

Marketing – You Must Be Joking

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in S. Brown and A. Patterson (ed.), *Marketing Paradiso Retreat*, University of Ulster, School of Commerce and International Business Studies, St. Clement's, Belfast, pp. 126-138.

Abstract

Marketing, in its bid to be a serious discipline, has largely avoided theorising about humour in the marketplace. This is especially surprising given the increase in humorous ads over the last two decades or so. This paper seeks to address this omission by analysing humour in advertising with particular reference to Budweiser's series of Lizards' advertisements. The paper considers the phenomenon at different levels of analysis. We argue that humorous advertisements are suited to contemporary media and advertising environments, and that such advertisements are a natural offshoot of the prevailing postmodernist mood. Humour possesses many traits of postmodernity – fun, irony and parody, and is therefore in step with this mood. Finally, humour is considered as an alternative to postmodernity, in so far as it reaches parts that other discourses, such as the discourse of postmodernity, cannot reach.

1. Introduction

Marketing scholarship has had a long history of ‘intellectual beachcombing’. Indeed it is possible that the discipline’s *defining* feature is its enthusiasm for collecting, perusing and retailing ideas and metaphors from every –ism, -ology and field of inquiry known to humankind. Such eclecticism is maybe understandable, as young disciplines like marketing often seek legitimacy by associating with older and better established areas, and perhaps it is no bad thing, given the pervasive difficulty that all academics have in speaking across disciplinary boundaries. Given this context, what *is* surprising is that marketing has, as yet, 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. 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 to any great extent. 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 paper seeks to plug this gap a little. Our aim is to inquire into the use of humour in advertising, and investigate what it tells us about the nature of consumption and the social context of advertising/consumption. In particular, we are interested in explaining the nature and increasing use of humour during the period that has come to be known as late capitalism. Our assertion that the number of ‘humorous’ advertisements has increased over the last twenty years

is based primarily on our own experience, since no data is readily available to allow a quantitative, historical comparison, although we do know that in 1989 24% of prime-time television advertising in the U.S. was intended to be humorous (Weinberger and Spotts, 1989). Furthermore, Weinberger (1999), who has studied advertising humour extensively over the last twenty years, confirms our opinion that the use of humour in advertisements has increased significantly over the last twenty years.

As a way of anchoring our discussion, we focus on a single exemplar of humorous advertisements, namely Budweiser's well-known and long-running series of reptilian advertisements, and we begin the paper by summarising the nature and content of this series. We then 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

Budweiser is the largest-selling beer in the world. It has a 72% share of the premium regular category of the US beer market, seven times the share of the next largest brand. It has, however, experienced declining market share through the 1990's, although the rate of decline has reduced in the last two years. In Ireland, its market share has continued to grow throughout the 1990s, and it is now the leading lager in the country with a 33% market share.

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. These came from the same agency Goodby, Silverstein & Partners, San Francisco, and featured two Lizards, also in the swamp, looking on, jealous of the Frogs success. Budweiser tended to launch each new ad at the Superbowl, the peak commercial space on US television, and they have now broadcast over 80 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. After achieving considerable success, the campaign is now expected to be phased out over the last quarter of 1999.

Both the Frogs' and the Lizards' series have relied heavily on comedy, and there has been an observable 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 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.*

Louie hires a Ferret to kill the frogs. The Ferret tries to electrocute the frogs by dropping a neon Budweiser sign into the swamp. This almost works but the frogs survive and seek out Louie. Louie chastises the Ferret for his failure and himself for hiring a ferret to do a weasel's job. Louie then explains that these commercials were for entertainment only, and we should not think that he really intended to harm the frogs. Louie wonders about the need to move to another safer swamp given that he is being ostracised over the Ferret incident. He gets his big break as one of the frogs gets "stressed out" after the assassination attempt. Louie considers bringing Frankie and the Ferret in to form a new trio and replace the frogs. Louie fails to deliver a competent performance in the commercial. Louie and the frogs are therefore "canned". The Ferret takes over in the commercials. The frogs turn on Louie for getting them "canned".

The campaign has continued for 4 years, which is much longer than the two years that is normal for ads of this type. The story line has evolved over time, as have the characters. In 1995 there were just three frogs. In 1997 the lizards were introduced, as was a ferret. By 1999, one of the frogs had been killed off and Frankie, Louie and the ferret had developed quite distinct personalities. Even the frogs were given a chance to speak towards the end of the current series. Not surprisingly, one of the creators of the series copywriter, Steve Dildarian, drew a direct comparison with sit-coms when interviewed by *USA Today* (26 January 1999).

3. Now How Is That Supposed to Sell Beer?

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 instrumental and prescriptive, 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. In their comprehensive review of this literature, Weinberger and Gulas (1992) conclude that humor has a positive effect on attention, a mixed – leaning to positive – effect on comprehension, no significant effect on persuasion or source credibility, and a positive effect on liking the source of the advertisement. Furthermore, after exhaustively reviewing dozens of studies, they conclude that "the efficacy of humor as a communications device remains uncertain . . . [and]

generalisations about the effect of humor are fraught with pitfalls" (1992: 35). Consequently, they suggest that future research should consider more particular issues like the specific communication goals that are likely to be achieved through the use of humour, or identifying the most appropriate audience for humorous advertisements. Such future studies, however, are likely to face the same definitional difficulties and methodological enigmas that bedevil humour research, and also the reflexive conundrum common to all prescriptive research. So, for example, if research indicates that slap-stick is positively linked to persuasion and this leads to a significant increase in the use of slap-stick, then this increase is likely to result in slap-stick 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. 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. 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). Other practitioners are similarly phlegmatic: Calvin Klein, for example, has commented that "my ads are made exactly to have ambiguous readings" (quoted in Martins, 1995: 81). In this context, it behoves us to understand advertisements more broadly. For instance, adverts can be 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. In this context, we need to theorise more about humour itself and this is why, in the remainder of this section, we consider the literature on humour generally.

The first thing to be said is that the study of humour has engaged some of the greatest scholars in the history of thought, including Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Spencer, Kierkegaard, Bergson, Freud, Bateson, and Koestler.¹ Notwithstanding the application of this intellectual fire-power, no all-embracing theory of humour and/or laughter has gained widespread acceptance, most probably because humour serves a myriad of functions and there is a multitude of humorous techniques. For instance, Berger (1995: 97-8) lists twenty-one functions and forty-five basic techniques of humour (p. 54-55), while MacHovec (1988: 9-10) reproduces four different ways of classifying types of humour. Since any particular humorous instance usually involves a number of humour types and serves a number of functions, none of these classifications has become hegemonic.

In terms of theoretical perspectives, Berger (1995) identifies four dominant approaches: incongruity theorists, superiority theorists, psychoanalytic theorists, and cognitive/semiotic theorists. As a first step, we may usefully use these theories to help interpret the Budweiser advertisements, especially since, as Berger argues, multiple interpretive frames are necessary to understand humour because of its inherent equivocality. *Incongruity* theorists, such as Bergson, say that humour is based on some kind of surprising difference between what we expect and what we get. Koestler (1949), for instance, coined the term 'disociation' to describe the sudden clash

¹ For further reading on the theory and history of humour we would direct you to: Chapman and Foot 1976, Bremmer 1997, Berger 1995, Freud 1963, MacHovec 1988.

between two mutually exclusive codes or rules, which he saw as fundamental to the comic stimulus. Analogous to the way an electric charge jumps between two objects, both the creation of a subtle joke and the re-creative act of perceiving the joke involve an abrupt transfer of thought from one field to the other creating “redundant energy” that is discharged through the laughter reflex (Koestler, 1949: 110). The Budweiser ads clearly employ incongruity – the talking frogs live on the incongruous intersection of two planes, the human and the inhuman. Incongruity is also apparent when two characters in one of the ads discuss the very fact that they are in an ad. In a later ad, they discuss the possibility of selling advertising space in the ad itself. Identifying this incongruity does not however tell us a huge amount, since incongruity is present in many different comic forms. Indeed incongruity is used in some 69% of humorous ads in U.S. advertising (Weinberger and Gulas, 1992).

Superiority theorists, like Plato and Aristotle, argue that people take pleasure out of seeing others humiliated and that humour necessarily involves a sense of feeling superior to others. For example, sit-coms can be seen as allowing people to belong to the group that “gets” the humour and thereby feel separate from - and better than - the rest of the community. More specifically, the Budweiser 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. This line allows viewers to smile knowingly at the notion of this being applied to something like a frog as opposed to a beautiful person (or prince). The inherent humour here requires that we identify with the joker at the expense of those who fail to see that the hand of the marketer is behind the idealised images in advertisements.

A third approach is based on Freud’s *psychoanalytic* theory which argues that humour is best understood as the temporary escape of subconscious desire, which is often of a sexual nature, and which is usually masked or repressed by social norms. Freud was especially interested in jokes because for him they constitute one of only three instances where subconscious desire breaks free, as it were, from social norms (the other instances being dream activity and slips of the tongue), and thus they are a key to understanding inhibitions and deeper feelings: “Dreams serve predominantly for the avoidance of displeasure, jokes for the attainment of pleasure; but all our mental activities converge in these two aims” (Freud, 1963: 180).

A psychoanalytic interpretation of the Budweiser ads, and similar ads, is definitely possible (see Martins (1995) for a good example of this type of endeavour). Such an analysis would lead us to suggest that advertising operates to activate desire by (a) presenting dream-like scenarios that involve the world of the products concerned – thus an ad ‘dreams’ for the consumer; and (b) using humour as an important key to unlock desire and subvert social norms. The Budweiser ads are particularly violent and aggressive with spite, name calling, threats, intimidation, assaults and assassination attempts. It’s hard to see how these emotions could be conveyed in an advertisement that did not conform to the comic format. The emotions are particularly interesting in light of the series creator Dildarian’s claim that the Lizards are meant to depict the average Budweiser drinkers in a bar talking about life (and, implicitly, metaphorically depicting guys’

desire to be a prince, a star, to woo the girls). Perhaps coincidentally, Freud suggests that frogs symbolise primitive drives. The Freudian parallel can be extended. In one advert, the Ferret, while being an assassin, is held up as being a “babe magnet” because of his “bad boy image”. The link here between sex and violence / death reflects both Freud’s notion of jokes as escape and his views on sexual conquest. We could go further and interpret the Budweiser ads in much the same way that Freud interpreted dreams, which would mean making a distinction between the manifest and latent aspects of the ads. One problem with this approach is that Freud’s theory relies on unobservable, unconscious causes, which makes it impossible to falsify. In other words, psychoanalytic theory actually explains nothing because it can be used to explain everything. Another significant problem is that Freud’s theories and interpretations are now part of mass culture and this undermines any attempt to link manifest content with subconscious desire (Baudrillard, 1998: 145-8).

Finally, *semiotics* provides the fourth dominant theory of humour. From this perspective, words have no intrinsic meaning but only gain meaning through their relationship with other words in an overall system of difference. Thus, semiotic theory focuses on the use of literary devices like puns, metaphors, metonyms, and parody (which plays on the inter-relationships between texts). In this context, humour can be understood in terms of Derrida’s notion of *différence*, of the play in meaning – including different and absent meanings - that is inherent in the system of difference. So, for example, a punchline can be understood as a novel and surprising connection or meaning within the system.

The Budweiser ad series is inter-textual to the n^{th} 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 reflects 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 it 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 Budweiser series is 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.

4. Hey! Your Mother's an Iguana!

In the previous section we examined the Budweiser ads using four alternative interpretative frames suggested by Berger (1995). A limitation of this approach, however, is that it does not shed much light on the issue of why the number of humorous ads has increased over the last twenty years or help us better understand the nature of contemporary advertising/consumption. In this section, we draw on aspects of postmodern discourse to address these issues. We do this because it is arguable that the Budweiser ads 'work' because they tap into fashionable aspects of postmodern discourse – such as intertextuality, 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. In particular, 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 Budweiser and many other contemporary advertisements. Just as romanticism stands in opposition to classical realism, the Budweiser ads stand in opposition to modern ads which are framed within a paradigm based on information processing and communication.

Our first explanation for the increasing number of humorous advertisements is that humour effectively penetrates the contemporary media saturation without recourse to claims of superiority or differentiation that may be difficult or impossible to fulfil when the advertised product is purchased/consumed or, alternatively, may be neutralised by competitors. Thus, a significant feature of the Budweiser ads is that there is little mention of the gratification or utility that the consumer will gain through buying or drinking Budweiser. Accordingly, we can usefully categorise the Budweiser ads 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 is *diachronic*, meaning that it consists of two 'times' (i.e. the present during which the advertisement is being consumed *and* the future when the product will be consumed). Postmodern advertisements, in contrast, are structured within a mono-temporal framework that we can describe as *synchronic* (i.e. a single time, the present, during which the advertisement is consumed). 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. 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. 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*. Howells, makes much the same point in his 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 skepticism 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’ 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). 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 Budweiser series, which now may be best, interpreted as a form of sponsored programming (in more ways than one). These are not so much ads, in our traditional, modern (if that’s not an oxymoron) understanding of adverts. Rather they are jokes “proudly brought to you by the people from Budweiser”. 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 (Budweiser). The distinction is even more blurred when the comedic scene is part of a series, as in the Budweiser case which, in many ways, is a sit-com, sponsored by Budweiser, about reptiles in a swamp. Indeed, Budweiser’s 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.

5. 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 incongruity of modernity. Thus, just as anti-structure 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 recently 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. 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 is postmodern in a way that postmodernism the discourse (or more accurately the discourse about postmodernity) very often isn’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 antidote to the postmodern dismissal of epistemology and consequent skepticism 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 marketing’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 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. This, in turn, implies that changes are possible and that we need not be prisoners of habit, fixations, etc. Thus humour, whose only function seems to be to provide 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 skepticism 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. 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 Budweiser advertisement what is being sold is not Budweiser, 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.

6. Conclusion

The difference between a conclusion and a punchline 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 punchline, 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 punchlines. Maybe.

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