TRIANGULAR STRUCTURES OF DESIRE IN ADVERTISING

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A form of advertisement that we often meet consists of an image of a product (for example, a bottle of perfume), an image of a model (for example, a beautiful woman), and a text linking the model (more precisely, the self-projection of the model, her well-being, beauty, and so forth) to the product ("A fragrance to match your mood today", runs a typical text).

The aim of advertisements like these is to create a link - the link of pur-chase - between the product advertised and the consumer of the advertisement. The need for a third element in the transaction - the model - is therefore by no means obvious. Yet advertising practice seems to have shown that at least in a certain range of cases the form of advertisement in which the image of the product is _mediated_ to the consumer by an image of an idealized consumer, the model, "works" better than the unmediated form in which only the image of the product is presented. (In both cases, of course, the text plays its own mediating role.)

One might be tempted to think that in the mediated form the "real" transaction is the one effected between the product and the consumer, that the model is inessential and can be discarded as one discards marginal rough-work once the answer to a problem in arithmetic has been obtained. What I shall be arguing, however, is that the inherent structure of advertisements with models is truly triangular (in other words, that there is no way of reducing the structure from a triad to a dyad without falsifying it), and that the particular frame-work developed by the critic Rene Girard for talking about _mediated desire_ in the novel can be applied to the reading of advertisements with valuable re-sults.

The field of discussion in this paper is therefore the limited one of advert-isements in which the model is overtly present to mediate the product to the consumer. However, in section 1V, I suggest that even when the model is absent it is a mistake to think of the relation between consumer and product as dyadic as long as the camera mediates between the two as a non-neutral desiring eye. The argument is carried on from inside the phenomenological framework in which Girard works. Where this results in blindness to the virtues of positivist research into the psychological dynamics of advertising, I can only accept the consequences.

Orthodox explanations of the psychology of the consumer's response to advert-isements fall into two broad classes. One rests on the mechanism of identi-fication: the consumer is persuaded to identify with the idealized consumer portrayed by the model, and thus to want, use, buy what the model seems to want, use, buy. The other rests on the process of association: the advert-ising image is such that the product gathers around itself the associations of the glamorous, the desirable, the superior, etc. (it is characteristic of these associations to be ineffable), so that the consumer is brought to yearn to possess the product in order to capture the associations and embody them in himself.

Both these accounts aspire to explanatory power over more or less the entire range of advertising. Since they are capable of supplementing each other, they can be entertained at the same time, and commonly are by people in the advertising industry. To the limited extent that it carries on an inquiry into its own foundations (as distinct from carrying out market research), the industry does so within the identification and association models. For

anyone intending to develop a critique of advertising as part of the capitalist order, this fact ought to give pause for thought: if the industry itself operates comfortably with these explanatory models, it is unlikely that any critique which also works within them could develop any power.

It is not my intention to discuss theories of identification and association any further, or to try to argue that they are weak in comparison with the theory I will be adumbrating. How one chooses among competing psychological theories depends heavily on what one admits as valid evidence. The positivist basis of the association theory, in particular, means that only quantifiable behaviour is admitted as evidence, while a phenomenological account will resist a demand for data divorced from the subject's experience. Attempts to compare rival accounts while ignoring their philosophical foundations must therefore be idle. Avoiding comparisons, I will simply sketch an account of the subject's response to the advertisement which is demonstrably in conflict with both accounts I have mentioned.

The account I give is based on the analysis of forms of <u>triangular desire</u> developed by Girard in <u>Mensonge romantique et verite romanesque</u> (1961), translated as <u>Deceit, Desire and the Novel</u>. In his later work (for example, <u>Violence and the Sacred</u>) Girard extends his insights into the functioning of mediators in human desire and builds a theory of civilization based on processes of rivalry, reciprocal violence, and scapegoating. However, I will not employ a more developed form of the theory than that given in <u>Deceit, Desire and the Novel</u>.

Let us take two examples of advertisements with overt mediators and see how they are treated in a Girardian reading.

The first advertisement I have already referred to. The image of a beautiful woman gazes out of the page at the beholder. In her proximity, but on another plane, is the image of a bottle of perfume X. The text links a "you" who is both model and beholder with the perfume (in other cases the image of the bottle is simply allowed to attach itself metonymically to the beauty of the model). The promise of the advertisement is that "you" who use perfume X are beautiful.

In an identification theory, one buys perfume X because one identifies with (more precisely, wishes to identify with) the beautiful woman. In an association theory one buys it because one associates it, by way of a metonymic slide, with beautiful women, and therefore hopes that beauty will associate itself with all the perfume's users. In a Girardian reading, one desires perfume X because one has reached a stage of yielding the choice of one's desires to models like this one: one desires what one believes she desires, perfume X.

The second example is slightly more complex. A beautiful woman is portrayed, and in her proximity a bottle of perfume X. Hovering about her in a state of masterly fascination is a desirable man. Again, in a Girardian reading, because one has yielded the choice of one's desires to models, one desires this model's desires· not only the man (who in turn validates one's choice of her as model by desiring her), but perfume X.

I am not concerned to argue that either of these scenarios can only be read in a Girardian way. (For one thing, in the second scenario the Girardian reading seems to ignore the logic, "If you use perfume X, desirable men will desire you", which an identification theory neatly caters for. On the other hand, if this particualr logic were to be impeccable, then the model should not be beautiful but merely decently attractive like the models in a soap-

powder advertisements.) All I have done thus far is to show what a struct-
ure of triangulated desire might look like. Further, a word of elaboration
is needed on desire. The gaze of the model is rarely presented fixed on the
object of consumption, avid and excited. Instead she looks out of the page,
an image of desire alive but appeased. She has used (absorbed, consumed)
the perfume, it has made her what she is (happy, beautiful ... - as soon as
we try to describe the mood of the model we characteristically find ourselves
calling forth her whole being), satisfied now but by nature (like the con-
sumer) insatiable.

From these examples it is clear that triangular desire is in essence vicarious.
In literature, Emma Bovary and Don Quixote are the major exemplars of vicar-
ious desiring. Not only do they imitate the outward behaviour of models they
find in books, but they freely allow their desires to be defined for them by
these models. Thus in their cases there is not simply the desiring subject
and the desired object, but also the characteristic third point of the tri-
angle, the model through whom desires are mediated. Girard's general thesis
is that Flaubert and Cervantes, as well as the authors of certain other
romanesque (as opposed to romantique) novels, "apprehend intuitively and
concretely, through the medium of their art, if not formally, the system (of
triangular desire) in which they were first imprisoned together with their
comtemporaries" (p.3). The aims of romanesque art are thus critical and
liberatory.

The greater part of Girard's study is taken up with the analysis of more com-
plex forms of mediated desire than Emma Bovary's or Don Quixote's forms in
which the mediator is not a remote or fictional character but someone whose
sphere of possible action impinges on the subject's and who is therefore in
some degree a rival as well as a model (from this point Girard's thought on
mimetic rivalry in Violence and the Sacred develops naturally). While
real-world rivalry between the consumer and the model in the advertisement
is clearly impossible, a phantasmal rivalry - in which the consumer must al-
ways lose - is not. Thus Girard's analysis of the consequences of this variety
of mediation is also relevant to my purpose.

Girard writes in a philosophical tradition stretching from Hegel to Sartre
which attaches crucial importance to the ability of the subject to choose
his own desires. In fact, in Hegel the stage of self-consciousness does not
arrive, the "I" does not come into being, until the subject becomes aware of
itself as the locus of a lack, a desire. Thus the being of the "I" is wholly
implicated in its desires; and for the "I" to yield its autonomy as a desir-
ing subject is to yield its being. This yielding is what Girard calls an
"ontological sickness" (1961, p.96): in turning his desire toward the desir-
ing mediator, the subject yields his ontological autonomy:

> The subject is unable to desire on his own; he has no confidence
> whatever in a choice that would be solely his own. The rival
> (and model) is needed because his desire alone can confirm ...
> value (1978, p.66).

> The object is only a means of reaching the mediator. The
> desire is aimed at the mediator's being ... The desiring subject
> wants to become his mediator; he wants to steal from the
> mediator (for example) his very being of 'perfect knight' or
> 'irresistible seducer' (1961, pp.53-4).

The question arises at once, of course: Why is the self so mistrusted that
that it cannot desire its own desires? Girard does not give a single answer
to this question, but the argument that appears scattered over his discussion

of the romanesque novelists is an essently historical one. Triangular
desire makes its first appearance and becomes a target of analysis in Don
Quixote , which marks the beginning of the modern age as well as the beginning
of the romanesque tradition of critical fictions. It is thus a specifically
modern phenomenon. It arises as a consequence of post-religious humanism
and multiplies as social differences are levelled. In a world in which "the
most important relationships are not between social superiors and inferiors
but between peers, even though these are rarely experienced as relationships
of 'equality'," the presence of the "metaphysical rival" (i.e. the phantasmic
model of desiring) becomes "more and more obsessive" (1978, p.80).

In Girard's reading it is Dostoevsky who emerges as the subtlest analyst of
structures of mediated desire. Dostoevsky's answer to the question of why
the self can no longer desire its own desires is that the promise that comes
with the tidings that God is dead, that Man has taken his place, is not ful-
filled in experience.

> Each individual discovers in the solitude of his consciousness
> that the promise is false but no one is able to universalize
> his experience. The promise remains true for Others ... Every-
> one thinks that he alone is condemned to hell, and that is what
> makes it hell (Girard, 1961, p.57).

It follows that networks of mediated desire will be most all-inclusive in
modern materialist individualist societies where a public ideology of equal
opportunity for all reigns and failure is therefore experienced by the in-
dividual as unredeemable private ontic shame. In this respect Girard sets
himself in the tradition of conservative European critics of American dem-
ocracy of which Tocqueville is the main representative:

> Not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but
> it hides his descendants and separates his contemporaries from
> him; it throws him back forever upon himself alone, and threatens
> in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his
> own heart (Tocqueville, 1840, p.194).

Though Girard's enterprise is to describe part of the social psychology of
the modern world, his method of procedure is not one familiar to the empiri-
cist social scientist. Girard himself is clear on this point:

> I believe there exists in certain (literary) works a knowledge
> of desirous relationships superior to any proposed (elsewhere).
> It is not at all a matter of challenging science, but of searching
> for it wherever it might be found and in no matter how unusual
> a place (1978, p.49).

Similarly it is not farfetched, once we concede that "desirous relationships'
are quintessentially involved in advertising, to allow the possibility that
insights into how desire works may as well be found in novelists and their
interpreters as in the quantifiable behaviour of consumers.

The points of immediate relevance of Girard's theory to the analysis of ad-
vertising can thus be summarized as follows:

1) Triangular structures of desire have their origin in a yearning for trans
   cendence unsatisfied in the modern world.

2) The nature of triangular desire is that the subject yields the choice of
   his desires to the model.

3) Its characteristic concomitant emotions are self-mistrust, envy, jealousy, resentment.

Let us now turn to the place of the model in advertising. Nominally the model plays a mediatory role between consumer and product. She (it is easier to use the feminine pronoun here) is supposed to effect the link between desiring subject and desired object, and in the process to disappear. In fact, in the discourse of economics the model is not spoken of: all that is treated is the subject-object relation. In the advertising image itself the model is not captioned, named. She has been selected from among aspirant models for qualities which include lack of identifiable individuality: her physical features must be so plastic under the hands of the artist who makes her up for the photographic session that she is not identified from one assignment to the next, is not associated with any one product. In other words, she is a kind of desiring cipher, a nothing whose desires are infinitely mobile, who desires not because this particualr object makes her desire (for in that case it would leave its particular trace on her) but simply because it is her essence to desire.

The model here has to be carefully distinguished from the star, the celebrity (sometimes from the field of modelling itself!) whose very identifiability is used to sell products. The treatment given the star is just the opposite of what I describe above: her uniqueness is stressed, and, unlike the model, she is allowed to become identified with one or two specific products. The star in fact provides a simpler case of the mediation of desire and the yielding up of being than the model does, a case of what Girard calls "eternal mediation", that which Amadis of Gaul provides for Don Quixote. In the heyday of Hollywood, people were invited to "live like the stars" by learning to desire what the stars desired, i.e. what the stars lent their images to.

The faces that the model wears - since she herself is faceless - are prescribed by fashion. The people who put on these faces for her are not their authors: authorship, they aver, lies with Fashion itself, whose originator no one claims to be. If one follows the lines back as far as those called "fashion-setters", one hears that they are only "responding to the times". "X is in, Y is out", they say, in an utterance at the same time declarative and hortative and optative. The images of an unpredictably shifting repertoire of which no one knows the source. In a characteristically mystifying gesture, the mirror is always turned back on the subject. "This is the image of your model", says the voice of Fashion, "because this is how you desire to look." The mystification consists again in denying the existence of the model, affirming her nullity, asserting that she is nothing but an image of the desire of the subject, of the desiring subject.

Caught in such a gallery of mirrors, the subject (the consumer) cannot fail to fail in his/her enterprise of apprehending the being of so phantom a model. He/she experiences the bewildering envy that Girard (following Stendhal, Nietzsche and Scheler) describes, but in a modality peculiar to consumer society: because the mystification is precisely that the model/rival is invisible, null, does not exist, envy has the feel of being without object or origin: not only is it impotent, it does not know its own name. It occurs no more precisely than a malaise, a discontent, a sense of inner emptiness. The most penetrating analysis of life lived in this malaise, and through the sham values that envy creates in order to hide itself, remains that of Max Scheler (1915, pp.60-77).

It is not my aim to assign responsibilities, to pursue the project of blaming the prevalence of floating envy in the advertising and fashion industry on the late capitalist order or the death of God, if only because Girard's own analysis brings the activity of blaming into question. Nevertheless, it can barely

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escape our attention that it is to someone's material benefit that people should have models of how to desire, that these models should appear to be without authorship, and that the feelings aroused in their beholders should include an envy and sense of worthlessness that cannot be assuaged, no matter how much the beholder buys, because the desires he is trying to satisfy are transcendent. Nor can it escape the historical observer's attention that, whereas in the nineteenth century alcohol was used as a means to lure and lock the colonized into a money economy, that function is nowadays effected in the Third World via the propagation of images, models of desiring; and therefore that the phrase the creation of dependency may as appropriately be used of images as of substances.

I have hitherto discussed only one genre of advertisement: that in which the image of the model is overtly present. The question now arises: is this in some sense a "key" genre with the help of which we can unlock the psychological mechanisms of other genres in which the triangularity of the structure of desire is not so clearly manifest? Here one ought to be cautious: the vast amount of empirical investigation that the industry itself conducts, however self-serving its ends and however impoverished the theory behind it, cannot be ignored. This research continually stresses the variety of functions fulfilled by advertising and the variety of means it must employ. Any open-minded survey of the phenomenon must face the possibility that its nature is protean.

Furthermore, even in the case of the genre I have concentrated on, where the argument for an underlying triangular structure is strongest, the analysis I give does not exhaust the genre. I have not discussed by what acculturative processes the yearning toward specific models is set up. Nor have I touched on the structure that arises between the gaze of the model, the gaze of the desiring (male) camera, and the gaze of the beholding (female) subject. Nor have I tried to describe the iconological repertoire the genre has at its command, or the semics of the looks, gestures and postures it employs. Nor have I discussed the beholder's response to the narcissism of the model, or the nature of beholding as a voyeuristic act, or the quality that personal experience takes on in a world of images.

On the other hand, I will not go to the extreme of conceding that a triangular structure is simply one among many structures that advertising can call on. Insofar as the advertiser interjects himself between the subject whose desire he desires to control and object he desires to sell, the shape of the elementary advertising act must be triangular; and insofar as the nature of advertising demands that the desire of the advertiser remain concealed, disguise itself as something else, the purpose of criticism should be to reveal the hidden triangle. Thus, to take the simplest of examples, a sale catalogue may seem to employ only dyadic subject-object structures in its advertisements: an item for sale is pictured, with a price and a brief description. But why this picture, why this description? The picture and description are not the only or the best possible representation of the item (whatever these might be): they represent someone's image of the item as held in the gaze of desire: they are a representation of a desired item, an item desired in a model way, not an item in itself. Thus the structure of the apparently dyadic act is in fact triangular; the mediator has characteristically masked himself; and an analysis that unmasks him is a demystificatory act.

At the point where Girard's analysis of triangular forms of desire ought to be of the greatest value to an historical critique of advertising, it is regrettably sketchiest, namely in its documentation of the spread of the phenomenon in society. Nevertheless, read in conjunction with its key texts,

the novels of Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Dostoevsky and Proust, it does
go a long way toward providing an aetiology for the resentful bafflement
that is part of the background mood of the lives of many in late-capitalist
consumer society confronting the objects they are invited to consume. Fur-
thermore, the vision of a "time before" that we find in Girard seems to me
more historically defensible, less a creation of nostalgia, than the vision
of history in the humanist critique of advertising, which is the critique
we are most familiar with in South Africa. To substantiate this point,
me briefly turn to a work representative, in terms of acumen and moral en-
ergy, of the best of the school of F R Leavis and Raymond Williams, namely
The Imagery of Power (1972) by Fred Inglis.

In contrast to the Girardian scheme, in which the primary transaction is
between consumer and object, mediated through the model, the primary trans-
action in Inglis' scheme is between advertiser and consumer, mediated thr-
ough the advertisement. From his "anonymous vantage" behind the advertise-
ment, the advertiser sets about providing pseudo-solutions to the "immanent
fantasies" of the consumer which have the effect of "containing each man
and woman within their own feelings and preventing open seeing of a common
condition" (p.78). Thus like Girard, Inglis points on the one hand to the
mutual reinforcing of individualism and solitude, and on the other to the
reign of models (in Inglis, bad models). But Inglis does nothing to explain
the power of the bad models proposed by advertisements over people's minds,
except to talk about their "spellbinding" quality. Hence he descends to a
dualism that we find in one form or another in all humanist criticisms of
advertising: a dualism of the cunning of the advertiser and the innocent
simplicity of the consumer. It is profoundly to be doubted whether ad-
vertisers in fact stand outside the system of fantasy that reigns in society
and manipulate it for their own ends. It is far more likely that they tell
the truth when they say that they "believe in" what they are doing, i.e.
that they are involved in the same fantasies as the consumer. If so, the
focus of analysis ought to be the system itself: first the desire that in-
forms it, then the forces that create it.

When Inglis comes to talk about the advertisement itself, the earlier dualism
emerges in another form as an opposition between the object of consumption
and the "moral atmosphere" (i.e. usually the false glamour) of its image
(p.78). The energies of the advertiser, Inglis says, are directed toward
making this opposition invisible, toward hiding the gap between object and
image. The object must become its image in the consumer's mind; and the
more skilful the advertiser, the more successfully is the gap concealed.
Here there is a simple question that must be asked: why is the consumer so
easily "spellbound" into confusing signified with signifier? Denunciations
of the manipulativeness of advertisers can unfortunately all too easily be
turned on their heads into denunciations of the gullibility of consumers.
Both are forms of scapegoating, neither accomplishes anything. Behind all
the good versus bad dualisms that we find in morally-vased humanist critiques
of advertising lies an ahistorical opposition between an Edenic "time before"
and a fallen present. Inglis, like Leavis before him, clearly believes that
love, sex, the family etc. are debased by being used to glamorize mundane
objects for sale. "How can one truly love", the underlying argument runs,
"if one believes that perfume X or deodorant Y are the prerequisites of
love?' The immediate contrast being drawn is between a world in which true
(unmediated) love is felt and a world in which X and Y are felt to be the
prerequisites of love. But the deeper contrast is between an original world
of true (unmediated) love in which X and Y did not exist (because there was
no need for them), and a modern world in which they do. In other words, the
contrast is between an unmediated original and a fallen, mediated modern;
and the hidden yearning is for an unmediated world, that is, a world without

language.

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