

Material(ized) Desire: Forging a Subject of Consumer Ideology in Postsoviet Russia

ELENA PROKHOROVA
UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

These birds will be changed into men. I foresee in this several disadvantages. Many of those men will commit sins they would not have committed as penguins. . . . But in order not to impair human liberty, I will be ignorant of what I know, I will thicken upon my eyes the veils I have pierced, and in my blind clear-sightedness I will let myself be surprised by what I have foreseen.

Anatole France, *Penguin Island*

I. "The way we were"

If, as Althusser and Žižek argue, ideology is indeed external, i.e., predicated on material practices, then it is safe to say that until the late 1980s the ideology of consumerism was virtually absent in Russia or, to put it more cautiously, existed as disembodied desire. Soviet patterns of consumption were markedly different from their Western counterparts. A sociologist from the Russian Center for Public Opinion and Market Research (VCIOM) argues that, among consumers, the idea of prosperity and material well-being was expressed in terms of a large number, rather than a wide variety, of commodities. Material goods were identified with products, but not brands, with some products serving as symbolic indicators of social status. The upper strata differed from the mainstream groups not so much in terms of their lifestyle as in terms of the quantity (and, at times, quality) of the same basic comforts (Levinson 3).

At the same time, Western-made products always possessed a "surplus value," their symbolic status being a constitutive part of the "myth of the West," which had no single geographic referent. They functioned both as symbols of access to the consumer dreamland beyond the Iron Curtain, and as visual signposts of differentiation between privileged and "ordinary" Soviet citizens.¹ Soviet Russia's "second economy" (the black market) both contributed to the myth by circulating smuggled Western products, and made effective use of their symbolic status, often attaching Western brand name labels to Soviet-made goods. The absence of advertising, while a result of product shortage and homogeneity in consumption patterns, in its turn contributed to the mythical aura of Western products.

When Soviet consumers were finally exposed to Western shops and products in the late 1980s, they experienced shock at the variety of things on display.² Initially, however, the array of goods seemed to the majority not

only psychologically overwhelming, but also "irrational, economically redundant, and the nuanced differences between the brands were perceived as serving the [. . .] perverted needs of some consumers" (Levinson 3).

Early advertisements, for the most part, were copied from American or European ones, or made by Russian advertising firms on the basis of detailed instructions from Western companies. Russian economists and cultural producers point out that campaigns to recruit potential consumers from former Soviet citizens often misfired. The two most often quoted reasons are the viewers'/readers' ignorance of the products themselves³ and the "otherness" of the very language of advertising. In fact, Western ads were often criticized for their excessive "pushiness" and their nakedly cajoling nature. Thus, the unsubtle sexual allusions characteristic of many Western ads were typically singled out as an alien element preventing Russians from responding to the advertisements. It is more plausible, however, that the rejection and ineffectiveness stemmed from the *form* in which messages were offered to the consumer, rather than the visual content of ads. To use the Žižekian model, consumers saw right "through" the images, without being caught up in the process of signification as addressed specifically to them.

Both temporally and semiotically, the arrival of ads as pleasure-promising signs was linked to two major and simultaneous shifts in Russian culture at large: the gradual replacement of the old, logocentric culture with a new, visual one, and the social displacement of high culture to the periphery. The new visual reality of advertisements on TV and in new glossy magazines brought about new anxieties contributing to the already existing experience of rupture with the past—political, economic and cultural.

Native-made magazine ads, and especially TV commercials, tried to establish essential links with the audiences' experience, mentality, and expectations by reinforcing cultural stereotypes. The old, displaced patterns—high culture and reliance on verbal narratives combined with specifically Russo-Soviet cultural and historical clichés—stepped in. The two best-known Russian attempts to create native TV commercials were the MMM series, executed in a quasi-documentary "verist" style that reproduced "typical Soviet citizens" on the screen, and Bank Imperial's "artsy" commercials, shot in pseudo-historical style which their producers dubbed "cynical romanticism." While the first purported to educate former Soviet citizens in practical issues, the second worked in the genre of "historical" anecdotes, supplying them with a luxurious *mise-en-scène* (Figure 1).

Despite their strikingly different stylistic execution and cultural references, both commercial series operated with the comforting idea that one can succeed in new economic conditions "just the way you are" simply by



Figure 1.

accepting the new rules of the game, i.e., trusting the reality of the promises and inventive advertising techniques. Indeed, a mass influx of investments, especially in the MMM bonds, proved that the rhetoric of commercials "made by Russians" and targeting people "just like you" touched both community feeling and a desire that had been present long before the means of satisfying it appeared. However, also present were deeply embedded cynicism and distrust of any propaganda or the sale of any myth.

In the process of educating the Russian consumer, envy had to be cultivated and channeled, desire structured, and skepticism used to cater to the potential consumers' feeling of superiority and sophistication. Mere availability and materiality of the goods beyond glossy images were able to "recruit" only a small portion of the population with adequate resources. This has been especially true of intellectuals (constituting a fairly large percent of the emerging middle class and the "new rich"), for whom any societal change always presented itself loaded with loyalty to spiritual traditions, cultural superiority, and an ambiguous attitude toward material comfort.⁴

II. Cultural Revolution, Part Two⁵

The case of the newspaper *Kommersant*, which constructed new consumers virtually overnight, is very suggestive, if not typical, of the advertising strategies of the last decade. The paper featured stories and images along the lines of "A normal person begins his day with a glass

readily accepted as "natural." The discourse of "normality" was positioned at the intersection of the rhetoric of the "civilized" way of life and that of material comfort. While the first was flattering to the educated part of the New Russians, the second fed into their deeply-rooted desire to become like "them" (i.e., Europeans and Americans) in their appearance and habits. The rhetoric of an "educated choice" was effective: the audience not only bought the (self)image that was offered to it, but the instructions concerning what "normal" people should eat, drink, wear or drive proved to be powerful mechanisms of group cohesion. In this manner, the process of acquiring suggested products preceded and defined the formation of this consumer group's new identity. Since the only available model of new identity was that of a fictional Western businessman, any image/sign of consumer goods, services, or entertainment was to be associated with the new identity as a change in social status. The myth of the West in its split Soviet version—as a land of material abundance and of personal freedom—was the original desire/sin/guilt into which the emerging ideology of consumerism was projected.

The equation of "normal" with "Western" in the ads is reinforced by the context in which they appear. Modeled on Western magazines, Russian editions are usually published outside of Russia, on glossy paper, and feature articles that effectively collapse information and advertisement. In a way, such editions are "infomercials" (Andersen 31-32) in which *haute couture* and cigar exhibits flow seamlessly into stories about the rich and famous who consume them. For the Russian consumer whose previous reading experience was associated with low-quality paper and bleak grayish illustrations, this visual glamour triggers powerful identification with "normal" Western quality.

But the new mythology had to be both materialized and adjusted to the system of cultural assumptions and values, an important aspect of which was always the cult of (high) culture. Visual signifiers of the desirable world of things, alluring because of their texture, lustre, and color, were to modify but not cancel the existing myths. What is striking about advertisements in post-Soviet illustrated magazines for the *nouveaux riches* are the strategies of combining the materiality of images with "eternal" (non-material) values. The pleasure of possession is consistently linked with the pleasure of knowledge and sophistication.

The new consumer ideology in its visual instantiation thus had to balance two equally powerful myths: the myth of high culture as the ideal and the myth of the West as the material. Both function as reference systems in Williamson's sense, i.e., as sources of visual image and cultural associations/assumptions transferred onto the advertised product (31). But when

captured within the single frame of an advertisement, these two poles of reference also function as peculiar "fields of vision." Far from concealing their double constitution, advertisements work through internal splits and tensions in the production of meaning.

Lacan's concept of "dompte-regard"—the "taming" of the gaze by the visual image—helps to illuminate the close link between the emergence of visual culture and the development of consumer ideology in 1990s Russia. According to Lacan, "[w]hat determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside. It is through the gaze that I enter light and it is from the gaze that I receive its effects" (Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts* 106). Lacan posits the scopophilic drive as the site of desire, substitution, unfinalized subjectivity, and envy. "Invidia," which, as Lacan quite astutely reminds us, derives from the Latin "videre," is thus a mechanism of the subject's (self)-positioning and (self)-centering.

As the case of the *Kommersant* campaign suggests, Russian readers "recognized" themselves in the pattern of everyday behavior, rather than taking it as a model for the constitution of new identity. The existing fetishism of Western products as signs of both the enviable lifestyle and the desirable (i.e., "normal") identity presented itself in the guise of an always-already existing "me." While any direct address to the potential consumer would have been perceived as a lie or a message "not addressed to me," the rhetoric of "you know what you are; just bring out the normal person in you—recognize yourself in the image" triggered ideological fantasy.

Lacan's "mirror stage"—an image of the child in front of the mirror who is unable to realize its independent existence vis-à-vis its reflection but identifies with the image to get an impression of the integrity of its ego—captures, if only metaphorically, the process of this self-centering of the post-Soviet Russian through the visual:

The mirror stage is a drama [. . .] which manufactures the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of fantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image [. . .] to the assumption of the armor of an alienating identity. (Lacan, *Écrits* 3)

Clearly, the Russian consumer is a child with a twist: sophisticated in reading myths, yet unable to position himself vis-à-vis the fragmented values and mythologies he is confronted with. To "recruit" this consumer "in the making," ads constitute a *mise-en-scène* of desire through a skillful arrangement of objects loaded with mythological associations. The viewer/reader is thus positioned both outside the frame (as a cynical reader of myths) and inside it (as the subject who "always-already" knows the value of the

goods). The equivalence between the two is established through the play between a desire for the material and a desire for the ideal/culture.

Within this framework, it is precisely the oscillation, the fluidity of relationship between the ideal of culture and the materiality of its artifacts that makes the interpellation effective. The tension between the two is resolved through the reader's gaze: "staring" back at you through its alluring ambiguities, the picture makes "you" the point of intersection of material fetishism and cultural sophistication. It is "you" who recognize the essence/the center/the ideal.

Verbal messages play a significant role in the process of the centering and the self-recognition of the subject. Not only do they target the reader who still believes that the most important information is contained in the Logos, but the stories that verbal messages tell serve as navigating devices in the flow of meaning within the ad. The following analysis is intended to describe both the strategies of positioning the consumer/reader vis-à-vis the image and the interplay between visual and verbal rhetoric in ads.

III. "The divine crispness of money"

The advertisement for Continent Bank (Figure 2) illustrates the strategies of channeling subjectivity into the established framework of associations by creating multiple frames of identification and meaning and constructing multiple oppositions. A Stradivarius violin (identified

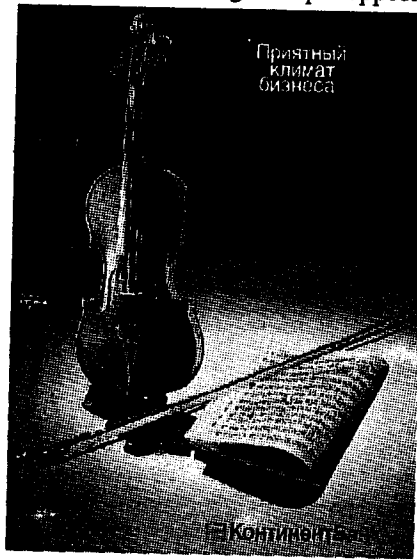


Figure 2.

as such by the inscription of the date and the name of the master—"Antonio Stradivarius, 1716") as a material object shows the wear and tear of time, its surface polish long faded. But its value as a symbolic cultural object created by a genius has no equivalent. The image, thus, attempts to preserve the "aura" of the object, its uniqueness and authenticity. Reflections in the glass surface give objects in the image three-dimensionality, volume, restore the "aura" threatened by the print reproduction. The link that the image makes between the violin and the bank is based on the transference of

the meaning of cultural tradition, the timeless quality of performance. The bank partakes of the violin's aura.

Another split, built on the first one, exists between the eternal value of classical music and the object itself, which has a market price. Far from concealing the idea of the market, the ad openly uses it to establish the split value of the violin: the higher its market price, the higher its symbolic value. This seeming contradiction, in fact, increases the symbolic value of the violin as a transitional carrier of desirable associations for the bank. The Continent Bank clearly markets itself as a financial service for *connoisseurs*, hence its name, drawing on the *European* cultural tradition. The appreciation of music (by "you," a sophisticated consumer) is a metaphorical link between the uniqueness of the Stradivarius violin and its extremely high symbolic value, and the "unique" services Continent Bank can provide. The link between the two is captured by the verbal message: "The pleasant atmosphere of business."

While seemingly leaving the potential bank customer "free" to choose, the image already projects him into the image. There are three material objects in the ad: violin, bow and sheet music. The only element missing is the musician, *you*, who will step in for a stellar performance. And because the tools are perfect, so should you be (by making the right choice). The verbal message, then, is far from an abstract, unaddressed comment: the pleasant atmosphere is there for *you*, and while admiring the superb work of the Italian master, you are already the subject of the "pleasant atmosphere" of music/business.

The ad, therefore, brings together "natural" possessiveness⁷ as a positive and culturally legitimate quality (after all, money is there to enjoy the beauty) and the Russian cult of high culture and true art—traditionally viewed as incompatible with mercantilism. Within the system of signification of the ad, the violin functions as a mortise,⁸ transferring its symbolic value onto the bank. From the point of view of the reader, however, the violin works as the "gaze of the other": the legitimizing culture that the knowing consumer cannot but appreciate. The eternal opposition of "art for art's sake" vs. "the art of sale" finds its reversed reflection/resolution in "business for profit" vs. "business for atmosphere/beauty."

A similar strategy is used in the El Dorado Supermarket advertisement (Figure 3), which bridges consumption and culture through an interplay of the visual and the verbal. But the latter plays a much more important role here: the information about the store establishes the initial framework within which the visual images work. As the text on the right informs the reader, the supermarket sells exclusively products from France, Germany, Italy, and Spain. In addition, the store also features a restaurant with "European