

## Lessons from the Spot: Advertising in Poland Democratic Culture in the Making?

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The last decade rightly bears the name of a decade of change. Major systemic and political changes that took place in Poland and other countries of the Eastern block initiated a chain reaction and brought about the reshaping of almost all domains of life. The road to democracy and a free market economy was synonymous with increased activity and entrepreneurship, and it created opportunity—mostly for young people—who quickly discovered the ways of participation in creating the new environment. As in the case of any major shifts and turns, the need for new narratives became apparent. Society needed new stories to explain and justify its actions as well as new heroes and icons with which to identify and to emulate. Previously used and greatly abused words needed to be redefined and given fresh meaning in order to motivate people. In addition, people had to start believing again in what they were told, without diversionary and backward readings to which they had been accustomed for so long. They did not have to wait long.

The new language came pretty quickly, loudly, and fully formed to accompany the birth and growth of the new reality. Interestingly enough, the roles have switched. Party propaganda—political language that used to dominate and spill over to the domains of economy and culture and explain them in ideological terms—got discredited, and a new voice audible after the collapse of communism had its origin in the reshaping of economy. New structures demanded their own vehicle—market communication. The need for promotion and publicity brought about a new type of speech with its new rhetoric. It entered the stage in a very brave and flamboyant manner and drew special attention with catchy slogans to attract people to buy new, previously unavailable products. Simultaneously, it symbolized on the surface the dawn of the new era in almost all spheres of life: an openness to the new models and values of culture and thought, the creation of new lifestyles, and the working out of new power relations both within the market and within society at large. The language of advertising, public relations, and promotion revealed how deeply free market practices influence the world of culture and politics, and how much these two domains refer to market techniques to increase the efficiency of their activities.

The main speakers of the new language were foreign corporate representatives willing to invest in Poland. This appeared to be an extremely attractive and profit-promising market that created opportunities for fostering companies' growth and boosting their sales on a scale unattainable in steady, already saturated markets of Western Europe or the United States. Foreign

interest in Poland has had one more particular source: apart from being a comparatively stable and homogenous market, it is the easternmost country bordering on the former Soviet Union, which apparently gives it crucial importance for reaching out safely to the markets of the New Independent States.

Foreign companies who came to Poland brought with them their entire infrastructure, a microcosm that would ensure fast and efficient establishment and operation in a new, unfamiliar market. One of the most important imports was the arrival of large international advertising agencies-principal word crafters in free-market societies. It seems very interesting to realize that their arrival has not been caused primarily by the desire to create the advertising industry in Poland, but has rather been a secondary effect of following clients who have begun to introduce their products here. <sup>1</sup>Foreign companies felt much more secure to bring to a totally strange environment specialists with whom they have often worked for a long time and with whom cooperation proved successful at home and in other foreign countries. Consequently, within a very short period of time, we could observe the emergence of a new branch of business-that of the advertising agency-that had thus far been non-existent in the market. An extremely dynamic process of organization, structural formation, and internal tensions between foreign and Polish participants made Poland the most vivid, energetic, most interesting, and fastest growing<sup>2</sup> promotional market in this part of the world. Having been built from scratch, the need for expertise was evident in the newly imported industry. Thus, the doors were wide open for foreign, mainly American, specialists who could boast of a nearly century-long advertising and promotional tradition. These specialists knew the rules and strategies and were acquainted with the manner of dealing with clients, but did not have much knowledge about the conditions, culture, and people of the country in which they were coming to work. In most cases, they did not speak the language in which they were supposed to advertise. Thus, they needed natives to guide them along the unfamiliar terrain. The mutual dependence of these two groups led to the creation of very particular, internally mobile

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<sup>1</sup> e.g. "Leo Burnett International opened its offices in Eastern Europe when Philip Morris and Procter & Gamble, Leo's two major clients, moved aggressively into Eastern Europe." from Kwangmi Ko Kim. 1995. "Spreading the Net: The Consolidation Process of Large Transnational Advertising Agencies in the 1980s and early 1990s." *International Journal of Advertising. The Quarterly Review of Marketing Communication* 14/3, P.197. op. cit., Similarly BBDO followed PepsiCo, or Scholz & Friends German tobacco company Reemst.

<sup>2</sup> Spending on advertising in Poland in 1994 amounted to \$405 mln, and in 1995, ~\$42 mln. The total increase was 34%. Despite earlier predictions the total spending in the year 1996 revealed further growth reaching 40%, in comparison with the year 1994. For the point of reference, 2% increase in spending on advertising in western markets is considered a very good rate. (Based upon the article "12 miesiacy z Zycia agencji, Medta Polska, styczen 1996, p.1 b.)

structures that would foster the dynamic growth of the entire field over the next couple of years. The trump card of foreigners was their expertise in the field of strategic planning, the skill most highly valued by clients; additionally, the clientele consisted mostly of huge western corporations ~ deriving from the same business tradition as the people serving their accounts. In the era of globalization, Poland was regarded as the extension of the domestic market and not a separate, new, or different entity that should be addressed in a separate, local way. All in all, Poles had to accommodate almost a century of advertising within a couple of years. They were not allowed their own method of trial and error, of gradual adjustment and accommodation to the new situation. Highly developed strategies and practices of promotion and advertising got imposed immediately, without training people to read and rightly perceive them and also without any time for monitoring structures to develop. What resulted is a situation in which all pervasive advertising is presented not only as beneficial but even indispensable. Any disagreement or criticism is attributed to local backwardness and should evoke the feeling of guilt if we want to join any structures of the modern, developed world, despite the fact that what we observe may be in complete conflict with trends in advertising in the "developed" world. The ferocity of advertising agencies, who secure their interests, associations, and corporations in this manner, stems from a belief that it is easier to safeguard for oneself as large a territory as possible while it is rough and undefended, than to ask for concessions in a strictly regulated terrain. Thus, it is not surprising that Poland is the country of a very vivid activity of The International Advertising Association (IAA), the organization protecting the interests and freedoms of advertisers, agencies and media. The operational codes of the Polish branch of this body are the Code of Advertising<sup>3</sup> and the Code of Ethics in Political Advertising, which are normative, voluntary agreements stating the main guidelines to be obeyed in the domain of advertising. What is striking about these documents, however, is the level of generality both in terms of language and issues addressed, which may leave great doubts, loopholes, and space for arbitrary interpretation. The codes use a number of ambiguous terms that are left undefined, and seem to focus much more on benefits and interests of producers than the well-being of consumers. The entire document, which aspires to be the main regulatory reference for the industry, consists roughly of three pages. This, even though not an argument in itself, seems strange as compared, for example, with the similar British document. Can this code, therefore, cover all the issues that need attention and create the conditions for fair and healthy competition and market practices? Or is it again the example of pushing away any possible threats for limitations and creating the opportunities for the strongest players in the market-usually foreign ones-

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<sup>3</sup> "Kodeks Postępowania w Dziedzinie Reklamy," Międzynarodowe Stowarzyszenie Reklamy w Polsce. Warszawa, dnia 01.02.1996,

to carry out activities much more unrestricted, expansive, and aggressive than those that their original countries allow? Interestingly enough, the commentaries on the activities of IAA Poland, coming from American observers, seem not to be that favorable. One of these, which appeared in the New York daily, *Newsday*, stated: "After decades of living under Soviet System, Poles now yearn for the imperfect free market of Western Europe. But IAA members, like many western advisers, want to sell Eastern Europe an ideological model-for self-regulation of the advertising industry, in this case-that is more absolute than any found in a western industrialized country,"<sup>4</sup> and it advises westerners to try it out at home first. Norman Vale, director general of the IAA, is rather open about the intentions of the organization. As early as in 1992, during the symposium about advertising organized in Warsaw, he warned consumers (!) against the government agencies and organized advocate groups that may deprive them of their freedom of choice and individual decision-making. To the question posed by one of the journalists present at the symposium regarding "freedom from advertising" Vale responded: "if you want a career in journalism, you need advertising." He added that if the young man was not convinced he should consider a career in "cleaning carpets or sweeping streets"<sup>5</sup> and added further: "but you don't want to have communism in this country again."<sup>6</sup> Nobody could deny. Anthony McAdam's speech from the IAA website states, "Without advertising a free and diverse media environment is inconceivable and an open society impossible. The IAA has been the pre-eminent proactive champion of advertising contribution to liberal democracy and I commend it sincerely."<sup>7</sup> Based upon this statement, we may be close to believing that something really crucial is at stake and that the advertising industry is a great benefactor guarding all we managed to achieve in a hard and long struggle. If advertising is proportional to democracy, it follows that a look at the vibrant and still-developing and expanding advertising market in Poland should give us a feeling of pride and safety about the road of reforms. But is that really so? Shouldn't we rather say that newly creating political, economic, and social structures are built under a strong pressure from advertisers and an implicit threat of the lesser evil dictated by the parties that are motivated mainly by promises of material profits from newly emerging markets? It seems understandable that the industry is going to safeguard its interests through the procedures of apparent self-regulations. However, it is hard to believe that such regulations coincide with those of consumers. There is a contradiction between the IAA statement that advertising is at the service

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<sup>4</sup> McKehey, Tara. "Madison Avenue Campaigns There for a Brave New World." *Newsday*, Nassau and Suffolk Edition, May 31, 1992. Lexis-Nexis

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

<sup>7</sup> McAdam, Anthony. "Threats to Commercial Freedoms: A Few Politically Incorrect Observations." Speech delivered to the IAA Melbourne Chapter's Forum "Marketing Freedom Under Threat." 15 August 1995. Melbourne, Australia, <http://www.iaaglobal.org/news/resourcebank/resmaterial/online/docs/fault.html>.

of a consumer while simultaneously s/he is deprived of any right to define and defend his or her interests through groups and associations. Keeping in mind the IAA's statement that organized advocate groups are a danger that by all means should be avoided, it seems that in the view of the association, a consumer should be protected mainly from oneself. In this light, the slogan

I from the campaign for advertising: "Advertising-your right to choose" has only one interpretation: "your right to choose advertising." Ironically, however, definition of choice used to imply inherently more than one option. This definition seems to have changed in the semantics of the new language.

Additionally, a similar urge and necessity to embrace a new reality, which we could observe at the level of structures and practices, is also visible at the level of advertising pictures and messages present in the Polish media. The original hunger for the "West" as an ideal in any form, which got manifested in a series of campaigns following the birth of the advertising industry in Poland and the first years of change, was satiated and replaced with a slightly different reasoning. It is no longer the argumentation that anything western is better but that if we want to join the European structures we have to get used to and embrace the practices of the democratic world,

including freedom of speech, and get rid of stereotypes, bigotry and pretended purity. We seem to be advised to abandon local thinking and attachment to purely regional symbols and icons. While looking at the democratic language of advertising, we are unfortunately also advised to do away with good taste. Freedom and emancipation means here debasing any behavior to the level of instincts and vulgar connotations and approving open ridicule of the existing advertising legislature. Discussing these issues, we should refer to the most obvious and controversial product categories: namely, alcohol and tobacco. The regulation of alcohol advertising (law on education and sobriety from 1982) bans any promotion of drinks that contain more than 1.5% of ethyl alcohol in the entire territory of Poland. Interestingly enough, the law was introduced during communist times and was only updated with the new finely specified amounts in December 1996. The problem of alcohol advertising regulation is particularly difficult to address, since breweries are a huge source of revenue for advertisers. Consequently, it appears obvious that agencies would look for any loopholes in the law to advertise their products legally. What we can observe in Poland is a huge proliferation of campaigns devoted to alcohol-free beers or wines that are only "plugs" for regular alcoholic drinks. Both parties-the senders and the receivers of these ads, perfectly know that what is advertised is regular beer, in most cases a very strong one predominant in the market (5-8% of alcohol). These commercials and ads are just a blatant, open, and unopposed ridicule of the legal restrictions (Plate I). It should also be made clear that advertised non-alcoholic versions are hardly available on sale. Sometimes even the ads carry the inscription that non-alcoholic versions of the drink are available only in breweries. Another, less straightforward, cryptic form is a promotion of the company name rather than its products or referring to the places

instantaneously associated with most famous Polish breweries.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the entire sphere of sponsorship of sport teams and recreational events seems to create the opportunity for promotion without breaking the law.

The second group of products is tobacco, which cannot be advertised in electronic media. The issue is particularly pressing due to the alarming medical data showing that the rate of deaths due to the tobacco-related diseases in Poland is the highest in Europe. If we consider, however, that Poland is the "market for 90 billion cigarettes a year (plus provides) and easy access to the region's largest market"<sup>9</sup> (the former Soviet Union) we can clearly see that the interests of advertisers<sup>10</sup> and those of crusaders to ban this product advertising do not coincide. It is totally understandable that advertisers want to secure for themselves the largest possible range of freedoms, and that it is easier done at the moment of entering the market when the monitoring public or consumer structures have not yet been developed. What we observe, however, is pretty blatant ignorance of good manners and use of the language of ridicule as tools of their tactics. "When R.J. Reynolds opened its Polish factory, officials said it was doing Poles a favor by offerin~ them healthier cigarettes than the coarse, unfiltered domestic [brands]."<sup>11</sup> Another, even more gross example, is brought about by doctor Witold Zatonsky, one of the main crusaders against tobacco advertising. He "accuses the Western cigarette manufacturers of playing dirty. R.J. Reynolds chose November 17, 1993-a 'stop smoking' day in Poland ( ... ) to hold a highly publicized national drawing for Camel smokers to win a car, a Harley Davidson, or a trip to Egypt for two." Zatonsky continued: "They are not accepting good European manners ( ... ). They had to choose this day to play against the health of Poland."<sup>12</sup>



Plate I "Scandalously Tasty" Goof taste is what matters.

<sup>8</sup> e.g. "Ice-cream? Only from Lezajsk," "Mariola 0 kocim spojrzaniu" (Mariola with cat's e.yes). Both Lezajsk and Okocim are the sites known primarily for their brewenes. Prewecka, Karolina. "A Frothy Argument." The Warsaw Voice, No.33, August 13, 1995.

<sup>9</sup> McKinsy, Kitty. "Clearing the Smoke in Poland." The Ottawa Citizen. Nov. 16, 1994. Lexis-Nexis.

<sup>10</sup> Three biggest advertisers: Philip Morris (USA), R.I. Reynolds (USA), BAT Industries (GB).

<sup>11</sup> McKinsey, op.cit.

<sup>12</sup> ibid



Plate II The lure of the West.

The knowledge of such incidents naturally raises the issue of whether advertisers opt for responsibility and business ethics as opposed to crude, exclusively profit-driven market practices. This seems to be a very important issue in a country that is just learning the mechanisms of the new system in the trial-and-error manner~ the practices cast substantial doubts that those who

come in the name of teaching us democracy play along with its rules themselves. What is probably the greatest disappointment in the school of democracy is that the message sent by the majority of the media is one of complete freedom and relaxation, totally undemanding, and without a sign of responsibility. This disregards the observation that "for a transitional society to make the crossing to a secure democracy, civic practices would have to be reinvented and a population re-educated. Moderation, patience, and the avoidance of undue cynicism would be necessary aspects of the political and cultural climate."<sup>13</sup> There can be no doubts that what we face in advertising has nothing to do with re-education. Rather, the practice is the identification of the lowest common denominator and the crafting of messages around it. A vast number of ads refers to crude and boorish sexual connotations or formulates messages along the line of basic instincts. This becomes more complicated and dangerous in the case of (non-alcoholic) alcohol ads when we consider the rate of violence (including domestic violence), especially toward women. Poland, however, seems not to be isolated in its experience. Czechs, for example, similarly complain about the "shockography" race in their advertising.<sup>14</sup> And even though consumers had to accept the situation that advertising in the 1990s does not fulfill the informative function about the products available in the market, they nevertheless rebel against "being treated as hamburgers themselves."<sup>15</sup> In this critical look at advertising, we cannot omit the credit that the industry deserves for some positive influences as well. It appears that massive taboo-breaking, which is observable almost as a leading tactic in advertising, spread into other domains of life, initiating positive social phenomena. In a

<sup>13</sup> Ervin Duggan, FCC Commissioner, quoted after Monroe E. Price, *op.cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>14</sup> Aida Media. *Teoria i Praktyka Reklamy*. Nr 12(43) 1997, str. 3.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

post-communist, Catholic and traditional-values-oriented country, it was hard for the society to admit the presence of drug addiction, domestic violence, poverty, or such problems as post-partum depression. These problems were all too shameful to be admitted in public, and they were either ignored as spoiling the more positive statistics about the country's situation, or considered to be personal sins about which to feel guilty. All of a sudden, these issues came out of the closet and acquired a full-fledged voice from billboards located throughout the country. The need was recognized and the problem identified with the intention to help. Social advertising, which emerged as a by-product of commercial messages, provided practical tools to those helpless and lost, and taught that they should cope with their problems themselves. Public service announcements redefined the domains of public and private in terms of human rights and legitimacy of human needs; this definitely is a very positive and democratizing element brought about by the spots (Plate IV). And last but not least, another beneficial effect of advertising is the initiation of the public debate. It is still hard to evaluate whether this opportunity will be seized or will it rather get derailed and infantilized and therefore concentrate on purely commercial, insubstantial, comparative spots. However, what we can observe looks promising in terms of provoking thinking and questioning of the surrounding reality. We can only wish to see more of it both in terms of the messages themselves and in terms of aesthetics.

Summing up the above discussion briefly, one must admit that undeniably the advent of advertising brought major reshaping in many domains of life in post-communist Poland. It was an abrupt, fully developed import, demanding quick adjustments and finding one's ground in the new reality. The industry arrived vividly proclaiming the slogans of democracy and the free market economy, yet not necessarily playing the rules of fair game. There is a feeling that what is at stake is not a democracy but the particular Eastern European model prepared by the developed, globalized corporate world hungry for new, unrestricted and unregulated fields of operation. The problem emerged pretty soon that all noble messages of plurality, democracy, freedoms, individuality, and egalitarianism penetrating Polish society come through the channels that inherently have nothing to do with these values. The divergence between the message and the sender has become visible, and it weakened the value of the former.

Corporate structures, especially those with global appetites, seem closer to authoritarianism than to democracy. Moreover, "product choices are tiny symbols of real political, social, and psychological freedoms—none of which are inherently in advertising's interest. Advertising needs only that its right to advertise remain unimpeded, not that it operate within a democratic society. Free-market economies, where advertising thrives, are not necessarily democratic; they can be totalitarian, as in Indonesia, Nigeria, or Singapore."<sup>16</sup> In this context, responding to Norman Vale's threat, advertising is not necessarily an alternative to a totalitarian society. The problem of the general

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<sup>16</sup> Savan, Leslie. "Advertising Advertising - In a Year-end Blitz, the ad Industry Markets Itself." *The Village Voice*. December 24, 1996, p.28. Lexis-Nexis.



public is that they do not have any check on what they are being told by the "experts" and are therefore in a position to take too much for granted. Enchantment with and aspiration to the west makes consumers often believe that this is how things are in the ideal America, while what they are told remains only in the sphere of wishful thinking of message senders, corporations, or advertising associations. The positive aspect of advertising lies in the fact that in the post-communist rearrangements it became one more very active and loud voice adding to the specter of debate, which is valuable itself in a developing democratic society. It is good that an advertisement stirs emotions and opinions, has foes and allies, and provokes and offends sometimes, because in this way people may come to define what they stand for and believe in. Hopefully, in contradiction to the threats of the IAA, this feeling of surprise, anger, or loss will result in a more organized ways of advocacy, education, and consumer protection, and this will definitely be a democratizing element of the Polish landscape.

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