

Historical Research on the Media

The Audience in the Text of Advertising Films

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Here we shall consider three Norwegian advertising films with special emphasis on the audiences they address. I shall then say a few words about the relationship between theory and empirical observations in historical research on the media.

On the Viewer/Reader in the Text

Texts address specific receivers, in the sense that the text presumes that the receiver, be he viewer or reader, has certain knowledge, certain sympathies, preferences, values and norms. The text invites such receivers to adopt certain positions. But a text is not a totally determined or determining system; the reader or viewer is free to decline the position the text offers, he or she may choose a quite different position and still construct meaning from the text. Texts are generally considered to have different degrees of rigidity in this respect. 'Closed texts' appear to require more in the way of specialized knowledge and/or an intended perspective, and they are less intelligible if read from other perspectives or positions. Propaganda messages are closed texts, whereas modernist novels, for example, are open. Open texts encourage diverse readings, constructions of meaning, on the part of different readers.

Advertising as Text

Reception theorist Wolfgang Iser (1978) considers advertising a form of propaganda, i.e., text which adapts to its readers in order to orient them toward their personal needs. The text seeks to elicit a specific response, in the case of advertising primarily purchase of the item in question. Advertising is quite "up front" about its purpose, which has made it a favourite object of study among those interested in the construction of meaning. The kind of advertising we will be considering here, the advertising film, addresses a large and diverse audience. Film-goers – before television, at least – constitute a cross-section of society, i.e., men and women from a wide variety of classes and cultures.

By the end of the Great War, advertising in Norway had evolved beyond the stage of "BUY THIS PRODUCT!" which had been common in the mid-1800s. As early as the interwar period Norwegian advertisers had learned to advertise their products by placing them in pleasurable and otherwise enticing contexts. Thus, advertising messages were adapted to their prospective receivers. Advertisers knew what people wanted and gave them exactly that. As a result of this focus on arousing positive feelings in a mass audience, advertising films can be in-

valuable indicators of aspects of Norwegian mentality.

Advertising films deal in, and thus reveal, the values, dreams and hopes of the Norwegian people. Studies of films from different eras reveal the variability of values, hopes and dreams, albeit certain elements are more or less constant. The first film we shall see, "Like Manna from Heaven!" (*Hva er som manna i Egyptens land?*) was screened in Norwegian cinemas in 1938. Let us keep in mind the identities the film addresses and thereby reinforces.

"Like Manna from Heaven!" (1938)

The film has a highly fragmentary visual component, with continuity provided by a title song which runs the length of the film. The first scene shows the sun rising over mountain tops. In the yard of a picturesque and well-kept farmstead barley is being laid up to dry; a young woman in folkloric dress and carrying a basket comes to serve beer to the farmhand. They break out in song – the title song – and tum toward the

camera, lifting their glasses. The rest of the film shows people in various settings – fishing, at work, in restaurants, etc. – drinking beer and singing. The lyrics are superimposed on the picture toward the end of the film, ostensibly to allow the audience to sing along. Once the lyrics have established the reference to the Biblical motif, we see pictures of a camel caravan interspersed with pictures of waving fields of grain. Finally, the film takes us into the high country, and then even higher, into the heavens above. The song ends there (and reasonably the film itself), but pictures of the three largest breweries in Oslo – the advertisers – have been tacked on to the end.

The film addresses viewers seeking happiness, ready to be entertained; the motifs that make them happy are familiar, and specifically Norwegian. The appeal is to Norwegians' feeling for their country and their pride in folkloric tradition. The film has all the 'arch-Norwegian' symbols – the mountains, steeply sloping fields, folkloric dress and stands of birch (the "Norwegian wood" of Beatles fame). A scenic sunrise, waving



National symbols, song and high spirits plus elements from popular culture advertised beer in Norwegian cinemas in 1938.



Like Manna from Heaven!

fields of grain and clear skies. Rhetorically, the beer is presented as a 'nectar of the gods' in a context of song, hearty good spirits and freedom. But there is also a strong popular cultural appeal: there is the hint of a romance between the pretty farmer's daughter and the farm hand. The power of love to transcend class barriers is a classic theme in popular culture, and such romances in rural settings recur as a theme in Norwegian popular culture in several media. Symptomatically, the pictures of the breweries at the end of the film are exteriors; pictures of real industrial work might remind the viewer of the drudgery of real life. In sum, then: the film addresses light-hearted viewers who are favourably disposed to national symbolism and Norwegian popular culture.

"PP Lozenges" (PP-Pastillen, 1957)

The film is a 'behind-the-scenes' production. Viewers witness the production of an advertising film for 'PP', a licorice-flavoured lozenge. Their 'host', Rolf Kirk-

vaag, a well-known media figure of the time, explains this to us in direct address to the camera, and adds, incidentally: "It would be fun to talk with someone who actually uses PP". And we cut to Ingrid Vardun, one of Norway's most popular motion picture femmes fatales of that day. Vardun is enthusiastic; there is no end to PP's selling points: not too hard, not too chewy; no hard edges, feels good on the tongue. A picture of the lozenge seen through a magnifying glass confirms the rounded edges. At the end, Kirkvaag tells the audience to 'try one and see for yourself'.

This film is not intended for pleasure-seeking 'national romantics', but for rational, modern consumers. It addresses people who select products on rational grounds and need to be convinced of the product's excellence on the basis of factual evidence.

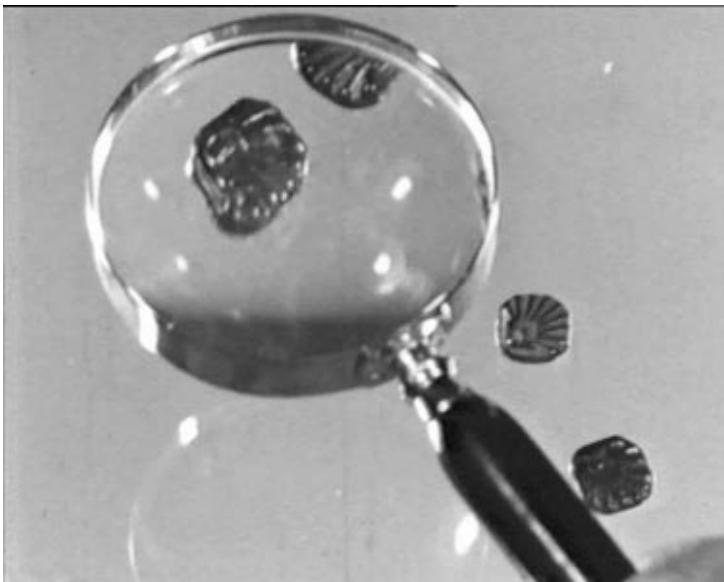
To viewers of today the film may seem to have an ironic twist, but we have every reason to believe that audiences of the late 1950s took it quite seriously. At least, there



Radio personality and famed femme fatale discuss a licorice lozenge in a film from 1957.

is no evidence to the contrary. The 1950s were in many respects a super-modern period in Norway, an era of firm belief in Progress and Rationalism. The postwar reconstruction project was in full swing; Norway's economy was booming and jobs

abounded. 'Good sense' was a central value in the 1950s, and the attraction of the behind-the-scenes concept should be understood in that light. The viewers are invited to see what really happens when a film is being made.



Viewers can see for themselves that the lozenge has no sharp edges.

Scientific argumentation figures prominently in many advertising films from this period, often considerably more explicitly than in the PP film. Experts in white lab coats, flanked by beakers, test-tubes and microscopes, expound on the cleansing power in X detergent.

Of course, rationality is not the sole appeal. This film, too, has a solid foundation in popular culture in the persons of Ingrid Vardun and Rolf Kirkvaag. Vardun has, for the moment, cast the 'fatale' image aside and seems simply pretty, friendly and slightly whimsical. Kirkvaag, the interviewer, exudes competence, self-confidence. His style is well-known from a popular Saturday-evening radio show that attracted tens of thousands of listeners in the late 1950s.

"Olga Michaelsen and SOLO" (1994)

The scene is a crowded concert hall, where a middle aged-plus soloist is singing the Norwegian "Happy Birthday" song to the

accompaniment of a grand piano. She is elegant in a gown of black and gold; the concert hall is festive – all the attributes of a "serious concert" are there. Only the song deviates. In the middle of the song, the singer stops and takes a sip of SOLO, then finishes to thundering applause. In the next picture we see the slogan from a current advertising campaign: "SOLO – probably the only soft drink that doesn't do anything but quench your thirst." We also read that SOLO is celebrating its sixtieth anniversary on the market.

The film appeals to youth, to the famous 'Generation X' with its sense of irony and bold-faced quotation marks. Young, post-modern viewers are accustomed to the kaleidoscope of the media and are not looking for representations of social reality. Their attitude is playful, they relish symbols and 'appearances'. In the eyes of such individuals, Olga Marie Michaelsen is 'cult'. A lyrical alto who sings romances in concerts nationwide, her fans include young people, who applaud her performances wildly. Ob-



Olga Marie Michaelsen sings 'Happy Birthday' to SOLO, "probably the only soft drink that doesn't do anything but quench your thirst."

viously, on one level Michaelsen is serious about her identity as classical singer, against all odds. She has all the attributes of the 'classical' singer, only the 'repertoire' is not quite what one would expect. The audience appreciates the pun-like play on identities.

SOLO, too, is a winner against all odds. Sixty years on the Norwegian market and 'still going strong', despite the machinations of multinational giants. The company has been a big advertiser for many years. Advertising in the 1990s is looking for new approaches, inasmuch as audiences are reportedly weary of manic, stupendous claims, which nowadays simply go in one ear and out the other. Whereas Benetton has responded to this by choosing a documentary realism approach, SOLO goes 'back to basics' with an ironic understatement: "probably the only soft drink that doesn't do anything but quench your thirst". The message Olga Marie Michaelsen drives home.

Indicators?

One can use these films as sources, as keys to trends in Norwegian mentality. The advertisement for beer indirectly describes an audience with a strong national identity, viewers who seek pleasure in popular culture. The licorice lozenge film, on the other hand, addresses a rational, reality-oriented consumer. Finally, viewers of the soft drink ad enjoy playing with the meaning in a variety of symbols and see reality in terms of 'appearances'. That is to say, the films address three quite different audiences. On the basis of these sources I might describe the recent history of Norwegian mentality, as follows: The romantic nationalism of the interwar period was succeeded by a highly rationalistic period, which in turn gave way

to the diffuse reality orientation of postmodernism.

I might. But is it true? My 'sources' are three strips of film. Now, how conclusive can my description be? Isn't my empirical evidence a bit too scanty to allow any generalization? I should have analyzed many more films and other popular cultural texts, as well, before allowing myself to say 'Word One' about Norwegian mentality. I have an empirical problem: My data are too limited, and one has reason to doubt their representativeness.

Or, is theory, rather, the weakest point in my argumentation? Aren't the points I derive from my reading of these films simply the kind of 'findings' we read all too much of in books about modernity and post-ditto? On the basis of the literature, I impose some few banal features on the films, features which I can't help but see, given the tint of my lenses. Might it be that those very lenses make me blind to other data in the sources, and limit the scope of my interpretation of what I do see?

Theory and Empirical Inquiry in the Field of Media History

Research in Media History takes place in this field between theory and empirical inquiry. History is an empirical science; historical research produces narratives based on empirical observation, and in the case of recent history the amount of source materials at hand is staggering. There are all too many contradictory sources, which admit of all too many and varied interpretations. Nor do the sources speak until spoken to; i.e., the researcher must ask them what they know. In other words, you are at least as blind without your theoretical lenses as you are with them. To make sources speak requires the application of theory, even if

theoretical perspectives imply limits on what we hear the sources say.

In short, what all this boils down to is a well-known post-structuralist lesson: Verbal discourses cannot mirror reality, present or past, and reconstruct "how things are or were". The relationship between language

and reality is such that this is not possible, not even for an empirical branch of science like historical research, with its focus on traces of the past and discourses constructed on the basis of sources once, but no longer, contemporary.

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