

Cultural theory essay – Australian tourism



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The Australian tourism advertisement that was released earlier this year, complete with the tagline “ So where the bloody hell are you? ” was one of the most controversial government-funded ads in recent memory. The advertisement was created and funded by Tourism Australia and screened on domestic television in dozens of countries around the world. The release of the ad prompted considerable worldwide discussion: it was initially banned from British television by the Broadcast Advertising Clearance Centre, due to the ad’s use of the word ‘ bloody’ and its perceived connotation as a profanity (“ Brits ban ‘ bloody hell’ TV ad”). I have chosen to analyse this advertisement because it is a recent, controversial text filled with many complex images that portray what it means to be Australian.

The advertisement portrays the following Australian locales: outback pub; secluded beach; ocean-side saltwater pool; kangaroo-inhabited golf course; open patio house; remote offshore tropical island; Uluru, Australia’s center; Sydney Harbour; barren desert (refer to appendix for a full description). The implied negative consequence of ignoring the advertisement is that potential tourists will be unable to visit and experience the beauty of the Australian landscape. Australia is portrayed in multiple ways by this text. As it is a tourism advertisement, its purpose is to convince foreigners to visit our country. According to the representations of Australian culture that are put forth by this text, we Australians value alcohol (primarily beer); engage in physical activity, no matter the age; frequent our many beaches; appreciate our native fauna; value family life; respect our indigenous citizens, and are generally sociable people. Each of these depictions of what Australians represent and value are tied to the process of ideology.

The term ' ideology' is rooted in the work of Marx. He argued that the dominant ideas and viewpoints in society were that of the ruling class (" Questions of Culture and Ideology"). Althusser submits that there are two sides to ideology: one that consists of the actual living conditions of people's lives, which is not false; and a set of meanings which misrepresent class and power within society, which is thus false. As many of the scenes and situations depicted in the focus text are irregular and stereotypical, the advertisement is ideologically constructed to depict Australian culture in a particular light. Ideology can be thought of as a sophisticated filter, through which our worldview is perceived (" Ideology"). Personal ideologies and societal ideologies may differ: whereas a society, by and large, may subscribe to ideologies of peace, democracy and justice, an individual may hold opposing viewpoints and thus, opposing ideologies.

Within our focus text, Australian ideological values such as equality, respect and the importance of family are prevalent. The Australian tourism ad is one that is rife with complex imagery, whose purpose is to represent Australia. Semiotics, the study of signs, refers to the way in which particular images, text or objects can be used to create messages, which are often a part of a larger system of signs. For example, a green light is generally interpreted as a sign to ' go', within the larger context of a traffic light-controlled motor vehicle intersection.

Once isolated and taken out of that context, the green light makes little sense. Consider an example from the text; the casual manner of the man who tells us " Bill's on his way down to open the front gate" ironically suggests that this is a petty task, until the shot of a vehicle driving across a

vast landscape conveys the message that such a seemingly simple task is, in fact, quite an ordeal. When discussing semiotics, 'myth' refers to a sign or series of signs that depicts one term within a system as indicative of all other terms. Furthermore, the simplification of signs known as 'indifferentiation' – the refusal of difference (Thwaites 68) – perpetuates myths by silencing all non-dominant terms or voices.

For example, within the focus text, the producers are guilty of mythic indifferentiation by suggesting that the only place that Aboriginals have within Australian culture is as an entertainment source for non-Aboriginals. Though it is unfair to write the advertisement off as largely mythic in its semiotic construction and thus not indicative of wider Australian culture, I have, for the purpose of this essay, entertained the thought. A 'metonym' refers to the association between terms, either in part or whole. Thus, the scene in the bar metonymically suggests that all Australian men work hard and enjoy a cold beer – served by a woman, no less – at the end of a day's work.

The choice of an attractive young woman in a bikini to represent beach culture metonymically invokes sex. The purpose of this sign is to physically attract foreigners to Australia through the use of a sexually attractive woman. Whether or not this specific sign is aimed at a particular sex is irrelevant: the woman in the bikini nonetheless represents happiness, health and virility. These traits are exhibited by a majority of the Australians in the ad, and are thus metonymically indicative of the rest of the Australian society. The very idea that all Australians are happy and healthy is, of course, ridiculous.

For example, it is estimated that half of Australia's population is overweight (" About Overweight and Obesity") and approximately one in twenty Australians is currently living with depression (" Understanding Depression"). Imagine if you were a European and saw an ad on television that portrayed Australians as they are in reality: for example, if the beautiful blonde bikini girl was replaced with an overweight man with a disgusting smoker's cough. While this may more closely mirror reality, it would be an extremely poor marketing decision. The signs that appear in this text are all carefully chosen for the purpose of appearing attractive to an overseas market. The producers' attempt at political correctness in regard to the Aboriginal people largely misses the mark.

While their native musical instruments of rhythm sticks and didgeridoo, and the spiritual icon of Uluru are well-represented and tasteful, the final scene featuring Aboriginal people dancing and the quoted line, " And we've been practicing for over forty thousand years" invokes a connotation that effectively reduces the entire Aboriginal people to little more than a tourist attraction, assumedly for the rich, white Europeans that the advertisement is largely aimed at. While it is highly unlikely that the producers of the text intended for this to be the denotation (or ' preferred reading', Thwaites 62) of the scene, the fact that it can be easily read in this manner, as derogatory toward the Aboriginal people, is demonstrative of the many different ways in which signs can be read. The Australians that speak in the advertisement use short, simple sentences to convey their messages. The language is constructed in this manner for two reasons: firstly, because it was broadcast in countries where English might not be prevalent, and thus the producers

wanted to simplify the language as much as possible; in addition, they attempted to capture the manner in which an ordinary Australian speaks, which is something that they achieved well. Furthermore, the one word that caused quite a stir, "bloody", is not even worth batting an eyelid at, as an Australian living in Australia. Tourism Australia's Manager of Strategic Insights, Lawrence Franklin, suggests that the use of the word "tapped into real perceptions of the irreverent, self-effacing nature of Australians" ("Bloody hell, does research work?").

While the word was apparently politically incorrect enough within other cultures for them to attempt to ban the advertisement, the colloquialism is so institutionalised within our society that the so-called "great Australian adjective" is well and truly a part of our vernacular, endorsed far and wide, from the average citizen right up to our Prime Minister ("Australia's Bonzer"). The inclusion of golf as the choice of sport to portray Australian-ness is a strange one. The creators of this text clearly wished to send out a particular image of Australian sport; instead of showing scenes from a popular team sport for which Australia is well known, such as rugby league or cricket, the producers chose to show the financially exclusive sport of golf. This sign attempts to convey a message of sophistication. I suppose that golf is more of an internationally recognised sport than the other two mentioned, and the producers decided to make a safe bet on a commonly played game, rather than alienate their audience by displaying an unfamiliar sport. Tourism Australia's "So where the bloody hell are you?" television advertisement is an undoubtedly well-produced, well-researched product

that adequately represents a majority of Australia's culture, people and values.

When analysed using semiotics, ideology and ordinariness, it is exposed to be a rich text that provides many points of discussion. While it is next to impossible to coherently convey everything that it means to be an Australian within a one-minute audio-visual presentation, the ad was, overall, fair in its depiction of the Australian way of life. References and Works Consulted "About Overweight and Obesity." Australian Government Department of Health and Aging. 30 September 2002. 1 June 2006.

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