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Female Food-Induced Dreams in Advertising: A Case Study of Three Polish TV Commercials

Acta Philologica nr 45, 85-92

2014

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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“Never just pictures” is a seemingly trivial phrase which nevertheless perceptively points to the complexity and weightiness of visual culture (Bordo, *Twilight Zones* 107–138). This title of an essay by Susan Bordo in which she stresses the importance of cultural images in shaping the relation between women and food is the central motto of this article. In order to follow this assumption, namely, not to dismiss the commercial representations that consumer culture is ceaselessly flooding us with simply as pulp without any significance, we need to achieve a certain level of competence or media literacy. When issues such as eating and femininity are concerned, any critical reading needs to start from the premise that advertising mirrors the already existing notions about gender, and in producing new content, it exploits a limited range of concepts determining what constitutes being male or female. In the case of food commercials, it can be said that they both embody and allude to the received opinion about the culturally appropriate behaviors and attitudes linking women and eating, at the same time always remembering to project the product they are advertising as positively charged. Such representations may conceal the grim nature of certain eating habits behind a syrupy veneer, but also, hopefully, might be read as a route to empowerment.

In order to be able to penetrate this facade, it is necessary to introduce some theoretical perspectives on advertising which will serve as tools in breaking through this sugar coating. To begin with, the article follows Anthony J. Cortese’s insights on advertising as offering “highly manipulated representations of recognizable or institutional scenes from real life” (13). Basing his ideas on the works of Erving Goffman, who underlined the theatrical quality of such images, Cortese, a sociologist writing about the intersection between media and gender, encourages us to pay attention to even the smallest details of the ads, making it very clear that what we are looking at are stylized ceremonies composed of ritualized gestures rather than what our daily struggle looks like (13–16). In keeping with this assumption, he provides a scheme useful in deconstructing advertisements: he outlines seemingly insignificant elements, such as facial expressions, color combinations, or the choice of tenses, as factors to be considered in analysis. By doing that, Cortese, just as Bordo, clearly dismisses the claim that commercials could be “just pictures” (157–158). Nonetheless, as it will be shown later in the article, his framework may not be sufficient to account for certain elements of the commercials, for which Bordo’s insights provide an effective explanation.

Cortese refers to the role of commercial pictures as the stuff of our dreams. He cites an advertising executive, who states that “Advertising doesn’t mirror how people are acting but how they are dreaming” (5). This quotation aptly summarizes the role of advertising

as a powerful force operating in the social sphere, a force capable of capturing the viewer's attention by offering him or her a softened up version of familiar, culturally validated images. More importantly, the crucial impact of advertising may consist in establishing the images it presents as the norm to be longed for and finally achieved. The lack of competence in recognizing the mechanism responsible for producing these glamorized visions might result in being falsely led to believe that, first of all, what deviates from the standardized format is to be seen in terms of a defect and consequently should be eradicated and, secondly, behaviors and attitudes which fail to conform are unacceptable. Condemned and removed from the public view, some forms of conduct are in this way *re-presented* as remaining outside the prescribed scope of social practices available for individuals.

In this article, I will examine the former issue: the dangers of constant dissatisfaction with one's life and the never-ending striving for the constantly eluding perfection in projecting an image of oneself; these anxieties are, according to theorists such as Mike Featherstone, cornerstones of consumer culture (13). This claim will be illustrated with an analysis of three recent Polish commercials, which have certain features in common. The first of them uses a well-known actress to endorse a certain brand of biscuits known to the English-speaking audience as Jaffa Cakes (Delicje), the next employs a famous singer to promote fruit-flavored tea (Loyd Tea), and in the last one we can see a young woman advertising a type of yogurt-based dessert (Fantasia). There are a couple of immediately perceived similarities among these three. All of them star good looking women dressed in light-colored clothes who appear to be consuming the products to the sounds of ambient music. What is more, the consumption is accompanied, or rather followed, by a state of dreamlike bliss. However, before more can be said about the fantasy world these women enter, it is essential to return to Cortese's ideas.



Figure 1. "Loyd Tea" commercial: a fairy queen in the enchanted forest

When he discusses possible sites of discrimination in ads, the readers are presented with a set of guidelines, which are treated here as a provisional "checklist" for the signs of gender inequality. He advises the reader to focus on "visual cues such as expression, posture, and gesture" (29) and particularly to be on the lookout for: relative size distortions (39), body chopping (42), function ranking (43), body clowning (45), and so on. If these are not detected, the commercial should be free of misogynist elements. And thus, no violence against women, be it verbal or physical, is committed in any of the three commercials. The women in them are not shown in any openly degrading position; on the contrary, they either stroll in a relaxed manner through pleasant landscapes (fig. 1; fig. 2) or lean back on a comfy sofa (fig. 3). Their bodies are not dismembered or their body parts are not explicitly objectified. They are not visibly passive, and even though the third

one is voiceless, she is not contrasted with any other characters who speak. They are not visualized as smaller or in a lower place than men. In fact, a man appears only in the third one, and even there, he is shown as a comically inept one, his attempts at surprising the main character are thwarted by the power of her magical dessert, and he does not speak as well. The absence of men could be treated as a licensed withdrawal, Cortese's term for the situation when advertisers prefer to avoid showing male characters when a high-ranking woman is presented (45). Assessing whether it is this phenomenon that the viewer encounters in this commercial would be a risky undertaking since not enough information is given. Therefore, at first sight, there seem to be no immediately alarming hints suggesting that the images are oppressive.



Figure 2. "Delicje" commercial: ecstatic biscuits

In order to provide a closer reading of the representation of femininity in the commercials, it is important to analyze the similarities among the advertised products. Chocolate-covered biscuits with orange jelly, forest fruit-flavored tea, and yogurt with fruit add-ins are all somewhat smooth, sweet, soft, creamy, falling into the category of non-essential edible consumables or stimulants without actual food value (this last refers to tea). Possibly quite high in caloric yield, but not rich in nutrients, far from being a truly necessary staple, they are not to be eaten in larger quantities. The choice of foods is by no means a pure coincidence; in Western culture what is appropriate for consumption is often associated with what is meant to represent the essential qualities of femininity: delicateness, fragility, yielding easily to external influence, decorative character, and so forth. The advertised products reflect the desired features of the female ideal, while the pretty characters are meant to stand for the pleasure of consumption. As Bordo argues, "most commonly, women are used to advertise individually wrapped pieces of tiny, bite-sized candies," foods whose intake is relatively easy to control (*Unbearable Weight* 129). That seems to be the strategy the viewer sees in these commercials. But why would the fact that the amount consumed may be contained matter so much? The sole fact of asking this question might be taken to stand for an aspect of the advertisements not accounted for at first glance; it is the crack in the otherwise smooth and glossy facade that one stumbles upon. This is the moment when one may start to see that these images hide a deeper, darker side.

A closer look at the dreamlike state made so prominent in the commercials reveals that it seems to be quite alike in all three examples. It is possible to distinguish four aspects of the fantasy used in each of them: it has a fleeting and uncommon character; its dimension is intimate and individual; it is captivating; and finally, the boundary between it and the real world is in some way delimited. The characters utter the following words: "it is a pleasure which absorbs more and more," (Delicje) "there is a thin boundary between my private moment and the world outside of me," (Delicje) or "I love to relish that state"

(Delicje) in the case of the biscuits.¹ They run through enchanted forests filled with fairy dust just to quench their thirst with a delicate porcelain cup of “the magic experience” (fig. 1) – that is the catchphrase used by the tea producers. They use a hotel door-knob sign with the phrase “I’m fantasizing, be right back” (Fantasia), while the narrator proclaims that if you fancy a moment of respite, you need some yogurt. This supposed serenity, however, is only a highly manipulated, positively charged representation of compulsive eating. According to Bordo, once again, “the talk of ‘obsession’ and ‘innermost cravings,’ the furtiveness, the secrecy [...], all suggest central elements of binge behavior” (*Unbearable Weight* 126). This claim sheds light on the fact that those female characters are either shown alone or, when a man appears, he is visibly intimidated by the woman’s shameful consumption process. In all three commercials, the women’s covert relation to food assumes the central place of their relation to both the outside world and other people. Only her and her food, that is enough to fill the whole universe with the thrills of this sensual passion, allowing for almost a complete reconstitution of her emotional network. Interpersonal relations are substituted with the limiting activity of eating directed inwards, inside the self.

Thus, the commercials perform a displacement, a magical transition from showing addictive, disturbed, definitely unhealthy behavior to “benign indulgence of a ‘natural’ inclination” (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* 108). The word “magical” is not used here accidentally: it refers to Judith Williamson’s concept of magic in advertising, described by her as “a mythical means of *doing things*” (140; emphasis in the original). According to Williamson, magic can be defined as a meta-system which functions as a shortcut allowing for circumventing the usual links between different spatial and temporal planes and for mixing different systems of reference. The progression from one place and time to another is thus made rather effortless, resulting in a misrepresentation of our relation to the external world (140–144). In the instance of the three commercials examined here, the fantasy of a sweet, satisfying dream conceals, or rather misrepresents, the real nature of bingeing. According to the anthropologist Carole Counihan, bingeing implies a daze-like state of ecstatic emotional release inevitably followed by numbness and strong feelings of guilt; it is a moment of self-absorption, oblivion, and withdrawal (84–85). Saying it simply, it seems that the advertisers employ the rhetoric of eating disorders, the fact that eating has been both an outlet and a getaway for women, to sell their products. What they are trying to obscure are here, therefore, not only the morose emotional and physical consequences of engaging in this disturbed pattern of behavior but also, or even most importantly, the material reality of this disease. The current diagnostic criteria for binge eating disorder (bearing in mind that binges as complex behaviors may also be associated with bulimia and anorexia) define it as “eating, in a discrete period of time (e.g., within any 2-hour period), an amount of food that is definitely larger than most people would eat during a similar period of time under similar circumstances” (Mitchell 4). In contrast, in the commercials the women are hardly shown nibbling at the advertised products and even that is depicted in a studious, ceremonial manner. This is particularly shocking if one

1 All translations by the author. The original slogans are as follows: “przyjemność, która coraz bardziej wciąga”; “pomiędzy moją prywatną chwilą a światem poza mną jest krucha granica”; “uwielbiam delektować się tym stanem.”

remembers that at first, when analyzed according to Cortese's guidelines, those commercials seemed to be free from discriminating images. Yet his analysis consists mostly of tracking down visual evidence which would identify an ad as oppressive, without considering that a lack might also be a tell-tale sign of inequality. In the case of the three commercials, it seems that what is most worrying are precisely certain absences – behaviours not shown. That points the discussion directly to the examination of restrictions on female sensual satisfaction, both when it comes to sexual and actual appetites.

Sexual metaphors are obviously dime a dozen in advertising, as references to eroticism simply help to sell products (Cortese 55). Food commercials, with all the oral allusions, are far from being an exception. In fact, they seem to be capitalizing on the link between the satisfaction of appetite and sexual gratification, just as the descriptions of binges often are orgiastic in character. The existence of this connection may be accounted for in a couple of different ways; for instance, historically, by referring to the opposition towards the New Woman. However, what I consider here is the socio-anthropological explanation that views it in terms of the dangers as well as opportunities associated with crossing body boundaries. The point here is not, however, to provide any conclusive answers to the question why women in Western culture are denied the open satisfaction of their appetites and as a result resort to bingeing behind closed doors, but to indicate that this disturbed behavior has become a recognized standard associated with femininity, and thus it has found its way to advertising, where it can generate income for producers of those sweet, caloric foods.

So far sufficient attention has not been paid to one aspect of the commercials which may offer still more insight, namely, the clothes worn by the characters and the surroundings in which they appear. In the first and second commercial (fig. 1; fig. 2), the women are wearing sheer white dresses (a knee-length, rather tightly-fitted frock in the case of biscuits; an elegant but ethereal ankle-length one in the tea ad), while in the third one the main character has put on a light blue shirt made of a soft fabric that resembles silk. The shoe factor also plays a role here: the protagonist of the first ad has nude ballerina flats, the one from the second ad has bare feet, and the legs of the woman from the third commercial are not shown at all. This type of representation, as it seems it is possible to talk about a more or less unified image in the three clips, fits the Alma-Tadema style picture of femininity known from Victorian ads which is characterized by the following features: "Breasts partially exposed, arms and feet bared, the goddess seems half-dressed in a costume that is often unashamedly diaphanous" (Loeb 35). This fairy queen is lost in a reverie, sleepy, and appealing – all that to advertise scented soap or other toiletries. Yet, according to Lorri Anne Loeb, a historian writing about the origins of the consumer society, she is not a weak-willed slave to male dominance. Far from it, her posture radiates confidence and the awareness of being in control (38). Is this possible that the three heroines also possess some form of feminine power? To answer that question, it is crucial to have a closer look at the socio-anthropological argument concerning the passing of food through bodily orifices.

Body boundaries stand for one's separateness from the world outside and the people living in it. According to Counihan, permeability of the bodily boundaries, exemplified by digestion, eating and defecating, may be viewed both as a source of threat, a danger of

contagion, and a chance for seizing power by expanding one's universe, especially in the case of women (64–75). This paradox plays a significant role in the discourse of eating disorders, where it becomes even more strongly tied with the rhetoric of mastery and control – by refusing to eat, an individual may renounce external attempts at influencing, taming, or policing him or her, but the visceral nature of the game makes the body simply grow weaker. Paradoxically, agreeing to consume, to take food into one's physical boundaries may be a declaration of courage and, at the same time, a sign of great vulnerability.

Because the matter is so fraught with ambiguities, a conclusive interpretation of the commercial is of course impossible, but it might be a good idea to have a look at one scene in the light of what has just been said. In the third advertisement, the woman eating yogurt is being approached by a man, a lover, dressed in a towel wrapped around his waist (fig. 3). The towel barely hides his private parts, threatening, or promising, to reveal more skin with every step he takes. He moves stealthily towards his oblivious prey with a red rose in his teeth, like a hyperbolized version of sexual predator, and just as he is to ambush her, he notices the yogurt. As soon as he does it, his mission is abolished. Why? Several explanations might be offered, but these two seem most important: he is either awed and subdued in the face of the powerful feminine world the woman has been able to create thanks to her conscious decision to allow the other into her, or embarrassed and appalled when confronted with her in the moment of secretly indulging in vile passion.

The former option, obviously more optimistic, alludes to the productive function of the process of eating, true especially in the case of women, which underlines the possibility of affirming one's subjectivity by using food as a stimulating building material that is reshaped in original ways. In other words, this is the view in which food, together with external influence, can be creatively reapplied in order to “reforge new meanings, new identities for ourselves” (Probyn). The latter, markedly more pessimistic, paints a picture of miserable entity almost devoid of personhood for whom consumption plays multiple roles, yet all of them destructive – a drug gradually filling the position of other emotional relations, a misconceived replacement for pleasures considered generally to be unacceptable, and a symbol of weakness in the face of negative influence.

What has been attempted here is an analysis of three food commercials which feature women shown in a dreamlike state induced by the consumption of the advertised product. The interdisciplinary perspective, incorporating sociology, anthropology, and gender studies has allowed presenting how the images, which have been shown to share a number of features inscribe themselves in the discourse of eating disorders, in particular binge eating. The three commercials appeal to the cultural ideal of femininity as one that refuses to gain sensual satisfaction in public and possesses almost no appetite, but simultaneously



Figure 3. “Fantasia” commercial: sexual predator on his way to get the victim

each one of them alludes also to the concept of hidden female voraciousness. On the one hand, the advertisements draw attention to the necessity of self-control and self-imposed regulations; on the other hand, they point to the mind-altering effects of both indulgence in the advertised products and behaviors symptomatic for the aforementioned disorder. When regarded in this way, they appear as outwardly polished, smooth-tongued misrepresentations of the life-threatening disease, which is equaled to some orgiastic pleasure. On the other hand, the possibility of reading the commercials with a more empowering twist has been hinted at, suggesting that the incorporation of food witnessed in the commercials might be viewed as an affirming act of opening oneself to the world. These deep-rooted ambiguities unearthed in the analysis can serve as an argument for a more critical reading of commercial culture and for increased media literacy.

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Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest analiza reklam telewizyjnych pod kątem występującego w nich przedstawienia kobiety wpadającej w stan marzenia sennego pod wpływem spożycia reklamowanego produktu i zaproponowanie nowego sposobu ich czytania w oparciu o współczesne teorie reklamy oraz prace Susan Bordo dotyczące ideologii głodu w kulturze popularnej. Dzięki zastosowanej metodologii autorka pokazuje, iż pomimo

powierzchnego odczucia wyzwolenia, które mogą one wywoływać, te przedstawienia wskazują na istnienie głęboko zakorzenionych restrykcji dotyczących satysfakcji cielesnej u kobiet. Związek łączący kobiety i jedzenie ma dużą wartość emocjonalną, która zmusza do negocjowania delikatnej równowagi pomiędzy przerażającą żarłocznością a bezcielesną transcendencją. Wreszcie, przeprowadzona analiza ukazuje, że reklamy te mocno podkreślają z jednej strony kwestie samokontroli i samoograniczania się, a z drugiej kładą nacisk na występujące zakłócenia percepcji siebie i otoczenia, co stanowi cechy charakterystyczne dyskursu zaburzeń odżywiania.