Reading South Korean Advertising as Popular Culture

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Tainted with inherent commercial instrumentality, advertising is an often neglected element of popular culture. Yet advertising is consumed as another popular culture product: Advertising slogans find their way into public discourse, unusual advertising is discussed with acquaintances and blogged about, advertising images animate fantasies and ambitions, whereas some ads address social issues, resonating far beyond advertising's commercial purpose. In South Korea, for example, certain advertising campaigns have become widely celebrated for their inspiring, humanistic messages. Witness the commonly praised 1984 “Lunch box” (tosisar) ad for Sangyong Group, which told a sentimental story about a kind teacher giving away his lunch to his impoverished students, or the 1992 “Filial piety” (hyo) campaign by Kyongdong Boiler, which encouraged urban dwellers to take better care of their elderly parents in the countryside.

My paper engages advertising as popular culture and reads famed campaigns of South Korean advertising as simultaneously reflecting and shaping social and cultural trends. My focus is on the post-democratization period, when South Korean advertising boomed, following the rapid growth in the number of mass media outlets and relaxation of censorship rules. I draw on the cultural studies to highlight how the field of popular culture is contradictory, rife with both oppressive elements and openings for resistance. After demonstrating the popular culture uses of advertising with a vignette from a recent advertising campaign and after making a theoretical argument that advertising is another site in the struggles for cultural power and domination, I take the reader through a number of advertising campaigns which have marked important developments in popular culture and everyday life in South Korea.

First, I consider humorous slapstick ads, which were prevalent when advertising for mass-produced consumer goods took hold in the 1970s and which remained popular into the present day; I read their popularity as a challenge to the official ethos of hard work and frugality. Further, I discuss the perennial celebration of so-called humanistic advertising—advertising with moralistic messages, which might seem more appropriate for a public service announcement. I relate the sentimentality of those ads to the melodramatic sensibility of other South Korean popular culture products, regarding it as a spontaneous response to capitalism-driven changes in the habitual ways of life and values. Next, I consider how the use of sexuality in advertising is no longer a scandal but a cliché, as South Korean advertising agencies have incessantly pushed the boundaries of the socially acceptable in an attempt to catch up with allegedly all-permissive Western advertising. Further, I discuss a recently increasing appreciation for dreamy, image-heavy ads, which bypass discursive means of persuasion and often violate advertising genre conventions, mimicking television dramas or music videos; I interpret this trend as marking South Korea’s transition into an image-dominated regime, characteristic of late capitalism.

In conclusion, I discuss the place of advertising in South Korean society, emphasizing how advertising often ends up in the centre of social controversies and problematizing the commonsensical idea that advertising as a social institution performs the identical role in different societies.

Olga Fedorenko is a PhD candidate at East Asian Studies Department of the University of Toronto. Her research deals with discourses and practices of advertising in contemporary South Korea and is based on a 14-month fieldwork in Seoul, which included an internship at a major advertising agency and observation at an advertising review board. She also holds an MA in East Asian
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