Advertising: The Organizational Production of Humour

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Abstract

This chapter discusses humour as it is deliberately produced by organizations through advertising. Using beer advertisements as an example, our aim is to explain the increasing prevalence of advertising-based organizational humour during the period that has come to be known as late capitalism. Drawing on the literature on humour in advertising, the chapter explores the irony of how such advertisements provide a comedic critique of the code that acts to control and construct consumers, while also being a constitutive part of that process.

1. Introduction

The focus of this chapter is on a particular aspect of the relationship between humour and organization, namely the deliberate production of humour by organizations through advertising. Our aim is to study humour in advertising and through doing so to investigate what it tells us about humour, organizations, and the social context of advertising/consumption. Specifically, we are interested in explaining the nature and increasing use of humour during the period that has come to be known as late capitalism. While no data is readily available to allow a quantitative, historical comparison, Beard (2005) provides a recent and insightful account of the emergence of humour within advertising. Also, the anecdotal evidence suggests that the number of ‘humorous’ advertisements has increased over the last twenty years, to the point where humorous appeals are now endemic in advertising and television advertising in particular (Tomkovick, Yelkur and Christians 2001). This is corroborated by Weinberger (1999), who has studied advertising humour extensively over the last twenty years.

Weinberger is one of a relatively small number of academics who has studied humour in advertising. Indeed marketing has had little to say about humour, save for a body of quite instrumental research aimed at measuring the degree to which humour helps an advertiser communicate his/her message (see for example Chattopadhyay and Basu (1990) and Weinberger and Gulas (1992)). What is especially surprising is that the postmodern moment – which emphasises fun, play, parody and pastiche – has not inspired marketing scholars to theorising about humour more deeply. In particular, the marked and perceptible increase in the use of humour in advertising, which has occurred since the eighties, has gone without comment or analysis by students of marketing. This chapter seeks to plug this gap a little.
As a way of anchoring our discussion, we focus on beer advertising campaigns from the USA, Britain and Australia as exemplars of humorous advertisements. Specifically we look at Budweiser’s well-known and long-running series of reptilian advertisements, John Smith’s ‘No Nonsense’ campaign, and recent Carlton Draught advertising from Australia. Beer advertisements are chosen for a number of reasons. Firstly, beer and other forms of alcohol account for a significant portion of the advertising spend in most developed markets. In the UK, for example, £204 (approximately 1/16th of total UK advertising) was spent on alcohol advertising in 2004 of which over 54% was spent on beer advertising (UK Office of Communications 2005). Similarly, in Australia, beer advertising accounts for $A52 million or just under 50% of total alcohol advertising spend (Miller and Mizerski 2005). By far the greatest spend takes place in the US, where $1.1 billion was spent advertising beer in 2002 (Nelson 2005).

Secondly, beer is a widely consumed product in most developed markets and therefore suitable for considering contemporary production and consumption. Finally alcohol, along with tobacco, has been the subject of progressively restrictive legislation in recent years. In particular, advertisers of alcohol are restricted with regard to the product claims that they can make, and many have consequently looked to humour as one means of promoting their product. Caillat and Mueller (1996) found that humour was the dominant appeal used in beer advertising in the UK while Pettigrew (1999) found that humour was also a prevalent in Australian beer advertisements. In this regard, alcohol is a bell weather product for late modernity where distinct benefits and advantages are more and more difficult to isolate and defend. One concern we do have about beer advertisements is that, since they routinely make use of gender typecasting (Barthel 1988), our analysis may potentially promulgate such stereotypes.

We begin by summarising the nature and content of each of the three campaigns. We briefly review the literature on humour in advertising and the wider literature on humour generally. We then use a variety of theoretical frames and various aspects of postmodern discourse to interpret the advertisements and their consumption.

2. The No. 1 Rule of Marketing: Frogs Sell Beer

In 1995, Budweiser began a successful series of advertisements featuring three animated frog puppets living in a swamp. The series revolved around a pun with each of the frogs in turn contributing to the “Bud Weis Er” brand name. In 1997, a related series of advertisements was broadcast, featuring two Lizards, also in the swamp, looking on, jealous of the Frogs success. By the end of the campaign, Budweiser had broadcast over 80 different television and radio advertisements featuring the Lizards. The Lizard advertisements were rated as America’s most popular ad campaign ever in a survey by USA Today, and were deemed the most “likeable” by those surveyed by Ad Tracking, which looked at over 170 ads broadcast during the Superbowls between 1995 and 1998.

Both the Frogs’ and the Lizards’ series rely heavily on comedy, and there is a clear development of story line and characters, much like a sit-com. In the Frog series, the following events occur. Three frogs sit on lilies in a swamp outside a bar where Budweiser is for sale. The frogs croak out

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1 Given the difficulty of explaining the humour, we have where possible provided readers with the URLs of sites where the campaigns can be viewed.
in turn giving effect to the Budweiser name. The three frogs are carried on the back of an alligator into the swamp bar where they disrupt the customers and leave with a case of Budweiser. One of the frogs attaches itself to a passing Budweiser van and gets taken from the swamp.

The Lizard series focuses on Frankie and Louie, two lizards that watch on from a distance at the frogs croaking out “Budweiser”. The running gag is that they are Lizards in a swamp and also out-of-work (New York) actors. The scene in front of them is both swamp and a film set for the previous advertisements. Frankie and Louie are jealous of the frog’s success in landing the Budweiser roles. Frankie is philosophical - Louie, frogs sell beer. That's it, man. No. 1 rule of marketing - while Louie is more spiteful:

Louie: The Budweiser Lizards. We coulda been huge.
Frankie: Hey, there'll be other auditions.
Louie: Oh, yeah? For what? This was Budweiser, buddy. This was big.

Or later:

Louie to the Frogs: Hey! Your mother’s an iguana!
Frankie: Hey! My mother was an iguana.
Louie: Sorry, I meant no disrespect.

In the late 1990’s, Scottish Courage launched the first of its series of No Nonsense television campaigns to promote the John Smith’s brand. The campaign (www.johnsmiths.co.uk), which had a £20 million budget featured outsized British comedian Peter Kay and ran from 2002 to 2005, coinciding with a 16% increase in product sales. It received significant press coverage and industry awards such as the Creative Circle and Campaign Magazine’s Campaign of the Year in 2002 and The Marketing Week Effectiveness Award 2004. Each execution of the campaign featured a less than glamorous Kay and his ‘no nonsense’ approach to parenting, care for the elderly, sport and consumption. In one advert Kay is the subject of a ‘door step challenge’ the common advertising ploy for detergent soaps. Indeed, the focus of the advert – John Smith’s beer – is only revealed in the final frame. The advert begins with television personality Danny Baker (former spokesperson and doorstop challenger for Daz soap powder) walking through a working class housing estate accompanied by a camper crew.

Baker: Here we are in Bolton and me and the gang are in town to do another doorstep challenge.
Knocks on door of modest house and smiles to camera.

Door is opened by a bedraggled Kay who is continuing a conversation with an unseen other inside the house.

Kay: I don’t care whose it is:. it’s floating!

Baker: Hello! Would you swap these two large packets of ordinary powder for one packet of biological powder?

In keeping with his no nonsense approach (but contrary to the conventions of such adverts) Kay, quickly accepts the offer.

Kay: Yea... yea.

Swaps one pack of powder for two.

Kay: Tarra

Kay turns and closes door on a suitably bemused Baker.
More recently, Australian brewers Carlton have attracted international attention for their ‘Made From Beer’ campaign which feature two executions – Big Ad (www.bigad.com.au) and No Explanations (www.Carltondraught.com.au). The first of these, Big Ad, is a parody of epic ads and films. The advert, which was shot in New Zealand, features stunning scenery, a large cast (over 300 actors and more than 20,000 computer generated men) and a dramatic musical score (O’Fortuna by Carl Orff, originally used in the Old Spice adverts in the 1970’s). The advert builds to a climax as two armies march towards one another through a large valley, in a scene reminiscent of Braveheart. The armies sing (with the words subtitled for effect):

It’s a big ad. Very big ad.
It’s a big ad we’re in.
It’s a big ad. My god it’s big!
Can’t believe how big it is!
It’s a big ad! For Carlton Draught.
It’s just so freak…ing HUGE!
It’s a big ad! Expensive ad!
This ad better sell some bloody beer!

In the second campaign, which parodies Budweiser’s traditional Clydesdale based adverts, an earnest and serious voiceover describes the manufacturing and distribution process for Carlton Draught beer.

Carlton Draught, brewed with sun-ripened barley, individually picked hops and attractive yeast.

Poured down pipes and fermented in a big...metal thing.

Carlton Draught, admired by scientists, put in kegs and driven around .....by horses. More horses!

Poured into frosty sideways glasses and drunk in pubs.

Carlton Draught, made from beer.

The campaign is a clear shift away from the traditional blokey beer advertising and has been described by the brewers as “almost anti advertising” (quoted in Ligerakis 2004).

3. Now How Is That Supposed to Sell Beer?

We now return to our original questions of why the use of humour is so prevalent, and secondly what the prevalence of humour tells us about the nature of consumption. In an attempt to answer these questions, in this section we will briefly review the literature on humour in advertising and the literature on humour generally. We begin with the advertising literature.
Within the advertising literature - which is the only part of the marketing field that considers humour at all - humour is generally seen as a peripheral cue, an optional element (and very much a secondary element) in the sales package offered to rational, potential buyers. Thus, the research has been prescriptive and positivistic, focusing on the degree to which humour is related to gaining attention for an advertisement, comprehending an advertisement’s message, being persuaded by an advertisement, and believing/trusting/liking the source of an advertisement (see for example, Weinberger and Gulas, 1992; Cline, Altsch and Kellaris, 2003; Geuens and Pelsmacker, 2001 and Chandy, Tellis, MacInnis and Thaivanich, 2001). In addition, all humour research is bedevilled by definitional difficulties, methodological enigmas and the reflexive conundrum common to all prescriptive research. So, for example, if research indicates that slapstick is positively linked to persuasion and this leads to a significant increase in the use of slapstick, then this increase is likely to result in slapstick being negatively linked to persuasion as viewers become used to and eventually bored with the genre.

A further difficulty with the research to date is that it adopts a rather naive view of the nature of advertising, of how advertisements are consumed, and the degree to which consumers deconstruct advertisements. Thus, advertisements can no longer be interpreted solely – and one might say simplistically – in terms of their functional utility in communicating a message about a product with the intention of engendering sales (in his chronological taxonomy, Holt (2002) describes this as the ‘modern branding paradigm’). On this point, it is interesting to note that sales of Budweiser have continued a 10-year decline despite the popularity of their Frogs and Lizards ads (Budweiser sales dropped by 13% between 1999 and 2003, while the US beer market grew by 1.7% in the same period2). Tellingly, one of the creators of the series, copywriter Steve Dildarian, is not too concerned about what happens at the cash register: “Advertising,” Dildarian says, “can only be held so responsible for sales” (USA Today, 26 January 1999). This reflects Holt’s ‘postmodern branding paradigm’ which dispenses with the modern notion that a brand should articulate a specific value proposition: “The postmodern branding paradigm is premised upon the idea that brands will be more valuable if they are offered not as cultural blueprints but as cultural resources, as useful ingredients to produce the self as one chooses” (Holt 2002: 83). Thus, Calvin Klein’s comment that “my ads are made exactly to have ambiguous readings” (quoted in Martins, 1995: 81) sits easily within this postmodern paradigm in that recognises the sophistication of the advertiser and the consumer of ads. Holt describes other branding paradigms as well, so it is not surprising that interpretations will vary and intended messages will be lost in the noise. So, for instance, Jakki Mohr of Courage expected quite ambiguous responses to Carlton Draught’s Big Ad: “I wouldn’t be surprised if people’s response is ‘What the?’ when they first see it” (quoted in Ligerakis 2004). In this context, it behoves us to understand advertisements more broadly. Ads are perhaps best seen as literary texts, artistically created by an author and aesthetically realized by a reader, who are both in continuous dialogue with other cultural, communicational and artistic texts (Holt 2002).

This suggests that postmodern discourse can help us to better understand the nature of contemporary advertising/consumption and also explain why the number of humorous ads has increased over the last twenty years. It seems clear to us that the selected beer ads ‘work’ because they tap into fashionable aspects of postmodern discourse – such as intertextuality,

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reflexivity, self-referentiality, parody, paralogy – which are recognised and appreciated by the postmodern consumer, even if s/he doesn’t necessarily use or know these terms. The ads are littered with in-jokes that the viewer can enjoy getting because they are “in the know” due to their media literacy. That is, they are not just watching an advertisement; rather they are sharing the parody of advertising, sitcom, and film created by the advertisers. In this sense, these are not commercials trying to represent an external or social reality; instead they are representing media to a media-literate audience. For example the line, “Number one rule of marketing: frogs sell beer,” can be seen as a take on the use of models to promote products, or the representation of the idealised person in much advertising, or as a parody of simplistic representations of management knowledge. The line allows viewers to smile knowingly at the notion of this approach being applied to something like a frog as opposed to a beautiful person (or prince). Similarly, the Doorstep advert for John Smith’s requires that we are clued into the conceit of the situation from Peter Kay’s opening line directed back into his unseen family as he opens the front door “I don’t care whose it is; it’s floating!” through to the final pay off as he accepts the offer of two boxes of his ‘old powder’. Perhaps the best exemplar of this phenomenon is Carlton Draught’s ‘No Explanations’, which is unintelligible other than as a parody of Budweiser’s advertising. The inherent humour in each of these campaigns requires that we identify with the joker at the expense of those who fail to see that the hand of the advertiser is behind the idealised images in the advertisements.

Humorous advertisements can be seen as symptomatic of the romantic aspects of postmodernism (Brown et al., 1998). Romanticism, it is worth recalling, celebrates the emotional, the creative, the imaginative, the unreal, the fictive, parody, and irony, and each of these features are present, to a greater or lesser degree, in the three campaigns under study and many other contemporary advertisements. Just as romanticism stands in opposition to classical realism, the three campaigns stand in opposition to more ‘modern’ ads (or what Holt (2002) would term pre-modern ads) that are framed within a paradigm based on information processing and communication (e.g. ‘buy this dress because it is 20% cheaper…NOW!’).

The selected adverts are inter-textual to the nth degree, making innumerable references to other ads in the series, to advertising norms, to the advertising process itself, and to well-known characters from film and television. Most notably, the advertising style and content in the Budweiser campaign reflect the more popular sit-coms of the 1990s, such as Seinfeld and Larry Sanders. Seinfeld, which was the decade’s biggest prime-time sit-com in the US, was about a stand-up comedian and featured inserts from his shows. Towards the end of the show’s successful run, the characters were played by characters written by characters in a sit-com. Likewise, the setting for Larry Sanders was a production team of a late night chat show with inserts again from the show. There is a self-consciousness about the Budweiser ads in the style of Larry Sanders, while the aggression and mean-mindedness of the ads is similar to both Larry Sanders and Seinfeld. Moreover, Louie’s most notable attribute is his bloated self-concept, which underlies his attempts to get and expand his part in the commercials. In this respect much of the humour in Louie can be read as a play on the folly of ego and human endeavour. Again, this closely parallels the mood of Seinfeld and Larry Sanders with Louie’s character echoing the George and Hank characters in these shows. Some of the ads also take broader swipes at the media. For instance, in one “episode” Louie does a parody of method actors, showing Frankie his “look”. Also, Frankie attributes the Ferret’s success ahead of the Lizards to the fact that he looks like a small European film director.
In essence, the selected adverts are a parody on advertising and various media genres. Parody is a pre-eminent example of intertextuality in that it relies on the addressee recognising the original text in order to get the most out of the humour. Moreover, from the marketer’s perspective, a comedic ad is the ideal format for a reflexive, intelligent, media-literate audience because it encourages and indeed requires deconstruction in order to be understood. This differs from a straight ad, which will fall apart when deconstructed.

One explanation for the increasing number of humorous ads is that humour effectively penetrates the contemporary media saturation without recourse to claims of superiority or differentiation, which may be difficult to fulfil when the product is purchased/consumed or, alternatively, may be neutralised by competitors. Thus, a significant feature of these campaigns is that there is little mention of the gratification or utility that the consumer will gain through buying or drinking beer. Accordingly, we can usefully categorise the campaigns as ‘postmodern’ in contrast to ‘modern’ advertisements where the reward or gratification for consuming the advertisement is deferred until the advertised product is consumed. Thus, ‘modern’ advertisements are structured within a teleological framework – “listen to this ad now and you will benefit in the future” – where the temporal structure the present during which the advertisement is being experienced and the future when the product will be consumed. Postmodern advertisements, in contrast, exist in an ateleological structure in so far as they are disconnected from the future consumption of the product. We could say that for the postmoderns there is no time like the present, or maybe no time other than the present. This privileging of the present is a common theme in postmodern discourse, which is axiomatically incredulous to teleological thinking, or the belief in some grand, over-arching narrative within which current actions are seen to be unfolding. Furthermore, the abandonment of linear time and teleological understandings of the present gives rise to a greater appetite for humour, since there is no longer a point to deferring gratification. Humorous advertisements fit well within this scheme, since, in so far as they provide instant gratification, they are based on an immanent temporality, in contrast to modern advertisements where the temporal structure is best described as imminent. As Hesse (1961) argues in Steppenwolf, infinity is a moment, and if you only have a moment then it is a moment best spent laughing. Howells (no pun intended), makes a similar point in his aphoristic assertion that “there will presently be no room in the world for things; it will be filled up with the advertisements of things” (quoted in Lears, 1994: 286).

If belief was the byword for the moderns – belief in reason, belief in science, belief in progress – then scepticism is surely the enduring attribute of the postmoderns. This is not to say that contemporary, postmodern consumers are totally negative or cynical to the marrow. Far from it. Instead, they might best be described as ‘sophisticated and literate sceptics’, at least in relation to popular culture and its aesthetics and semiotics, who readily and reflexively deconstruct both advertisements and their consumption of products (Meadows, 1983). In other words, the postmodern audience will critically interrogate an ad to see what its producers are trying to do, how they are trying to sell their wares, what meanings can be constructed from the advertisement, and what texts the ad refers to (O’Donohoe, 1997; Holt, 2002). Moreover, as Mick and Buhl (1992) and others have shown, advertisements are idiosyncratically interpreted and experienced against the backdrop of the individual’s life history and current life-world. Marketers, of course, are well aware of this phenomenon and it’s possible that humour is used as a way of inhibiting the creative interpretation – or wanton deconstruction - of advertisements that an audience routinely engages in. To expand on this point, we draw on Umberto Eco’s ([1979] 1984) somewhat counterintuitive distinction between “closed” and “open” texts. Closed texts – like
Superman comic strips and Ian Fleming’s novels about James Bond – are immoderately ‘open’ to every possible interpretation, while open texts don’t allow readers to decode the texts any way they want: “You cannot use the text as you want, but only as the text wants you to use it. An open text, however ‘open’ it be, cannot afford whatever interpretation” (Eco, [1979] 1984: 9). Humorous adverts are a good example of Eco’s open texts since they try to create a particular kind of reading and reader – people who will respond with smiles, laughter and related feelings to the advert/text. This is because for a joke to work the addressee must understand the message and have the same assumptions the sender has. Or, in other words, they know that the greatest satisfaction will be derived from a particular reading – which will be adopted in an attempt to get the joke.

The conjunction of these phenomena has created a significant re-orientation in the nature of advertising, as evidenced by ads like the selected campaigns discussed here, which now may be best interpreted as a form of sponsored programming. These are not so much ads, in our traditional understanding of adverts. Rather they are jokes “proudly brought to you by the people from Budweiser/ John Smith’s /Carlton”. Thus, there is little substantive difference between (a) a comedy show which has product placements in it; (b) a sit-com that is sponsored (for example, Bailey’s sponsorship of Friends); and (c) a comedic scene which is in a commercial break but which is clearly being paid for by a company (i.e. Budweiser). The distinction is even more blurred when the comedic scene is part of a series, as in the Budweiser (or John Smith’s) case, which, in many ways, is a sit-com, sponsored by Budweiser, about reptiles in a swamp. Indeed, this approach could be seen as very appropriate to the contemporary viewing pattern of channel-hopping between a multiplicity of channels, since viewers can more easily follow a story line that is delivered in short bursts, frequently and across a large number of channels. An advertisement comfortably fits this format.

4. Funny and Free?

Thus far, we have examined and interpreted advertising humour as an important and neglected aspect of postmodernism. In this section we adopt an alternative approach by considering humour as a reaction against postmodernism. First, we can argue that humour is a viable alternative to – rather than just a by-product of – the postmodern, since it has an innate palatability and positiveness that is absent from much of postmodern discourse. The postmodern, which we understand as the cultural critique of modernity (Rosenau, 1992), has no true existence save for its play on the incongruities of modernity. Thus, just as anti-structure (or post-structural) has no meaning without the existence of structure, post-modernism as anti-modernism has no meaning without modernism. In contrast, humour, has no Other except the target of ‘being funny’, which provides it with an ontology that is always unattainable by the postmodern. Or, as Vasantkumar (1998: 229) has observed, “the reality of jokes is more tolerable than the joke of reality that is the discovery of postmodernism”. In other words, postmodernism quickly leads into nihilism and despair – the joke of reality – while jokes, in contrast, create their own reality that is tolerable, happy and fulfilling (as well as reminding us of the fragile, arbitrary and tenuous nature of ‘reality’). Furthermore, much of what passes for postmodernist writing is actually writing about postmodernity in a manner and style that conforms to modern mores covering discourse. Humour, however, while having conventional forms and structures, has to be different, surprising and incongruous if it is to work. Indeed to achieve its purpose (being funny) it has to play with
form and expectations. In this regard, humour achieves an outcome that postmodernism (or more accurately the discourse about postmodernity) very often doesn’t.

A further attribute of humour is that it gets us away from the relativism of postmodernism, since it’s difficult to argue that humour exists merely and totally in the eye of the beholder. If humour was totally subjective how then can one explain the fact that large numbers of people laugh at the same time when watching a humorous play or film? Since humour is invariably shared with others – either real or imagined - it creates a link between the singular and the collective, effecting a transition from aloneness to togetherness, countering the Thatcherite notion that there is no such thing as the social. And uniquely, laughter is a powerful social contagion, triggering the release, in a collective, of great quantities of emotion. Along with sympathy and other emotions, humour is an emotional state in which “the need is felt to behave as part of some real or imaginary entity that transcends . . . the boundaries of the individual self” (Koestler, 1964: 54).

Humour also provides an interesting perspective on the postmodern (problematising) of epistemology and consequent scepticism to all truth claims. This is because humour provides what amounts to an alternative epistemology, because the transitions from humour (the “Haha reaction”) to discovery (the “Aha! reaction”) to the delight of the aesthetic experience (the “Ah . . . reaction”) are continuous: witticism blends into epigram, caricature into portrait, art into science, beauty into truth. For example, a funny caricature works because even though there is no attempt to accurately represent reality, the basis of the humour is that it captures the essence or idealised concept of reality. Some jokes, therefore, are funny because they’re true, and conversely, some truths are true because they’re funny. Or, as Will Rogers once said, “Give me the truth. I’ll exaggerate it and make it funny” (Fadiman, 1955: 227). In this sense, there is a humorous dimension to epistemology that has, unfortunately, got lost in much, if not most, of organisation theory’s epistemological debate (see Kavanagh, 1994 for a summary).

A final approach to the study of humour is to consider the phenomenon at a different level of analysis, namely at the level of the capitalist system as first described by Marx. Here, we can draw on a long-standing argument – expounded by writers such as Marx, Durkheim, Schumacher and latterly in OS by critical theorists like Alvesson – which asserts that as consumption increases and as the consumer society becomes more extensive, existential angst, anxiety, alienation and anomie will also increase. Marx’s thesis was that this alienation could only be ameliorated through (proletariat) revolution, while Durkheim ([1897] 1970) posited that deviant behaviour, rather than social revolution, would be the outcome of the dysfunctions within capitalism. However, an interesting alternative is that the anxiety produced by the capitalist system is released through humour, and that advertising provides a convenient and appropriate process to effect this. This is because humour has a ‘liberating’ aspect, since it plays with our ideas of what’s normal and abnormal. For example, the punchline in a joke leads us in a direction we had not anticipated and thus suggests that there is an element of freedom in our lives (it intimates at alternative realities by showing the arbitrary and tenuous nature of mundane, paramount reality). This, in turn, implies that changes are possible and that we need not be prisoners of habit, fixations, etc. Thus humour, which has an important function in providing release from tension, is of equal importance to the capitalist system as other, apparently more central, phenomena like alienation. From this systemic perspective, advertising responds to a need for humour within the capitalist system and, correspondingly, individuals will consume advertisements that satisfy that need. Here, it should be noted that since the unit of analysis is
the capitalist system, there is no interest in whether a particular advertisement is humorous or not, or whether the humour was useful in communicating the advertisement’s message.

If we take a Baudrillardian rather than a Marxist perspective – i.e. if we centralise consumption rather than production – a similar, but somewhat different argument applies. Unlike Marx, Baudrillard saw no potential for a proletariat revolt and saw no possibility of the capitalist system being overthrown. In developing his ideas, Baudrillard centralised the concept of the ‘code’, which he understands as a controlling system of signs: “one is permanently governed by a code whose rule and meaning-constraints – like those of language – are, for the most part, beyond the grasp of individuals” (Baudrillard, 1998: 61). The ‘code’, which bears strong and explicit resemblances to the ‘matrix’ in the film *The Matrix*, is pervasive, ensuring that people participate, and participate actively, and in particular ways, in the consumer society. Thus, in a world dominated by the code, consumption no longer has anything to do with satisfying ‘needs’. As Ritzer (1997: 81) explains, “We do not buy what we need, but rather the code tells us we should buy. Further, needs themselves are determined by the code so that we end up ‘needing’ what the code tells us to we need”.

Again, we can argue that humour's liberatory potential provides a means of escape, albeit temporarily, from the code, and, in addition, it gives individuals a feeling of superiority in an arena where they are constructed as receptacles. Moreover, in an age when postmodern discourse is characterised by scepticism towards great visions, advertising – and humorous advertising in particular – presents a utopian vision of a happy, imaginary world to the consumer and, through doing so, celebrates the continuing human ability to be creative and to transcend the mundane. As Martins (1995: 51) puts it:

... in the absence of stronger illusions, the public needs to invest its dreams somewhere. Replacing other vendors of illusions that progress has dislodged from their traditional positions, advertising appears at the right time to fill the vacuum.

Alternatively, however, we can see humorous advertisements as very much a central part of the code, acting to control and construct consumers (ah – as I interpreted it above). In Baudrillard’s (1998: 80) opinion, “consumerist man [l’homme-consommateur] regards enjoyment as an obligation; he sees himself as an enjoyment and satisfaction business” (original emphasis). Moreover, this interpretation suggests that in the selected advertisements what is being sold is not beer, but humour, since a feature of the code is ‘that which was once thought to be inalienable is exchanged: “virtue, love, knowledge, consciousness” (Baudrillard, [1973] 1975: 119). And so it is with humour. By selling humour, or, more accurately, by ensuring that consumers consume happiness – “happiness” as the ad used to say, “is a thing called Hamlet” – the code ensures that consumers giggle, or, in Neil Postman’s (1985) phrase, “amuse themselves to death,” rather than rebel or destabilise the system.

5. Conclusion

The difference between a conclusion and a punch line is that a conclusion self-referentially connects with the storyline’s narrative structure, in particular its beginning, so as to create a closed oneness between the beginning and the end, the alpha and the omega. A punch line, in contrast, deliberately eschews the narrative structure, creating a new meaning to the text that is in opposition to the prior sequence. Modern texts, like this one, have conclusions rather than punch lines. Maybe.
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