kalman Applbaum (1998, 1999), have also helped to push the critical study of advertising and marketing back onto the anthropological agenda. Collectively, these contributions have helped to bring concrete particularity and social contingency, which were largely banished by the structuralists’ formalist orientation, back into our understanding of advertising.<sup>19</sup>

What I attempt to do here and elsewhere is to build further upon this work of reclamation by returning to the problem that Sahlins posed to Marx: the sociocultural determination of use value. But instead of referring this determination to culture per se, I explore the possibility of understanding the production of advertising as a kind of cultural production, the production of commodity images. In Marxian terms, the crucial point is that this production does not involve a one-way subsumption of concrete use values within abstract exchange value.<sup>20</sup> On the contrary, the production of commodity images depends on maintaining an ongoing and irresolvable tension between concretely situated, affect-intensive materials and their would-be authoritative discursive elaboration in the form of brand narratives.

Commodity images comprise a concrete material level—the physical aspects of image and text—that resonates in complex and unpredictable ways with local embodied and affective associations. But these physical properties are also always elaborated through various more or less generalized discourses, both at their various sites of reception and in the process of their production. The two levels of a commodity image are constitutive of each other and yet ultimately incommensurable. It is precisely in the tension between the two levels

that desire is harnessed to meaning and value is realized. By the same token, this is also necessarily an unstable and provisional process; it depends on conjuring and maintaining a fragile compact.

This is a mode of production that is highly dependent on rhetoric, staging, and interpretation, all before an advertisement even hits the streets. On a formal level, when an ad agency sells a campaign to its client, it realizes the elements of the advertisement as a commodity image by performing it. This performance seeks to harness precisely the dialectical tension between image and elaboration. The intensity of images is arresting and may sway the client in the short term. But without a set of narratives elaborated around this moment of intensity, the agency will not be able to extend this impression into a lasting and profitable relationship with its client.

The first moment of the process—seduction with images—is primarily a matter of dramatics. The elementary forms of an agency presentation to a client include the arrangement and decoration of the conference room, including strategically placed pieces of advertising and a particular seating order; the magician's flick of the wrist and the solemn silence of an expectant audience as each new design is unveiled by the agency art director; the tag-team, good cop–bad cop, presentational dynamic between various members of the agency team; and the subtle modulation between creative and executive discourse achieved through the occasional verbal interventions of the copywriter and the art director. All this is routine agency theater, performed to captivate, to heighten the client's flow of adrenaline and sense of expectation. At this stage, the fragments of the ad operate as a kind of Lacanian mirror in which the agency hopes that client executives will discern an appealingly coherent—albeit provisional—image of themselves.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, the play with images remains incomplete if the affect that it generates cannot be captured and formalized within a discursive set of product narratives. This narrative capturing has the effect of giving the resonant images an apparently delimited form and meaning, which the agency can then sell to its client. Conventionally, we think of brands as a kind of idiom of transaction between companies and consumers. This vision is entirely consonant with how corporations think of brands. But what is missed here is the fact that before brands reach the public—however defined—they must be elaborated within the parameters of the relationship between ad agency and client.

This is a negative dialectic: there is no higher synthesis of its terms. Just as elaborated brand narratives formalize the concrete images they draw on, they also require a constant infusion of affective energy in the form of *new* images. Because the agency is the producer and supplier of these images, it holds, in one sense, the upper hand in the relationship. Yet an agency's tenure on a particular account depends in large part on its ability to bring the two domains of affect and narrative into a semblance of a stable and meaningful relationship. As the executive on the EMW Mobile account remarked to me one day, "If an account is going to go, then it will go. It's like a divorce—if the spark's



gone, then you're not going to be able to stand there and try to convince them to come back to you with rational arguments."

Maintaining this provisional balance between affect and narrative is not simply a formal matter, separated from the contingencies of power, place, and history. Rather, it must necessarily and continually contend with both publicly circulating cultural discourses and a far less consciously elaborated, though no less concretely embedded, level of inclination, preference, and intuition that everyone involved in the process brings to the table. These two levels may well contradict rather than support each other.

### Agitation and Rationality

The packaging that the agency had come up with for RightAway certainly did not suffer from any lack of "sparks." When the team presented the EMW Mobile executive with their new design, he was suitably entranced. Turning the box over and over in his hands, gazing raptly at its bright, sleek surfaces, he exclaimed, "Can we keep *exactly* the same graphic look? Don't change *anything*!" As pleased as the agency team was with their success, they nevertheless knew that the battle was only half won. They still had to elaborate some kind of discursive product identity with which to harness their client's excitement before it cooled and dissipated. In the midst of all the backslapping, the copywriter looked uneasy. "He's a rational man," he reflected quietly, referring to the EMW Mobile executive. "He's going to go back to head office and reason is going to triumph over his emotions."

Indeed, it gradually became evident to the agency team that RightAway, at that stage, was all sparks and no argument. In their ongoing attempts to conjure a coherent identity that would link RightAway to the larger EMW brand, the agency team kept coming up against the problem that the focus groups had already articulated: the only advantages that EMW Mobile enjoyed vis-à-vis its rival, SamTech, were just as likely, in this product category, to be perceived as *disadvantages*, namely, EMW's qualities of locality, warmth, and Indianness. What made the situation even more difficult for the agency team was that this predicament was only confirmed by the spontaneous reactions of their client, who was, for them, the embodiment of the corporation itself.

Joyfully reunited with the RightAway package at the next agency-client meeting and once more caressing its contours, the EMW Mobile executive impatiently brushed aside the account executive's rather insubstantial attempts to introduce a product narrative. He exclaimed with gusto, "Excellent! Exceptional! Brilliant! If this doesn't win the awards and get the customers nothing will! This wild look is *happening*! Visually, this is extremely brilliant. It doesn't look Indian, actually."

Increasingly, the agency team's pleasure at their short-term success was clouded by anxiety over the emergent contradictions that threatened to sabotage their long-term plans. Their next move was to suggest that radio might be the ideal medium in which to achieve a connection between the local relevance of the EMW brand and the "happening" attractions of RightAway. To this end,



the creative team had scripted a set of radio spots, each of which was constructed around a specific Bombay consumer stereotype. One was a suburban Catholic girl, a character the copywriter had dubbed Sandra from Bandra, who was deploying her mobile phone to keep abreast of college gossip (“Aey! Tell no, you’re going to the Navy Ball or what?!”). Another script featured a young Marathi street hustler (“Kuch *decide* kiya na, to phata-phat se, *boss!*” [When something’s been decided, then get on with it, man!]). Still another featured a Gujarati gold trader calling Antwerp for market prices. The final installment involved an Anglophone version of the Marathi kid—an impatient, finger-snapping, where-it’s-at young man—this time with added fashion references (“I shaved my head, RightAway. I tattooed my arm. I pierced my lip, RightAway”).

Throughout the reading of the scripts, the EMW Mobile executive had been looking increasingly perplexed. As the presentation ended, there was a moment of silence, as the agency team sat back apprehensively. “What is the consistency here?” the EMW Mobile executive finally demanded. “Today I’m in shirt and sleeves. Tomorrow I’ve shaved my head and I’m wearing rings. Next day I come in a *lungi* [loincloth]. I’m the same person, but the perception of me keeps changing.” The agency account executive tried to explain that in the radio spots, they were aiming for specific, targeted appeals. But for the EMW Mobile executive, this very specificity, this attempt at local relevance, threatened to bring the identity of the product down market. It seemed that he was not so much haunted by incoherence per se as by the specter of provinciality. “No, but you don’t need to get so *localized*,” he protested. “In all the other communications, you’re ten notches above.”

Before the account executive could waste too much time and client goodwill on the relatively unlucrative medium of radio, the agency office manager interrupted, telling his subordinate, “What he is saying is that the rest of it is very classy, very contemporary. It’s a *cityscape*. In radio, why are we suddenly going *ethnic*?” The EMW Mobile executive nodded: “Why are we localizing it so much if this is an international, hip thing?”

### Sense and Sensibility: A Division of Labor

The strategic requirements of the brand-product relationship were being undercut by the spontaneous responses of the client executive. This tension was, furthermore, recapitulated internally in the respective roles assumed by the agency office manager and his immediate subordinate, the account executive. The manager was, in a sense, the agency’s salesman. In terms of corporate hierarchy, he was the EMW Mobile executive’s opposite number. And indeed, the dynamics of his salesmanship depended on his evoking a shared aesthetic understanding—a con-sensuality, a commonality of habitus—between himself and his client. This implication of an “instinctive” resonance between two senior executives provided the medium for a mode of persuasion based on a tacit appeal to embodied preference. The evidence of this was the agency manager’s apparently superior ability to divine the deepest desires of his client. Frequently he

would act as if he understood his client's needs before they had been articulated. At other times, as in the scene I just narrated, he would appear to contradict his own team for the sake of expressing a more profound intuition. Invariably, creative ideas and marketing strategy would be submitted for the agency manager's perusal and approval before a meeting; thus apprised, he would proceed to offer the client his agency's services as if he were doing him a personal favor ("let me see what I can come up with for you").

If the agency manager was in charge of sensibility, then it fell to the account executive to make sense of it all. The agency manager occupied a largely "front" position; the account executive, on the other hand, was very much a mediator. Account executives, who routinely act as middlemen between agency creative teams and their clients, are generally hounded by both sides for their pains (Brierley 1995: ch. 5; Moeran 1996: ch. 1). These days, account executives are often business-school graduates; in this, the executive on the EMW Mobile account was no exception. His training predisposed him to reach for marketing logic to supply him with both practical solutions and rhetorical strategies. Although the creative team concerned itself most of all with the impact of the images and the copy of the ads and the agency manager attempted to achieve perfect resonance with his client, the account executive worried about long-term strategy, a problem that expressed itself concretely as the need to develop a coherent brand.

Worried that mobile telephony might well be, as he put it, an "irrelevant" product category for most Indians, the account executive nevertheless thought that the warmth and intimacy with which the EMW Group brand was associated might help to create an emotional basis for its insertion into the everyday lives of Indian consumers. But so far, as we have seen, all the agency team's attempts to add some of this local resonance to the "happening" profile of RightAway had misfired. By that point, several members of the team were extremely reluctant to hold up a mirror marked "local" to their client's face. The account executive persisted in trying to make the advertising more attuned to EMW Group's Indian brand image and thereby develop some kind of clear and coherent bridge between RightAway and the EMW brand. The agency manager, on the other hand, had taken on board his client's horror at any concrete reference to Indianness. The question posed by the Amitabh Bachchan ads—namely, what might Indianness conceived as an avatar of the global look like?—now required an answer.

A possible solution arose in the course of an internal agency meeting. If RightAway could not be overtly Indian, then it could nevertheless be "very Bombay." The creative team, the account executive, and the office manager were all gathered in the agency's creative room to attempt to clarify their collective strategy. The account executive, still convinced of the value of making the brand relevant to what he thought might be the identifications of Indian consumers, suggested to the creative team, "You can show different people in different situations—even a Gujju guy [a Gujarati] with his printed shirt and white trousers." The agency manager, however, winced at what he clearly

perceived to be down-market, provincial imagery and responded, "But take the stereotypes of the young, modern guy."

Keenly sensitive to his client's enchantment with the RightAway packaging, the agency manager did not want to risk disrupting the spell. To him, the most direct route to elaborating a narrative around the product was to base it on the excitement embodied in the visual appearance of the package. Nodding to the copywriter, the agency manager said, "Go with the 'survival' thing that you had for Contact. That had *Bombay* language, the *city* language." What the agency manager had in mind was not the *Bambaiyya* [Bombay-vernacular] of the ill-fated radio spots but, rather, "Bombay" imagined as a collective space of aspiration and transformation: "Today, this is the latest way to go mobile . . . the *newest*, the *gizmo* way to go mobile . . . the most *happening* way to go mobile." "Not necessarily to harp on the product, but focus on the package," he said. He raised his voice: "The easiest, the best, the latest. It's Bombay! It's happening! It's *now*!" By this time, he was on the edge of his seat, riffing, almost shouting with excitement: "*Give* me the latest way! *I need trappings*! To feel the latest way the world moves!" Breathing in, he sat back, lowering his voice: "I'm giving you *that*. The latest hip thing is very 'Bombay.'" He looked around the room: "Let us not intellectualize it. This is *the latest way*. When you get to that kind of flavor then you have the news value."

As a sign, "Very Bombay" had the advantage of combining an unmistakable reference to locality with an aspirational and transcendent connotation. It was also usefully inclusive. It was Bombay as contemporary urban jungle, a setting in which the mobile phone was a weapon of survival. This image of the city brought the most wretched inhabitants of the city's burgeoning slums together with government employees squeezing their way through the crunching mass of bodies on the commuter train and the transnational corporate elite. "Very Bombay" brought all these under a single name, fusing the basic struggle for survival and the consumer's infinite aspirations.

Beyond the physical boundaries of the city itself, the signifier "Bombay" also drew on a complex set of public cultural connotations. For the last century or so, Bombay has been the hub of big business and finance in India (a position that is now gradually being eroded as many companies move to the relatively cheaper environs of Delhi and Bangalore). Money weds spectacle: Bombay is also the home of the most prolific commercial cinema industry in the world. Bollywood films enjoy a near-universal popularity in India, although they do have significant regional competition, most notably from the commercial Tamil cinema. "Bombay" hypostatizes in a single signifier the transformative allure of modernity, both material (a new life in the city, the possibility of making a living, however precarious, on one's own terms) and phantasmic (the spectacular imaginaries of Bollywood, which increasingly play with the place of Indianness within a globalizing world [Ganti 2000]).

The all-India meanings of "Bombay" prefigure, on a national level, the imaginary imbrication of the local by the global. And the signifier "Bombay," in both its material and phantasmic dimensions, prefigures the restless mediation

of concretion through generality that is the mark of the commodity image. Even within India, “Bombay” extends its connotations beyond India itself and into an imagined field of modernity, transactions, identities, and physical forms—into, in Tanabe Atsuko’s words, “the limitless space of the foreign” (Kelsky 1999:232).<sup>22</sup> As a set of connotations, “Bombay” thus indicates a recognizably Indian space of meaning, while at the same time opening onto a transcendently global vista.

Saskia Sassen (2001) has argued that “global cities” mediate between the twin logics of contemporary capitalism: dispersal and centralization, localization and globalization. As a commodity image, the “cityscape” that the agency and its client had in mind performed an analogous function on an imaginary level. In so doing, this vision of “Bombay” implicitly laid inclusive claim to the energies of the multitudes that populate and define the actual city while simultaneously sanitizing the image of the city to make it amenable to an exclusive consumerist aspiration.

### The Gift of the Brand

Within weeks, huge billboards featuring the swirling design went up along the freeway that hugs the Bombay seafront, and bold images of the RightAway package turned up in the lifestyle sections of all the major newspapers. For a moment, the spectacle was real. And yet neither the client nor the agency was fully contented. Although the EMW Mobile executive had been enchanted with RightAway’s appearance, his superiors—more removed from the conjuring of the agency presentation—soon complained that there seemed to be no sense of connection between this brash new image and the profile of the EMW brand as a whole. Having spent vast sums of money on advertising to build up their brand as a dignified yet warm Indian alternative to the transnationals, the corporation was reluctant to spend even more money on advertising that contradicted or diluted this image.

The agency, for its part, had sated its client’s immediate desire for spectacle. But insofar as RightAway worked against the client’s larger brand image, the agency’s own long-term prospects were at risk. An account planner who was visiting from the agency’s Delhi office was given the chance to peruse the work done for RightAway. With the creative team and the account executive eagerly clustered around him, he mused, “The graphic, the artwork is there. But I think that there’s an overall idea, in terms of the writing, that you need to bind it into. It needs to be a unity of form, a *tonal* thing. There’s a *voice* that needs to cut across all these.” The art director objected that this would be hard to achieve, given the highly various profiles of the products and events that EMW put its name to. The planner shook his head: “I’m not saying you should take this as an example, but if it were Nike, you’d see it in Nike language. Do you see what I mean? It’s not necessarily a question of content, but of *voice*. The danger here is that each campaign will end up reflecting only the product offer and not the voice of the brand.”

The terms that the planner used to imagine the coherence of the brand—*voice* and *tone*—pointed to the encompassing metaphors of brand identity and brand personality. My interpretation is neither arbitrary nor original; in fact, these metaphors are constitutive of the marketing imagination. Where my reading departs from marketing orthodoxy, however, is in the suggestion that marketing discourse involves, through and through, a massive displacement. A relationship that is formally imagined as one between corporation and consumer is in fact first and foremost about the relationship between advertising and marketing professionals on the one hand and corporate clients on the other.

This is of course not to say that references to “the consumer” do not constantly modulate the agency–client relationship. Both sides routinely make authoritative and self-legitimizing claims on behalf of this abstraction, sometimes backed up with opportunistically cited market-research data, sometimes supported only by rhetorical force. Client and agency executives pride themselves on “understanding the consumer,” that is, on analytically grasping and rendering explicit the preferences and inclinations that their target audiences supposedly experience unreflexively. But all these specific illuminations are in turn both guided by, and articulated in, the language of marketing thought, within which the theory of the brand plays a preeminent role. And just as “the consumer” stands in as an absent referent for all kinds of tactically guided decisions, so the discourse of the brand allows agencies to benefit from (and stoke) their clients’ anxieties about their own stature and value in the eyes of consumers.

Let us look, for a moment, at the theory of the brand in its own terms. David Aaker, eminent among U.S. branding theorists, writes, “A *brand personality* can be defined as the set of human characteristics associated with a given brand. Thus it includes such characteristics as gender, age, and socioeconomic class, as well as such classic human personality traits as warmth, concern, and sentimentality” (1995:141). In what Aaker calls “the self-expression model,” a brand is offered as a vehicle for the self-identification of consumers (1995:153). From this perspective, the relatively dowdy connotations of the EMW brand were clearly a potential problem for the agency. Aaker also argues, however, that some brands work precisely by having personalities that consumers may not identify with but which they nevertheless *trust*—this is “the relationship basis model” (1995:159).

Most importantly, Aaker insists that a brand should not be conceived as a static, inanimate entity; rather, “your relationship with another person is deeply affected by not only who that person is but what that person thinks of you. Similarly, a brand–customer relationship will have an active partner at each end, the brand as well as the customer” (1995:161). Aaker’s prescriptions should be understood as something more than formalized commodity fetishism. The notion of the active, personalized brand is a fundamental component of the manner in which a consumer-goods corporation is encouraged, within marketing discourse, to imagine its intervention into the public realm through the medium of a kind of prosthetic personality. The tactile, affect-intensive concretion of the images that make a lot of advertising so attention grabbing is

matched by the peculiar *intimacy* with which it hails its audience. Advertising legend David Ogilvy advises copywriters, “Do not . . . address your readers as though they were gathered together in a stadium. When people read your copy, they are *alone*. Pretend you are writing each of them a letter on behalf of your client. One human being to another, second person *singular*” (1983:80). Indra Sinha, a copywriter of Indian origin who has lived and worked in the United Kingdom for a number of years, elaborates: “It is . . . an interesting fact that the second person narrative . . . is most commonly found in pornographic fantasy, advertising and interactive text-based computer games. In each case the word ‘you’ is used to create an illusion of human interaction, but the narrator is actually manipulating the ‘you’ character, who has no real power to affect the exchange” (Thakraney 1998).

Both the eroticized solicitude of publicity and its apparently fraudulent appropriation of an ideal of reciprocal exchange have been mainstays of the critique of consumerism. Baudrillard notes that consumer goods, by means of their eroticization, simulate a relationship in which the identity of the consumer is at once affirmed and constructed. By means of advertising, products “submit themselves to us, they seek us out, surround us, and prove their existence to us by virtue of the profusion of ways in which they appear, by virtue of their effusiveness. We are taken as the object’s aims, and the object *loves* us. And because we are loved, we feel that we exist: we are ‘personalized’ ” (Baudrillard 1996:171). The immediate proof of the successful brand appeal is the consumer’s sense of being singled out and recognized, or in Althusserian terms, “interpellated.” As the agency manager told the EMW Mobile executive in the wake of the RightAway launch, “Now that the physical product has happened, the aim is to create in the consumer a sense of ‘it talks to *me*!’ ”

If the structure of the brand depends on a metaphor of personality, then the practice of branding is built on a metaphor of gift exchange. Branding effectively presents itself as an attempt to reenchant a disenchanted set of market relationships—but only, of course, on terms that promise to maximize corporate profit. Here we might learn from the generation of anthropologists who in the 1970s and 1980s built further on the foundations laid half a century before by Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) and Marcel Mauss (1990). Despite differences of detail, the work of this cohort converged on the proposition that the management of social relations—the whole calculus of rank and reciprocity—had at least as much to do with *keeping* valuable objects as with giving them (Damon 1980; Godelier 1999; Munn 1986; Weiner 1985, 1992, 1994). Or rather, as Annette Weiner’s influential formulation put it, the problem was one of “keeping-while-giving” (1992).

Keeping-while-giving, Weiner argues, “is essential if one is to retain some of one’s social identity in the face of potential loss and the constant need to give away what is most valued” (1985:211). If one’s social standing is powerfully embodied in one’s ownership of particular valuable objects and yet such objects must be exchanged in order to cement relations of alliance and patronage, then something that will continue inalienably to link the giver with the



gift that has been exchanged becomes necessary. For Weiner this something is the mysterious and much-debated force that the Maori call *hau* and that Mauss glosses as the “spirit of the gift;” the element that demands a return (and also recognition) on pain of death or injury.<sup>23</sup> Whereas the conventional reading of *hau* stresses its role in maintaining reciprocity, Weiner and her contemporaries especially pick up on the agonistic, competitive moment in Mauss, on *hau* as a vehicle for the prestigious name (or in Nancy Munn’s [1986] terms, the *fame*) of the giver.<sup>24</sup>

What I want to argue here is that the practice of branding is a game of keeping-while-giving—but one that is played on precisely the terrain where mainstream economic anthropology suggests it should not be possible: the market in mass-produced commodities. Branded goods combine the two categories that in Maori terminology are opposed: *taonga* (valuables) and *oloa* (utilitarian objects). In themselves, marketing theorists argue, mass-produced goods are “mere” commodities, functional items that are humiliatingly forced to compete on price. In the words of one anonymous Indian commentator, “You can’t call yourself a brand if the market dictates your price. You’re a commodity, sometimes a distress-sale commodity” (*Advertising and Marketing* 1997). And it is, of course, advertising that promises to rescue products from the indignity of “commoditization.” Once, accompanying the agency team to EMW Mobile headquarters, I spied the following message tacked up in an executive cubicle: “Advertising builds the brand and the brand is the only thing that will stand between you and commodity pricing.” Brand building through advertising, in this discourse, generates the *hau* that lends a touch of *taonga* to what are otherwise merely *oloa*. It promises to be the inalienable source of value that enables a corporation to “keep” its identity while simultaneously “giving” of itself every time one of its products is sold. Just as, in Weiner’s account, part of the value and power of the ideally inalienable object comes from the risk of its loss, so corporations are constantly battling the threat of piracy, counterfeiting, and parody (Betting 1996; Coombe 1998).

One might object that the branded product cannot really be likened to a gift because consumers agree to pay a premium for it. Does not a cash payment cancel any obligation that a gift exchange might impose? The branded product is certainly ambiguous in this regard. But I would argue that corporations, insofar as they subscribe to the discourse of branding, try to have it both ways. Premium brands certainly do enable producers to charge a premium price. And yet, the gift of the brand cannot really be repaid but is instead envisioned as the basis and justification for the customer’s emotional loyalty to the corporation. As Baudrillard expresses it, “Power belongs to him who gives and to whom no return can be made. To give, and to do it in such a way that no return can be made, is to break exchange to one’s profit and to institute a monopoly” (1988:208). It is crucial for the functioning of the brand that it both can and cannot be repaid.<sup>25</sup>

What David Aaker presents as ideal-typical alternatives—“self-expression” or “relationship basis” (1996:157)—may perhaps better be read as the



simultaneous tasks of the successful brand. Insofar as a brand is a coherently structured set of connotations, it can be offered to consumers as a virtual world, a world it is both their human right and their social privilege to be invited into. In W. F. Haug's words, "The commodities are surrounded by imaginary spaces which individuals are supposed to enter and to fill in with certain acts. If an individual acts within them, these spaces organize his/her way of experiencing these acts and personal identity" (1987:123). At the same time, it is crucial that these "spaces" not appear to be artificially imposed by corporate interests; rather, their content and meaning—while necessarily remaining the product and the property of the corporation—should appear simply as a means by which consumers' existing identities and aspirations may be more or less spontaneously expressed and enacted.

Brands consequently take on an attitude that is simultaneously paternalistic and servile. From one perspective, their visual signs (logos, trademarks) operate like nothing so much as royal insignia: consumers who wear these signs on their bodies are thus literally incorporated as loyal vassals, and Jürgen Habermas's pessimistic diagnosis of the "refeudalization" of the public sphere by commercial interests rings true.<sup>26</sup> And, indeed, one of the EMW Mobile focus-group respondents, as the agency account executive was quick to point out to the client, had explained that he expected to be looked after by EMW "as a father looks after a child."

From another perspective, however, this seemingly anachronistic mode of legitimacy is justified precisely in terms of its apparent opposite: democratic populism. And in fact, one of the foundations of the liberalizers' critique of the planned economy was that the developmentalist state had been communicatively inept, that it had failed to *engage* citizens on an affective, embodied level. Advertising-led consumerism, conversely, put the "electricity" back into public speech, turning mere "information" into "communication."<sup>27</sup>

It is by faithfully serving the sovereign will and desire of consumer-citizens that a brand may flourish. Seen from this angle, no customer's wish should be judged too trivial to qualify as the corporation's command. For all its lordly and spectacular stature, the mighty global brand is merely the humble servant of the least of its customers. The brand must be at once intimate and awe inspiring, nestled into the folds of our everyday domestic routines while at the same time flexing its muscles on the battlefields of the global market. In this, the brand recapitulates the duality of bourgeois (consumer) citizenship, at once a chest-thumping concentration of ruthless economic prowess and a genteel patronage of the arts.

### **Crisis and Unexpected Efficacy**

A well-maintained brand narrative helps an ad agency manage its relationship with its client by creating the impression of a mutual, rational, and measurable set of interactional parameters. Ultimately, a coherently developed brand discourse becomes a kind of consensually maintained mutual fetish between agency and client, expressed in the form of a shared idiom. Executives

pride themselves on their exclusive understanding of the precise parameters of a particular brand. As a predictable semantic repertoire—a space of meaning—the brand crucially stabilizes the seductive but unstable surges of affect that the agency's images introduce into their relationship with the client. Without such a stabilizing framework, the agency might do well in the short term but will be unable to formalize its success, to turn it into a dependable source of exchange value.

Branding is, of course, also part and parcel of an agency's claim to professional credibility. Like any self-proclaimedly scientific endeavor, branding depends in part on the apparent correspondence of its categories and predictions to observable entities and processes in the "real world," in this case the world of consumer behavior. When a product fails, the agency producing its advertising will be quick to blame other factors—pricing, distribution, the product itself. When a product succeeds, the agency will of course take as much of the credit as it can. But a more troubling situation arises when the product appears to be succeeding under conditions that are demonstrably unrelated to the advertising agency's carefully elaborated strategies.

By now, the agency team members were deeply conscious that their work on EMW Mobile seemed consistently to be substituting cosmetic interventions for structural repairs. They were all the while complaining about the incoherence of the client's desires and the structural contradictions besetting the account. Consequently, the next crisis to befall them was all the more paradoxical: it seemed that the ads were actually working. A leading commentator published an article in the daily newspaper *Asian Age*, in which he congratulated EMW on having achieved "critical mass," as well as brand "synergy," between its various product lines (H. Mehta 1997). Meanwhile, EMW Mobile's own brand-tracking research indicated that imagewise, their brand was rapidly closing in on SamTech. Finally, rumors started circulating that *Advertising and Marketing* magazine's upcoming issue was going to list EMW as the number one Indian brand.

Once again, the copywriter expressed a quiet unease. Despite outwardly participating in the celebrations at EMW Mobile's head office ("Even I was clapping my hands"), he was conscious that RightAway had only just been launched and was, therefore, not likely to have had any discernible impact on the research. The *Asian Age* piece, meanwhile, had suggested that "EMW's power of advertising voice" had created a "highly visible brand." The implication was that sheer presence, or mere visibility (rather than a carefully honed brand profile), was doing the job; and this threatened to undercut the whole logic of the agency's relationship to the client, in particular its claim to a superior understanding of the needs of the brand.

### **A Return to Bombay**

Ostensibly, these contradictions arose out of the conflicted desires of the client. The EMW Mobile executive was both thrilled by the spectacular force of RightAway and affronted by its scrappy challenge to the corporate dignity

of the brand. This conflicted desire was then, of course, echoed in the zigzagging path of the agency team members. One minute they were feeding their client's hunger for spectacle, the next they were agonizing over the incoherence—or even the absence—of their long-term strategy.

The oscillation was not simply a function of the peculiarities of this account; rather, it reverberated with, and strained against, the historical determinations that had produced my informants as social and professional subjects. In many ways, as postcolonial professionals, they found themselves betwixt and between. On the one hand, and particularly in relation to foreign clients, they were quite directly the agents of transnational capital. From this point of view, they found themselves looking at “Indianness” as if from outside and above, as a set of more or less serviceable traits. On the other hand, the reifying process could never be total; all of them were, of course, personally enmeshed in the category in various ways. As we have seen, one of the outcomes of this was that although their thinking on EMW Mobile was, in explicit conceptual terms, framed as a relation between the Indian and the global, it was in fact, on an affective level, driven by an acute concern about social distinction. The cosmopolitan corporate imagery desired by the client and by some members of the agency team was constantly haunted by the distasteful hexis of provinciality. Here, the aspirational logic that is a general feature of mass consumerism intersected with the anxieties of a postcolonial elite.

The agency team's persistent struggle to construct a brand gift that could be both global and yet proudly Indian also collided with the fact that the intended brand transaction was always already determined by a prior gift: in Immanuel Wallerstein's words, the “gift of universalism” (Tang 1993:389) that was globalized mass consumerism. Mauss argues that there is a deep-rooted human tendency to assign value to the local. Taonga, he writes, are generally “a class of goods that are more closely linked to the soil” (Mauss 1990:10). The kind of postcolonial self-denigration diagnosed as a pathology in the Amitabh Bachchan ads turns Mauss's equation around in favor of “the allure of the foreign” (Orlove 1997). One of the great promises of the gift of consumerist globalization is to restore self-respect (“Why don't we believe in ourselves?”); here, the global consumer market appears as an unbeatably sensitive index to locally embedded needs and desires.

Although consumer desires are the linchpin of this ideology, producers are also promised restitution. The complaint of a Singaporean entrepreneur is a response to a world situation in which the dominant economies control the taonga of brands while those on the periphery must content themselves with trafficking in oloa: “We produce the Levi's, the computers and the spare parts, but we never have the brand” (Slater 2000).<sup>28</sup> But the terms of entry into the global fraternity of brand managers are never innocent of history. Even as its advertising took on the alchemical promise of globalization, EMW found itself constrained by this history. On one level, it could be mapped objectively: only the kind of Indianness that was already authorized by long careers of global circulation was admissible. Consequently, such Indianness was typically auto-orientalizing, seeking to fuse

Indian spiritual transcendence with Western technological transcendence; ancient Indian sensuality with consumerist indulgence; Indian timelessness and holism with the end of history announced by the global hegemony of the neo-liberal regime.

The dream of consumerist globalization, as expressed in the Amitabh Bachchan EMW Group press ads, gestures toward a dialectical resolution in the positive, Hegelian sense: the local becomes the basis for an ascent into the universal. But the agency team working on RightAway was grappling with a product that deconstructed itself at every turn. A symptom of the paradox was the fact that the term through which the account executive attempted this final mediation was the very same one that, a few weeks earlier, had indexed the transcendent promise of RightAway: "Very Bombay." Note that in the Bachchan ads, the "global Indian" position actually remained contentless, abstract, little more than the *idea* of a resolution. Perhaps, then, it was not surprising that when the agency account executive continued to push for a determinate content, the result was reactive, even defensive.

The account executive's final gambit was an attempt to turn the deadlock into a defiant statement of national pride. "Mobile telephony is definitely a male category," he began, "and EMW *is* Indian. We can never get away from that. It *should* be modern . . . young." The copywriter lifted his gaze: "I don't buy this idea that we can't get away from our Indianness." "Yes, okay," responded the account executive swiftly. "You *can* get away from the Indianness, but then you'll become parity. I'm saying we take the *strength* of the Indianness. The *philosophy*, not the nationality." The copywriter challenged the account executive to explain exactly what this "philosophy" entailed; the reply came in the form of a familiar signifier: "Bombay."

This time around, "Bombay" was still a kind of virtual geographical marker. But now, the agency team was looking at the other side of the "global city." Previously the figure of the city had reached outward, straining away from its turbulent local moorings toward transcendence and universality. Now, instead, it bespoke defiance, an insistence on the primacy of its specific genius vis-à-vis universalizing claims. "Can we say that this is for 'the new Indian'?" It's a very *Bombay*-based concept," the account executive improvised. "It's saying, 'I no longer have to go to the U.S. or look to the U.S. I can now be successful right here in Bombay.' Yeah! Fuck 'India'! This whole thing is *very Bombay*. . . . We're Indian, fuck it. We don't want some multinational to come and bail us out!"

In coming full circle, the discussion had made visible the intractability that underlay the smooth reconciliation of the local and the global expressed in the Bachchan ads. The medium of this reconciliation had been the nation brand: the dream of generating value out of the controlled circulation, the branded marketing, of cultural "property."<sup>29</sup> And it was EMW's fate to find itself in precisely the position where the impasses of this equation became visible.

### Conclusion

On one level, the impasses that haunted the production of the commodity images I have discussed here are as old as the first experiments with Indian modernity, those 18th- and 19th-century struggles with the ambivalent location of Indian specificity vis-à-vis the universalizing claims of colonial knowledges.<sup>30</sup> And, yet, vis-à-vis their forebears, my informants were operating in a radically transformed world. Positioned as the arbiters of rapidly circulating affect-intensive images, they were trying to carve out a zone of expertise and executive authority in a context where, by means of commodity images, the commandment/enticement of progress had been eroticized in a way that was quite novel in mainstream Indian public culture.

The story of RightAway presents us with something more than a dead-lock. In fact, as we have seen, the productive process generated a number of possible alternative visions that, for complex reasons, were not acceptable to the particular constellation of interests and preferences that prevailed. Nor were these alternative visions and images arbitrary; many of them—the “Gujju guy with his printed shirt and white trousers,” to take just one example—were themselves implicated in other zones of public culture: cinema, news media, street life. By now we are used to the ethnographic claim that the social lives of media messages may be entirely different from that envisioned by their producers. The story that I have presented here moves the contingency (but also the ideological critique) one step back to illuminate the complexity (which should not be read as the indeterminacy) of the relationship between producers’ plans and discourses and the content of the advertising that emerges.

In the case of EMW Mobile, this relationship was conditioned, in part, by the fact that members of both the client and the agency teams had taken on board a deep-seated sense of the inferiority of Indian technologies, particularly vis-à-vis the R and D/export-driven economic trajectories of the “Asian Tiger” economies. Insofar as telecommunications were understood as both a means and a paradigmatic sign of globalization, this specific insecurity took on a more general significance. Indeed, the inferiority complex also helped to overdetermine the visceral—and often self-defeating—resistance to any kind of overt localization in advertising images, a resistance that was justified in the name of maintaining the dignity of a “world-class” brand (and therefore, by extension, the dignity of world-class Indian consumers).

Other product categories refracted the relation between globalizing markets and Indian cultural specificity very differently. As I show elsewhere (Mazzarella in press: chap. 4), auto-orientalizing versions of Indianness were highly compatible with upmarket cosmopolitan commodity aesthetics in product categories that emphasized sensuous indulgence and luxury. Vis-à-vis the unsmilingly productivist politics of the Tiger economies, there was even a certain radical potential in this move: the civilization that had produced the Kama Sutra (both the treatise by the sage Vatsyayana and the premium-branded condoms) now seemed admirably suited to teach the world a thing or two about the refinement of consumerist pleasures.

Products that were aimed specifically at urban Indian youth in their turn experimented quite self-consciously with the kind of cultural hybridization with which I introduced this article (“Indian soul” and “international feel,” “modern values” with an “Indian expression”)<sup>31</sup> or the kind of approach favored by an executive at the trans-Asian music-video network Channel V (“The content is incredibly India . . . but with completely pumped colours” [Butcher 1999:171]). The fact that most of these brands were not identified as being primarily Indian ensured the requisite glamour; what remained was the transnational executive tug-of-war over the terms of “Indianization,” over the value and the acceptable guise of cultural difference within the overarching form of the global brand.

For anthropologists, there is of course something deeply uncanny about all this. Today, by means of the marketing imagination, transnational capitalism is, oddly enough, *acting out* key moments in the history of our discipline. Take, for example, the careful mapping of the diffusion of brands or the constant attempt to reconstruct and predict the evolution of local markets. Meanwhile, the ghost of the Human Relations Area Files haunts marketers’ panoptic desire to construct a global inventory of consumer cultures. Indeed, from one side the whole project looks like a mutation of the mission of the *philosophes*: to reconcile all local variation under a single transcendent humanoid form, *homo consumens*. At the same time, it’s not all the iron cage of totalizing taxonomy; equally, and particularly in the advertising business, the charismatic flash of creative inspiration—the so-called Big Idea—mines and mimes figures of complexity, contingency, and indeterminacy.

Marketing is just one of the many more or less elaborated practices—be they professional, political, religious, or academic—in which specific sets of social actors attempt to harness human yearnings for their own purposes. This doubling of figures from the past and present of anthropology must serve as a constant reminder of the dangers and complicities involved in a naive ethnographic practice. But by the same token, it also offers us a powerfully dialectical entry point for a critical anthropology. The dynamic that I have identified with the commodity image—the play of embodied resonance and narrative elaboration—may serve as a more general heuristic for a world of disjunctive interconnections in which the relationship between affect, meaning, and identity is constantly being worked and reworked in the service of all kinds of social agendas—subversive, disciplinary, or commercial. Ethnographically, each of these reworkings, each of these provisional equations, may be approached through more or less formal, more or less ordinary, social relations, nodes, and events. And of course they are always both fuelled and constrained by locally embedded fragments of memory and history. Is it any surprise, then, that the transformative potential of all these local projects is also associated in equal, if not greater, measure with anxieties, particularly anxieties revolving around the authenticity or value of selves, the relation between spectacle and reality, and the ambiguous relationship of determinate identities to transcendental agendas?



Once again, in these anxieties lies a parallel and perhaps a lesson. If anthropology has emerged from the so-called crisis of representation that dominated the field in the mid- to late 1980s, then it has not been through some miraculous act of theoretical parthenogenesis. Rather, it has been through the recognition that the cultural politics of ethnographic practice are not so cleanly separable from the cultural politics we take as our objects of study. Far from rendering ethnography irrelevant or impotent, I believe that this recognition offers us the foundation for a reactivation of the critical force of our discipline as a locally rooted, globally minded, and politically productive project of understanding.

### Notes

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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. Because 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 (1982a, 1982b) suggests that the industry grew from 37.38 crores of rupees (US\$44 million) in 1975 to 89.11 crores (US\$111.4 million) in 1980. An OBM Media Bulletin from 1983 is more boosterish, figuring 236 crores (US\$295 million) for 1980 and 296.9 crores (US\$312.5 million) for 1982. Karlekar (1986) offers 200 crores (US\$232.5 million) for 1981 and 400 crores (US\$317.5 million) by 1986. 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 (US\$423 million) in 1990–91 to 5,331 crores (US\$1.4 billion) in 1997–98, at an average rate of growth of 30 percent a year. Steven Kemper (2001:35) notes that there were 93 advertising agencies in Bombay in 1960 and 425 by 1988.

2. The probusiness Swatantra Party brought in flamboyant Bombay creative consultant 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. R. K. Swamy, of R. K. Swamy/BBDO (formerly head of the Madras office of J. Walter Thompson), has long offered publicity services to the Hindu nationalist combine. 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 grassroots political mobilization.

3. The reforms of 1991 represented both an unprecedented opening of Indian consumer markets to foreign brands and the return of many transnationals that had left in



1977, when the Janata coalition that replaced Indira Gandhi's most authoritarian period in office enforced the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act of 1974.

4. This appears to be an interpolation of a Western notion. I thank Raminder Kaur for pointing this out to me.

5. For intelligent discussions of Bachchan's public persona, see Chandrasekhar 1988, Kazmi 1998, Prasad 1998, and Vachani 1999.

6. One of the ads that the agency came up with nodded in the direction of this constituency: "Everybody wants to be somebody. You want to be nobody. . . . You have your reasons. We don't want to know."

7. The Indian government granted mobile operators licenses in 1992; service commenced in 1995, initially only in the four major metropolitan centers: Bombay/Mumbai, Delhi, Calcutta, and Madras/Chennai. Early subscriber projections were generally optimistic: according to one source, EMW Mobile and SamTech jointly expected a total of 100,000 subscribers by the end of 1995 and as many as a million by 2000 (Raina 1995). Actual numbers were more modest. In the immediate aftermath of the launch, EMW had 4,000 subscribers in Bombay (Nandkarni 1995). In 1996, the Deve Gowda government announced a significant cut in import duties on mobile-phone handsets, and by August of that year, SamTech's subscriptions had jumped to 29,000 and EMW's to 25,600. By the time I started my agency fieldwork in September 1997, the figures were as follows: SamTech had succeeded in enrolling 100,000 subscribers, with EMW Mobile trailing behind at 70,500. By April 2002, the figures had increased substantially, although not quite to the level of initial predictions. EMW Mobile and SamTech now reported around 380,000 subscribers each.

8. Parenthetically, the perceived expense of mobile telephony was recognized as a problem for the category as a whole. In market research commissioned by the agency, one focus-group respondent had given a rather nice twist to the notion of a white elephant by complaining, "Even if someone gives me an elephant free, I still have to feed it!"

9. The research company that conducted the focus groups assembled three groups of around ten people, each of them featuring a mixture of self-employed businessmen, "professionals," and corporate executives. Each of the three groups, in turn, represented a different relation to mobile telephony. One was made up of individuals who already had mobile phones, that is, "owners." This group was further subdivided into SamTech and EMW subscribers. The next group comprised people who were seriously thinking about purchasing a mobile phone, that is, "intenders." Finally, there was a group consisting entirely of "nonintenders," that is, individuals who expressly believed that mobile phones were not a relevant product category to them. Each group was presented with the vital statistics of EMW Mobile's proposed new product and asked for its reactions. So as not to bias any feedback that the groups might produce concerning overall brand perceptions, they were not told which company—EMW Mobile or SamTech—was behind the research. The focus groups were conducted by a female executive of the research company in the conference room of a hotel in midtown Bombay. The participants were told that they were being recorded on audio- and videotape; they were not told, however, that members of the advertising-agency team were simultaneously watching the proceedings on closed-circuit television in another room on the same corridor.

10. This respondent was unwittingly recapitulating a famous example of so-called motivational research produced by Ernest Dichter in the 1950s, which applied the wife/mistress analogy to saloon/convertible cars.

11. SIM stands for Subscriber Identity Module. Briefly, the SIM card is the personalized brain of a cellular phone; it carries the subscriber's telephone number, keeps track of airtime usage, and can be slotted into any handset that uses compatible technology.

12. EMW Mobile were themselves, however, ambivalent in relation to this positioning. Although emphasizing to the agency that the convenience of the product was a crucial component, they turned down a line of copy prepared just before the product launch—"Along with the sweets and the clothes, pick up mobility. Really. It's that simple"—on the grounds that it "trivialized the product."

13. In passing, I should note that these Image Bank catalogs, expensive, heavy, and glossy, are produced in the West and circulated to the rest of the world. Hence, not only are the images agency creative types customarily scour for inspiration already part of a commercial repertoire—magazine ads or anthologies of international advertising campaigns—they are also part of a globally diffused Western-generated repertoire.

14. Williams was of course himself writing in a vein that Karl Marx had inaugurated. In the section of the 1844 *Manuscripts* titled "Needs, Production, and Division of Labor," Marx, offering a kind of dystopian reinterpretation of Hegel's civil society, stated:

Within the system of private property . . . every man speculates upon creating a *new* need in another in order to force him to a new sacrifice, to place him in a new dependence, and to entice him into a new kind of pleasure and thereby into economic ruin. Everyone tries to establish over others an alien power in order to find there the satisfaction of his own egoistic need. . . . Excess and immoderation become [the modern economic system's] true standard. This is shown subjectively, partly in the fact that the expansion of production and of needs becomes an *ingenious* and always *calculating* subservience to inhuman, depraved, unnatural and *imaginary* appetites. [Marx 1964:168]

15. Some of the structuralists tried to turn this vice into a virtue. Although ultimately acknowledging that "the danger in structural analysis [is] its introversion and lack of context," Judith Williamson nevertheless insists on "simply analyzing what can be *seen* in advertisements. . . . Analyzing ads in their *material form* helps to avoid endowing them with a *false* materiality and letting the 'ad world' distort the real world around the screen and page" (Williamson 1978:178, 11).

16. Note, however, that brief reflections on the parallels between advertising and magic can be found in Malinowski (1965:237 ff.). McCreery 1995 alerted me to this fact.

17. This is what Sahlins calls Marx's "anthropological deception" (Sahlins 1976:155). It is worth emphasizing, however, some of the ambiguities in Marx's discussion of use value, even in the famous first chapter of the first volume of *Capital*. Right at the outset, Marx insists that it is the "usefulness of a thing" that makes it a use value and that this usefulness is "conditioned by the physical properties of the commodity" (Marx 1976:126). In the very next sentence, he already appears to shift the argument somewhat by stating that use value "*is* therefore the physical body of the commodity itself" (1976:126, emphasis added). Marx also argues that use value is "only realized in use or in consumption" (1976:126). At the same time, the determination of the needs that spur this use or consumption is complex: "The nature of these needs, whether they arise, for example, from the stomach, or the imagination, makes no difference" (1976:125).

Marx's analytical prioritization of exchange value over use value is consonant, as Sahlins points out, with the unilinear historical teleology that he had adopted by the time that he wrote *Capital*. In this sense at least, the *later* Marx, contrary to received wisdom, is more Hegelian than the early Marx. Indeed, in the 1844 *Manuscripts*, Marx offers this:

[Political economists of the Say-Ricardo school] are hypocritical in not admitting that it is caprice and fancy which determine production. They forget the "refined needs," and that without consumption there would be no production. They forget that through competition production must become ever more universal and luxurious, that it is use which determines the value of a thing, and that use is determined by fashion. [Marx 1964:172]

18. Michael Schudson's work on advertising (1984) suggests that for consumer goods, advertising has only a rather tenuous relationship to sales (except in relatively clear-cut cases such as price advertising). If additional support for this contention is required from within the industry, the words of legendary adman David Ogilvy can be quoted:

Many manufacturers secretly question whether advertising really sells their product, but [they] are vaguely afraid that their competitors might steal a march on them if they stopped. Others—particularly in Great Britain—advertise “to keep their name[s] before the public.” Others because it helps them to get distribution. Only a minority of marketers advertise because they have found that it *increases their profits*. [Ogilvy 1983:171]

19. We might see this move as part of a more general current in the anthropology of the media to read the production, dissemination, and consumption of media forms as contested loci of social practice (Abu-Lughod 1993; Burke 1996; Coombe 1998; Dickey 1993; Dornfeld 1998; Dwyer and Pinney 2001; Ganti 2000; Gillespie 1995; Ginsburg 1994; Kemper 2001; Larkin 1997; Lien 1997; Mankekar 1999; Naficy 1993; Pinney 1997; Schudson 1984; Skov and Moeran 1995; Spitulnik 1993). The foundational role of Powdermaker 1950 should not be overlooked.

20. See Mazarella (in press: chap. 2) for a more detailed critique of this philosophical one-way street, in particular as it relates to the use of photography in advertising.

21. Brian Moeran develops a similar argument: “The Agency first has to persuade its *clients* that its approach to a particular problem is the best. In this respect, it is as concerned with selling a would-be advertiser an image of *itself* as it is [with] selling consumers an image of that advertiser's *products*” (1996:96). Peter Mayle, in the irreverent mode befitting an industry insider, notes, “We are often told that advertising reflects the face of society, which would be extremely depressing if it were wholly true. Nearer the truth is that advertising reflects the face of the client” (1990:58).

22. Christopher Pinney describes the use of cityscape backdrops and vintage motorcycles in the prop repertoire of the traveling studios of provincial Indian portrait photographers:

The traveling studios that frequently used to come to Nagda always had an Enfield or a Yezdi, almost always positioned in front of a dramatic urban scene of bridges, high-rise buildings and a sky filled with planes inscribing dramatic vapor trails. It is against such a backdrop that Guman Singh of Bhatissuda sits astride his bike in front of a hybridized cityscape more suggestive (to me) of New York or Chicago than anywhere else, but that Bhatissuda villagers and Nagdarites will unequivocally identify as Bombay, the city that for them symbolized all that is most dramatically good and bad in the modern. [1997:183]

23. See Godelier 1999 for a relatively comprehensive account of the long and tortuous debate on the meaning of hau.

24. Some latter-day readers of Mauss have pointed out that, taken in conjunction with his political writings, the essay on the gift was in part intended as an exploration of the possibility of establishing an ethically binding system of reciprocity in modern industrial societies (Graeber 2001; Hart 2000; Parry 1986). But in general, anthropologists have unfortunately persisted in contrasting societies organized around large-scale commodity markets with those in which the exchange of singular valuables plays a socially constitutive role. Maurice Godelier, for instance, envisions charitable giving as the compensatory response to a world in which the abstraction of the market increasingly comes to stand in for more concrete social imaginaries (1999: introduction, ch. 4). Weiner, for her part, attempts to track the movement of inalienability into market societies but insists on equating it with singular objects. Consequently, she focuses on those areas of exchange that—*unlike* the apparently anonymous mass market—construct “symbolic density”

around individual objects: heirloom transfers, auctions, and so forth (Weiner 1992, 1994).

25. See Mazzearella in press:chapter 6 for an account of how the agency team working on the EMW Mobile account at one point reached for gift exchange as a literal theme for a TV commercial in an attempt to resolve the paradoxes that haunted the product–brand relationship.

26. “In the measure that it is shaped by public relations, the public sphere of civil society again takes on feudal features. The ‘suppliers’ display a showy pomp before customers ready to follow. Publicity imitates the kind of aura proper to the personal prestige and supernatural authority [once associated with divinely sanctioned kingship]” (Habermas 1989:195).

27. See Mazzearella 2001 (in press: chs. 3, 4) for extended treatments of this theme.

28. Thanks to James Watson for bringing this reference to my attention.

29. Christiane Brosius quotes G. Bharat Bala, of Bharatbala Productions, Bombay, in this connection: “Nation-building is the *basic brand* that is required today, India *needs* that” (1999:109).

30. See Chatterjee 1986, 1993, 1995, 1997; Khilnani 1999; Nandy 1983, 1995; Prakash 1999; Tarlo 1996.

31. The second pairing comes from a strategy document generated by a global soft-drink brand.

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