

VALUES OF FEMALE IMAGES IN BULGARIAN ADS BEFORE AND
AFTER THE DEMOCRATIC CHANGES:
“NO MORE PATRIARCHAL MYTHOLOGIES”¹

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In recent years the media and media discourse have had a growing, transforming impact on social life, especially in the former Eastern European countries where changes of social order have brought about vast changes in culture, civic discourse and even language. The new sociopolitical context did not lag behind the problematization of gender and its representational diversity in culture. These issues have been the focus of attention in contemporary dialogue since 1989, the great caesura of consciousness. They have penetrated and inhabited the media, pretending to be quite objective and realistic. Electronic and print advertisements, which provide information as well as entertainment for consumers, are also preoccupied with some of the hottest issues in civic discourse such as the above mentioned, as well as with environmental problems, animal rights, recession, etc.

The present paper explores several aspects of re-presentations of women in Bulgarian advertisements. It studies from a new perspective the pre- and post-consumerism imagology of the construction of the woman and the woman's body in Bulgaria, a former socialist country. Let me preface my analysis with a few comments about the situation in Bulgaria, crucial as background knowledge. Although advertising aims at its globalization, it still has to reflect and take into account specific cultural and social characteristics.

Staging the Set of Ads before and after the Changes

Today, living standards in Bulgaria are slowly on the rise. There has been a 180° shift in political, economic and cultural orientation: before the changes it was the former Soviet Union, now it is the “West”. All these changes spawned contradictions and tensions in the daily lives of the majority of the population. Nonetheless, they have led to freedom of the public to express their own opinion and to the establishment of independent mass media. Before 1989 and its Democratic Revolution there was practically no advertising in the daily press or the electronic media that were addressed to a mass audience. There were various

¹ Quotation in K. K. Ruthven's *Feminist Literary Studies. An Introduction*. Cambridge: CUP, 1991, p. 79.

categories of announcements about the Bulgarian Communist Party, especially at the time of elections. It was the one and only “alternative” to vote for, and it was explicitly stated. There were also some “advertising” segments, if we may call them so, that were presented on TV under the headings of informational or cultural programmes. They addressed societal and cultural needs thus promoting collective welfare for building up a “prospective” future.

Take another example: There is a Bulgarian magazine *New Goods and Advertising* (NG&A) that was published before and after 1989. It targets the mass audience and wholesale and retail dealers. Before the Changes, all ads that were presented in it were mostly hard-sell, replete with rational arguments, with only the product depicted in the non-verbal part of the ad, i.e. the illustration served to fulfil a referential function. The verbal part consisted of information about the product. There were practically no “tickle” ads. For example, if an ad offered biscuits it mentioned the ingredients used for them and the price. On the whole, ads appeared to be quite objective. If people (mostly women) were present in the illustration, they were significantly either workers producing the goods or consumers in the literal sense of the term, i.e. pictured at a time of trying the product. Both categories were depicted in a non-ornamental way, and their socialist, or more precisely their worker, identities were strongly emphasized. So, pre-1989 ads were only “informational”, with no “allusiveness” in them at all.

Although advertising discourse strives at changing behavior and not only promoting goods and services it is hardly accepted as such in Bulgarian context even today. All this seems to result from the existing social situation of economic instability and untrustworthiness among people, companies and political parties.

The advertising situation in Bulgaria before and after the Changes is closely connected with the social and economic situation. Even nowadays people are interested first in the benefit of the product, its price, other people’s opinion of it, and conceivably, in the emotional appeal of the ads. On the whole, there is lack of trustworthiness, and the prevailing view is that the promoted product is of low quality and it is usually advertised by private companies that are financially more prosperous, although, as the case may be, they normally do it in a non-professional way. None of the companies think of long-term investments in advertising campaigns. This tendency of people being suspicious of everything is related to the typical, and we can also say “notorious” Bulgarian skepticism about life and the world around in general. In other words, the advertising policy appears to be considerably shaped by what Covino states as ‘successful persuasion’, which ‘depends on the psychology of the audience, i.e. the audience’s beliefs, values, desires and expectations’². In countries in which consumer culture is developed, the product is less important than the desires it can evoke. In Bulgaria, the product matters more than the associations it can evoke, although in principle no one expects or believes in anything positive about

² Covino 1998:26.

a product that is advertised. Most Bulgarian ads consist mostly of rational arguments presented in a simple way. Characteristically, it is the information ads contain that matters rather than the images presented in them.

It is obvious that the advertisers' task in Bulgaria is far from being an easy one. They have to look for manipulating symbols to influence consumer's perception of a product that would appeal to our desire for pleasure. One of the ways for doing it is by the use of celebrity endorsers (e.g. sports people; film stars, their images used especially after the film has been on for some time, etc.). So, women celebrities started appearing in ads presented in Bulgaria. However, these images may be said to serve as ornaments and are often turned into currency for achieving the desired value. In this respect there is some change in our society: Bulgaria is now at a stage of joining the international consumerist community. Consequently, the general opinion is that Bulgarian producers and advertisers are blindly following the world standards in the advertising industry. An explanation for this might be the reason that the establishment of consumer culture has been at a rather initial stage, which, in turn, may question the viability of advertising literacy in Bulgaria. Practically speaking, what we can possibly have is experiences of ads shaped by other texts. This, however, leads us to yet another consideration: that the majority of people are likely to enjoy looking at images and symbols in ads, although the general public cannot link these images to the product and make the necessary associations and inferences about the transfer of social values to the product.

Problematizing Female Images in Bulgarian Ads

Bulgaria is still on the threshold of creating consumer culture. What I have in mind is Michael Schudson's statement about consumer culture 'taken to be a society in which human values have been grotesquely distorted so that commodities become more important than people or in an alternative formulation, commodities become not ends in themselves but overvalued means for acquiring acceptable ends like love and friendship'³. That is definitely not the case in Bulgaria. What is true, however, is that before the Changes people's fantasies and desires were suppressed by a dominating party-line moral. Now, when they overtly turn to sexuality, advertisers want their products to be successful and consequently use the female body as an object of desire and commodity, as well as a sign of exchange, thus stimulating the fantasies of consumers by projecting them onto the product. No doubt this would require a more refined way in representation, which is practically impossible at least for the time being, as many producers lack the competence needed, on the one hand, and on the other, the existing advertising agencies are under development. In pre-1989 ads women that were depicted were far from being the "fashion models" type. They could not provoke any positive associations, let alone fantasies or

³ Schudson 1984:7.

desires of any kind. Today, in post-1989 Bulgaria, the situation is changing in what seems to be the “positive” respect. At present, ads are overwhelming with famous models, actresses, and elegant women with well-shaped, sexy bodies.

Rachel Bowlby has expressed two different views of consumers: ‘In one s/he has no choice: the choice is imposed, even if it feels like spontaneous desire. In the other, s/he has full powers of choice and is restricted only by lack of information’⁴. If we try to interpret it as regards former Eastern European dimensions we can say that the first view would refer to advertising and choice on part of consumers before the Changes, while both views can be taken for granted for the period after the Changes. What actually happens is that with the disintegration of society various groups of consumers have started to appear. One of them lacks the money, while the other one lacks the information but has got the money. There is yet a third group which has both, money and information, and controls the business in Bulgaria in every respect.

So I can say that I have got particular perspectives, having grown up in a socialist society with virtually no printed and electronic ads until 1989. I have lived and have been brought up in a world where advertising did not exist, except in its political sense. We must admit that there were books and articles on advertising but they analyzed advertisements from Western countries, or “capitalist” countries as we used to call them. Some principles of socialist advertising were outlined among which the principle of the ‘party spirit’ was of crucial importance. The so-called ‘party-spirit’ had to be understood as the spirit of the Bulgarian Communist Party. According to those principles, all advertisements had to obey certain political laws. ‘The functions of the socialist advertisement are consciously used for achieving a unity of economy, politics, ideology, technology, culture and education’⁵. In 1988 a Congress in Vilnius (in the former Soviet Union) “On Socialist Advertising – New Horizons” finally drew the conclusion that advertisements should inform customers objectively and on time; they should also create new needs and educate rational consumption⁶. Nothing was mentioned about the verbal or non-verbal images in ads. Female images in ads were used to promote the party line and goals, i.e. gender was politicized. The woman’s gender role was thus desexualized, but ironically “embodied” in the traditionally patriarchal male role. This presumed gender equality only perfunctorily dedichotomized the traditionally weaker/stronger dyads in sexual politics. What is more, the gender role discrepancy came to be even more emphasized – although never socially verbalized (but even encouraged). It was because of the almost patronizing undertone of this political act that the gap turned out to be even bigger when its ideological backbone announced sexual equality but constructed women within the socio-political male gender role. In other words, unaccidentally, it was paraphrasing the Genesis to

⁴ Bowlby 1993:3.

⁵ Doganov, Radoicheva 1987: 10.

⁶ See NG&A 1988/3.

complete the Arcadian picture of equality bliss at the expense of the female return to her naturally patriarchal genealogy in the male body.

I am going to outline briefly the position of women in socialist and post-socialist Bulgaria. They had and still have equal rights with men in society. Their rights were notified in item 2 of the Bulgarian Constitution, accepted by the Great National Assembly on December 4th 1947. It said that all citizens over the age of 18 have the right to vote and be elected⁷. Even before the Changes Bulgarian women also had the right to work in all spheres of social life. Bulgaria as a socialist country carried out all sorts of activities connected with labour protection, (i.e. social insurance, maternity leave, etc.), as well as with improving of their qualification and raising of their cultural awareness⁸. There were a number of magazines for women discussing various issues and newspaper columns in *Trud* (a newspaper, its title meaning "labour") under the heading of *On the woman, family, conditions of life*. In 1950 a Committee of Bulgarian Women was established. It has participated actively in the proceedings of the International Democratic Federation of Women since then and was one of its founder members. The Committee makes equality of women in Bulgaria known to all the world and issues a monthly magazine *The Woman Today*⁹. That was and is the situation of women as far as Bulgarian laws are concerned. Women had equal rights with men in voting, study and work. They also received equal salaries. If, however, we pay closer attention to their status in respect to the "unwritten" laws in society, we can say that before the Changes there was some kind of inequality in the family. Women had to raise their children, do the washing, go shopping, cook, and go to work apart from all this. The ideal of domesticity was put to the core. As it was the time in which moral values were especially emphasized, it may sound strange, but if women were teachers they had no right to wear trousers and short skirts at work. Any kind of fashion was regarded as demoralizing and uneducational. The same held for schoolgirls. They did not have the right to have long hair either unless it was plaited. They had to wear uniform, which is demonstrative enough for a kind of "tamed" sexuality.

All these constraints were somehow imposed on the type of advertising that existed in socialist times. Before the Changes we used to pay lip service to prejudices and moral values, just "pretending" to stick to family values. We put an emphasis on the unity of the family. Moral values were emphasized not only in everyday life but in the media as well. The images of women that were presented in the media were mostly of workers, clad in a very respectful, decent way. In newspapers there was a kind of indirect advertising in photos and articles about women from all spheres of society. For example, the life and achievements of doctors, teachers, headmistresses, mayoresses, etc. were among the foci in various issues of the newspaper *Trud*. In the majority cases, women were

⁷ See SBE 1963a:321.

⁸ See SBE 1963b:358.

⁹ SBE 1963c:96.

pictured as workers in dairy farms, assembly halls, as spinners, shepherds, etc. This shows the proletarianization of women in pre-1989 Bulgaria.

Most advertisements published in *New Goods and Advertising* before the Changes presented only the advertising product without any female images or any other signifiers. It is true that as J. Williamson has stated that the absence of the person (in this case the woman) from the illustration invites us to take their place, i.e. the place of the Other¹⁰. It is also true that this absence provokes fantasies and dreams, provided it is done in a professional way. There are no objects which to fill the "void" or to stand for it in some way. If there were ads promoting jewelry they presented only the jewels. Even if there were ads presenting a woman wearing the advertised jewels there was nothing provocative and tantalizing in her looks, behaviour, style of dressing, etc.¹¹ The "sexual appeal" if it may be called so is contained only in her wide smile. She obviously seems happy. We are invited to feel the same if we buy the product. Here, again, there is no background against which the product is represented. There is nothing "to decipher". There is no narrative of any kind. However, there were some ads which contained some sexual connotations in the illustration. They referred to body lotions, deodorants, suntan oil¹². The female images in those ads are depicted either in full size, in their bikini, on the beach, or parts of their bodies could be seen, suggestive of pleasure and enjoyment. This way of advertising was done only in connection with cosmetic products and it was inevitable because there is a natural link between skin and the product. The woman was presented as a cosmetic user, not as ornament.

Nowadays, the emphasis lies on the sexual appeal of images, or more specifically on female images through which advertisers hope they would sell their products more easily. The erotic images of women act as emotional teasers, i.e. they provoke biologically programmed reactions, thus indirectly attracting attention¹³. Today's eroticization of advertising in Bulgaria is opposed to pre-socialist proletarianization.

The prevailing tendency of advertisements portraying women nowadays (not only in Bulgaria) is for women to be presented as equal partners with men, their identities not dependent on men. So, there is some shift from "domesticated" homemakers and workers to women as ornament, from patriarchy to individualization. For former socialist countries, Bulgaria including, there is also a shift in ads from the "average" woman image to celebrity images, the latter belonging to the Western type of advertising, or put in more general terms, to Western celebrity culture. Women are shown in the way they ought to be, their self-awareness heightened by conscious-raising. Yet, some advertisers

¹⁰ See Williamson 1985:77ff.

¹¹ NG&A 1989/6.

¹² See NG&A 1985/1; 1988/3; 1989/6.

¹³ See Kroeber-Riel 1988.

are more willing to sell the male fantasy view of women rather than to present women as they would like to see themselves.

The images of women in advertisements are simultaneously representative of society and uniquely individual. The values these images possess reflect the changing social attitudes towards women in diverse cultural and national contexts. On the whole, the tendency in the mass media is constantly to reinforce norms of masculinity and femininity, showing women as sex objects and men as full of strength, vigour and energy. Quite often, sexual desire is signaled in terms of the nude female.

Once women in western advertisements were portrayed and conceived of only in terms of their relation to men but in a way that showed them as submissive and weak, playing a helping role in the family, and being good mothers or wives. As Mark Simpson has pointed out in his "Added appeal for Mum" (*Guardian*, 7 March 1994) 'in seventies adland a woman's place in the world and her relationship to men was clear. It was taken for granted that the aspirations of women were confined to the home and seen in terms of nurturing men and bearing them children. When an ad depicted a woman in the home with no father present, this could only mean that father was working hard at the office or hurrying home.' This was also true for pre-1989 Bulgarian context. But, what was also emphasized was the image of the woman in workplace, which means that if "Western" women had to do only the above mentioned things, i.e. looking after men and children and staying at home, the Bulgarian woman had to go to work as well. That is why in most ads shown in Bulgaria the woman was presented as a member of working-class society.

The situation has changed nowadays, or at least, some advertisers would like to believe it has changed or think they are presenting it in a way completely different from what it used to be. Adverts "try" to represent women as people in their own right, liberated and free to act as they like, or seen as individuals. 'Nowadays, when a husband is 'absent' visually he may be taken to be absent altogether. Husbands are no longer an essential part of what it means to be a woman.'¹⁴ While family values are not so often depicted in Western ads, in Bulgarian ones they are still present. Not that family values are so much appreciated in Bulgarian society but as it was pointed out we "pretend" to stick to "moral" values that really existed in this country some time ago. So, some of the Bulgarian ads still present family identities rather than female ones. For example, a Neoset commercial on Bulgarian TV (Neoset is a Bulgarian furniture company) presents a whole family sticking to the "happy family" image, in an idealized home in which the latest trends in furniture could be seen. But we can also say that in a similar way the idea of the happy family image is revealed in ads, that are probably American in origin, but having become global. Thus, in a Cola Cao commercial on Bulgarian TV, a little boy wins a boxing contest. Although the main narrative is closely connected with the advertised product, the parallel one

¹⁴ Simpson 1994.

shows the boy's mother embracing him. The next moment a man approaches them, the shot seen only for a second. We are not sure whether the man is the boy's father or the woman's partner or boyfriend but the idea of happiness in a united family is there.

In another advertisement in *Standard* (April 17, 1993) a happy smiling woman, quite elegantly dressed in trendy clothes, is shown in a kitchen with all modern conveniences. Her family (father and son) is also represented. It is her boy's birthday. From the birthday cake it becomes clear that the child is two years old. The father is taking a picture of him. There is another illustration next to this one in which the same woman, with an even wider smile, is depicted against the background of some people. The caption reads: 'I've made my choice to live among the best'. The caption under the two illustrations is: 'I've made my choice. That's Candy.'¹⁵ Here, the woman is shown at home as well as in public, enjoying herself. She feels liberated in apolitical terms and free to do what she likes. She is young and independent, although she has got a family. She has much free time now that she has decided what to buy for their kitchen. Even if she is in the kitchen, she does not do the housework. The important thing about the ad is that she herself has made the choice of having a washing machine, refrigerator, freezer and dishwasher from *Candy*. The woman is represented as having status, elegance and sophistication, qualities which are immediately transferred onto the products images. So, though there are no class distinctions in Bulgaria, some people can afford having all those expensive things while others cannot have all of those, or if they have any, they might not be of the same good quality.

In principle, the way advertisements map the world and produce our sense of their reality depends largely on the various signs they use. In most ads women are depicted in terms of their physical appearance as sexual objects. They themselves are represented as commodities or as helping goods to be sold more easily. In this respect we can quite agree with J. Williamson that 'in advertising women are like currency that can be used to buy or sell anything. In adverts women become interchangeable with the products they are selling, often they even become part of the product or are shown contained in it.'¹⁶ Images of women have been used to evoke glamour, happiness and sexuality. If we compare women's images in ads with ones from reality, we would easily realize that the represented female identities in adverts are more or less constructed and artificial rather than real and natural. The reason for this is that if women as customers like to see themselves as the women in ads they will have to buy the advertised products.

Images of women are used in ads addressed to women because women share common knowledge and intuition and much of the information can remain

¹⁵ I am sure the advertisement is made for Bulgaria but not in Bulgaria. The company (Comtra) it is made for is the official representative and authorized dealer for Candy in Bulgaria.

¹⁶ Williamson 1985:124.

implicit. But even when ads are addressed to women they may be read as if by men because most of the times readers are usually constructed as males.

Quite often people are biased, or prejudiced, or take it for granted that men are more representative and can be trusted more than women. In this respect, men are used where possible in the illustration for advertising certain goods and services. However, this tendency is gradually changing. Nowadays numerous ads for men's perfume and a number of car ads are aimed at women. It should be pointed out that to some extent this reflects changing social attitudes and roles of men and women and shows women as having some freedom and following their own wishes in a new world. Today, more and more women in Bulgaria own and drive cars. They are not merely passengers as they once were. That is why advertising has reflected this change in Bulgarian society as well. While there are car ads aimed at women in Bulgaria (Amando, Renault 19, shown on Bulgarian TV), strangely enough, Bulgarian perfumes for women are not often advertised in the media. The reason for this is again that we would rather buy foreign perfumes than look for Bulgarian ones because we cannot rely on our own products. We simply do not trust the quality. It is strange though, having in mind the fact that Bulgarian celebrities (especially women doing sports like Stefka Kostadinova and Maria Petrova) have given their names to some quite expensive perfumes that are already world famous. We can proudly say that this is a kind of world recognition of Bulgarian women.

Although in most ads women are shown as satisfying somebody else's needs (air attendants, housewives, etc.), still there are ads in which women are shown as people having equal rights with men. For example in a Bulgarian TV commercial for cigarettes "Assos International" women play billiards, a game typical for men. Smoking was regarded as 'a social symbol of considerable power in the 1920s in affluent societies'¹⁷. In Bulgaria there were some signs of advertising immediately after World War I. They were in the form of advertising posters and calendars. In 1926 such a calendar represented a woman smoking a cigarette. The puff of smoke inscribed the brand name *Zora* (meaning "dawn"). It was considered to be quite provocative and distressing at the time. On the whole, human images appeared in ads at the turn of the 19th century. Then, in the years of socialism it was considered bad manners if women smoked, not only in public, but in general. Today smoking by women is a way of socializing, a sign of high living standards, trendy and chic. Or, maybe it is seen as a kind of democracy and equality. Advertising cigarettes is done through the use of glossy images of people or objects with the aim of distracting one's attention from the fact that smoking kills people and pollutes the environment. What is "polluted" in such ads is the language that is used. Cigarettes are called "mild" while describing them. The language that is used for something dangerous to one's health is definitely sexist. Why should it be connected with women's images?

¹⁷ Schudson 1984:196.

In another ad promoting mobile phones, the company Mobiphone, which is a British-Bulgarian joint venture, advertises its products showing them used by men (*24 Hours*, April 29, 1994) as well as by women (*Standard*, May 1, 1994). Women are depicted in a business world where men are usually expected to be seen, i.e. in generally male-dominated career structures. The ad empowers women by presenting them on an equal basis as men.

However, there are still TV commercials for washing powder aimed at the former Eastern European countries that show women as people whose lives revolve only around the quality of their washing. Such an ad was the one for *Ariel* washing powder representing women from different nationalities (French, German, etc.) assuring us that this is the washing powder all Europe uses. So, we have to use it as well. There is another ad for *Tide*, Procter and Gamble's product, doing the same thing. It is one of the few ads in which Bulgarians are shown and which is probably made in Bulgaria.

Before the Changes objects like "condoms", "tampons" and "sanitary towels" were taboo words and phrases and they were not discussed in public at all, most probably because of their implicit sexual reference. Now these products are widely advertised, showing women in all sorts of situations: at home, in the gym, going out, etc. When they started appearing in ads they were politically loaded. For example, *Pampers* and *Ariel* washing powder were advertised using images of political people. The illustrations of an ad that appeared on January 21, 1992 in *North-South* (a local Bulgarian newspaper) depict the image of Nora Ananieva, former Chair of the Bulgarian National Assembly, also a member of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, and that of a male member of the Bulgarian National Assembly, also a member of the Union of Democratic Forces, Edvin Sugarev. So, the products are presented in a humorous light. The ad indirectly mocks women from the Bulgarian Socialist Party. Similarly it ridicules men from the Union of Democratic Forces. It reads:

'Blue "Pampers" for him and... pink "Pampers" for her

A way to feel pleasantly dry even when they have wet themselves...

For all the others – "Ariel".

It washes not only outside but completely, **INSIDE** as well!

Without soaking!

The ad is based on play on words. The Bulgarian word for "soak" is ambiguous and it can be used in its literal as well as its figurative meaning. The latter means "frame/set up somebody". The allusion is that if you use Pampers you will stay unambiguously "clean", or unstained from the political "soaking".

Considering the above-mentioned ad, we can say that there is some relationship of advertising to the politics of representation. Advertising mirrors in a way society and the changes in it. People can interpret the implicit meaning in the ad drawing on their experiences from other discourses, or, in this particular case, from the discourse of politics. Again, as regards this ad, we can say that ads

are consumed irrespective of the products they offer. This one caused a lot of fun because the images used in it are familiar to practically everyone in Bulgaria.

Many ads in Bulgaria are produced in an ugly manner and with a complete lack of taste, representing erotic images of women. Thus, for example, there was a TV commercial for the newspaper *1000 Days* that was shown in 1993. The verbal part consisted only of "The naked truth". The non-verbal component of the ad depicted a woman, a shiny (satin?) gown revealing most of her naked body. The audience is invited to play the role of a voyeur. The female image is addressed to male audiences with the aim of provoking pleasure, desire and expectations, which will later on be transferred to the newspaper as an object of advertising. Some of the ads depicting women are even vulgar. For example, there is an ad for the beer *Pleven* which is heavily loaded with sexual connotations (*Standard*, November 11, 1998). The bottle of beer is wrapped in paper and a man's hands are tearing the paper, so that the label is seen. There is a female image in the illustration as well. The woman is turned with her back to us. Only her legs and part of her body are seen. She is dressed in a black leather dress, with a zip at the back, and her shoulders are bare. The dress is rather short, slit at the back up to her behind/pelvis. Her hand touches the lowest part of her skirt as if inviting the man to avail himself of her body. This gesture is emphasized by two more signs. One of them is non-verbal. The two illustrations overlap in such a way that the man's hand is pictured under her legs that are wide apart. The other one is verbal: 'Take what you want! The imperative is ambiguous: You can have only one thing, either the beer or the woman. Again the woman is used as currency. The sexual desires and basic instincts are projected onto the beer. There is some aggressiveness in the overtly sexual aspect of the ad that might repel and disgust the addressee rather than attract them and provoke a desire and willingness in them to buy the advertised product.

We are constantly asking ourselves the questions posed in Robert Goldman's book *Reading Ads Socially* but left unanswered: 'Is advertising a reflection of society?' or 'Is society a reflection of advertising?'¹⁸. On the other hand, the American Association of Advertising Agencies claims that advertising is 'a mirror of society's tastes' (op. cit.), which is yet another issue. Are advertisements really representations of "real" life? I would say 'yes' and 'no'. Because although ads represent real goods and services, i. e. ones from real life, in most cases they do it in such a way that the representation, at least, seems unrealistic. What matters, in fact, is not the product itself, but the signifieds it is connected with, the atmosphere and the associations it creates, as well as the provocations readers are faced with when interpreting the ad. Apart from selling us the promoted goods and services, advertisements influence society by selling us social relations, although these social relations and values are quite often idealized and egalitarian. Thus, a second discourse is created in ads. An ad about

¹⁸ Goldman, 1992:2.

Ledenika beer (24 Hours, August 11, 1999) does not merely reflect social relations but it also reflects the hottest issue at the time it is published, namely the eclipse on that day. A man and a woman have special eyeglasses on, with heads up. They drink beer – the woman from a glass, the man from the bottle. The man holds the woman, his hands round her waist. The female sensuality is emphasized by her belly, slightly uncovered, her lips parted, and her long blond hair hiding part of her face. You can see the brand name of the beer on the label and on the glass. The caption reads: ‘Lager for special pleasures!’ On the left-hand corner of the ad there is a halo of the sun with a bat inside it. The words ‘total eclipse’ and ‘Ledenika’ are inscribed on both ends. The pleasures are several. The woman is happy because she drinks *Ledenika*, her boyfriend is with her, and they are going to see the rarest event that happens once in a lifetime, if at all. There are three objects of desire in the ad; the eclipse, the beer and the woman’s body. The special pleasure each one will get from the ad is definitely the sexual one. The bottle of the beer slightly touching the woman’s belly is presented as a phallic symbol. Or, put in other words, an object that is quite asexual acquires sexual connotations. There is more than one narrative. The ambiguities and tensions provoke the audience’s fantasies, dreams and illusions.

There are ads in which the language that is used is sexist, associated with a woman’s image. We can agree that language in adverts has the ability to refer to two things at once, and that is exactly where the satisfaction of reading or seeing the ad comes from, but when visual images of women and products are deliberately juxtaposed, that is what shows that ads are rather androcentric than gynocentric or androgenic. Although language itself is not inherently sexist, it can be deliberately put to sexist uses. There are ads in which language contains some references to female sensuality by the way various words and phrases are used to refer to the promoted goods without even the presence of female images. For example, there are chocolate ads for Kraft Jacobs Suchard products made in Bulgaria, that use allusions:

Seasons Chocolates – **smooth** co-existence of **fragile** chocolate and **tender** fruity cream.

Daily little adventure with **delicious temptation**...

Light, **heavenly flight** above the tedious rhythm of reality...

Seasons – **in four unforgettable tastes** – *Strawberry, Apricot, Morello-cherry and Rum.*

For You!

(24 Hours, October 4, 1997, emphasis added)

The example proves the fact that although language is not inherently sexist, it can either be deliberately put to sexist uses. It also has the ability to refer

to two things at once, and that's exactly where the satisfaction of reading or seeing the ad comes from.

The advertisers have followed the principles of effective advertising in the above-mentioned ad, i.e. if an ad wants to be successful, it has to contain in itself the four basic human needs: air, water, food and sex (see Bakardjiev 1999: 39). Sexual words and phrases are used for something referring to food, while in the non-verbal component the chocolates (food again) float in the air. The sky is blue with white and pinkish clouds streaming from the chocolates. The caption below the illustration reads: 'Perfect harmony'.

There is another interesting Bulgarian advert in *Standard* (28 April 1994), for a Yamaha motorcycle, called *Virago*. The name which is from Latin origin means "virile girl, brave woman, heroine". In Bulgarian "motorcycle" is masculine in gender. What is striking is that the analogy that is made in the brand name and in the verbal part of the main text is to a woman: "Virago attracts, even having calmly stopped by you". In Bulgarian gender is determined by form, so verbs have endings which are in concord with the subject. In this case the ending is for the feminine gender. It is closely connected with some other sexist words: "attracts", "pleasure", "shine". A word that is definitely sexist is "PASSION", written close to the illustration, with its first letter on the front part of the motorcycle and not far from its brand name. The interpretations might be different, one of them that if a man wants to have a girlfriend or a lover, he might just as well have a motorcycle instead, which is quite humiliating for women. All this proves the fact that 'in advanced industrial societies, the transposition of gender characteristics onto inanimate objects is peculiarly marked'¹⁹. I would not like to say that Bulgaria is a highly advanced industrial country but the reason for applying these techniques in advertising in Bulgaria is that at least for the time being advertisers simply imitate Western ways and styles of practically everything. What is also true is that in principle, you can attach different cultural meanings to the object of attention and they will definitely vary within different cultures and nations.

Today the female images in ads presented in Bulgaria are connected with emotional strategies, with illusion, desire, pleasure and fantasy. Together with the hedonistic representation of the woman there is something mystic and sexual about her because what Bulgarian women have possessed for such a long time is reality. Now these addressees want something different to make them feel better, to look like the Other (in the ads), different from what they really are. 'The real body of the other serves only as a support for our phantasmic projections'²⁰. Theoretically, female sexuality is connected with the narcissistic gaze of the woman as one of the audience. She can identify with the woman from the ad who is an object of desire and imagine herself to be like a mirror image. The narcissistic for Freud is not related only to reflection of one's own body but of

¹⁹ Hebdige 1988:86.

²⁰ Žižek 1995:210.

what one would like to be (Freud 1914). The sexual connotations that are created also lead to desiring a product not related to sex. The inability to buy the advertised product so that you could get closer to the image in the ad may cause disillusionment and disturbances in one's life. But this can also happen even if you buy the product because once things become real they can no longer promise enjoyment and will stop being interesting and provocative.

I do not think I can make generalizations about female images and identities in present-day civic discourse or put them in stereotypic frames. Rather, my aim has been to outline a personal view based on many years of observation, investigation and analysis in the field of advertising discourse within social and cultural frames. Since 1989 I have experienced a transition to new consumerism and nowadays I live in a fledgling consumerist society. Or, metaphorically put, I have lived in two worlds. My observations are suggestive of some discursive practices within advertising contexts representing female images. On the whole, what is present in ads after the changes is explicit sexuality and spectacular and seductive imagery of women.

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