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# Visual Advertising Across Cultures

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# Visual Advertising Across Cultures

## **Abstract**

In thinking about the role of images in cross-cultural advertising, a useful starting point is the concept of "iconicity." In the vocabulary of communications theory, a mode of communication can be termed "iconic" if there is an analogical relationship between its constituent signs or symbols and the things that they represent (Sebeok, 2001; see also Peirce, 1991). For example, in the case of verbal onomatopoeia, a word contains an analogy to a real-world sound. In music, it can be argued that certain compositions - such as classical "program music" - contain analogies to human moods or emotions. However, the mode of communication that is most pervasively characterized by iconicity is pictorial communication. Indeed, iconicity is one of the defining aspects of visual images. Even relatively "unrealistic" images such as stick figures or cartoons are based on some degree of analogy to the visible structure of real-world objects and spaces.

If images can bring us closer to the appearance of reality than other communicational modes can, are they also an effective means of communicating across cultural boundaries? Does the iconicity of visual communication make it a vehicle for the sharing of meaning between people who are separated by linguistic or cultural differences? These are increasingly important questions in the world of advertising. Because of the growing globalization of economic activity, commercial advertising is directed to an ever greater variety of linguistic and cultural communities. Among advertisers as well as researchers, this situation has led to a recurring concern about the degree to which it is necessary to tailor advertising messages to the characteristics of each specific community. Should different ads be produced for different languages and cultures, or can pictures be relied upon to transcend such differences?

## **Disciplines**

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

# Visual Advertising across Cultures

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## **Advertising across Cultures**

In a survey of long-term trends affecting the foreseeable future, Hamish McRae argued that "The single greatest change in the world economy since the Second World War has been the extent to which it has gone international" (McRae, 1994, p. 141). Indeed, it has been estimated that, in the second half of the twentieth century, the dollar value of world trade increased by a factor of 90 (Gabel & Bruner, 2003, p. 12). Accordingly, advertising that crosses national boundaries is not a new development. Products such as Coca-Cola have been marketed internationally since before the Second World War (Quelch & Hoff, 1986, p. 59), and discussions of the feasibility of standardized international campaigns have been appearing in scholarly journals for several decades (e.g., Dunn, 1966; Blinder, 1965; Fatt, 1967; Hill & Shao, 1994; Lorimer & Dunn, 1967; Rosenthal, 1994). Increasingly, advertisers have come to see their target audience as spanning entire regions -- e.g., east Asia (Babyak, 1995; Javalgi et al., 1994) or western Europe (Halliburton & Huenenberg, 1993) -- or, indeed, the entire globe. More than twenty years ago, a prominent observer of these trends was arguing that "Companies must learn to operate as if the world were one large market -- ignoring superficial regional and national differences" (Levitt, 1983, p. 92).

In response to these imperatives, a number of writers have argued that advertisers need to place greater emphasis on the visual aspects of ads. In an article subtitled "To globalize, visualize," Kernan & Domzal (1993) claim that "effective global ads are never predominantly verbal" because "Anyone can interpret a visual execution" of an advertising theme, whereas "a verbal ad requires that the consumer understand the language in which it is written and, if the ad is

ambiguous, the subtleties of that language as well" (p. 55). Similarly, Bourgerly & Guimaraes (1993) make the following point:

Advertising agencies today are trying to create a "visual esperanto": a universal language that will make global advertising possible for virtually any product or service. The new visual esperanto is based on the idea that visual imagery is more powerful and precise than verbal description (which leaves too much room for personal interpretation). Moreover, all people can comprehend the messages of visual imagery (p. 24).

But the central premise of these statements -- the idea that anyone can understand a picture -- is not without controversy. Academic writers have long insisted that the conventions of pictorial representation are culture-bound (Scott, 1990), and critics of international advertising can point to a variety of visual campaigns that did not travel very well from one culture to another. Arguing that "There are significant cultural differences in pictorial perception," de Mooij cites a Korean ad for LG which uses a fish to symbolize prosperity. As she points out, the significance of this symbol "is not understood in most of the Western world" (de Mooij, 2005, p. 47). Similarly, in their early, ground-breaking catalog of failures in cross-cultural advertising, Ricks et al. (1974) note that a picture of the emperor Nero in an Italian lipstick ad "struck no accord" when it was shown to Japanese consumers because "Nero was alien to them," while Exxon's famous tiger "failed to elicit favorable reaction in Thailand" where tigers are "simply not symbols of power and strength" (p.49). As a result of such concerns, advertisers have become cautious about standardization in their international campaigns. Since the 1980s, the proportion of "fully standardized" campaigns has fallen to a low of 10 percent, while the majority of international campaigns are now blends of both standardized and localized elements (Jones, 2000, p. 5). As one advertising consultant has put it, "Ads that are shoehorned into an alien environment really do no one any favors" (White, 2000, p. 39). More starkly, the director of a Russian advertising agency once said that certain "Western" TV commercials "would be incomprehensible for us" (quoted in Wells, 1994, p. 89), while an academic analysis warned that an excessive dedication to standardized global advertising is "not unlike being dedicated to committing economic suicide" (Onkvisit & Shaw, 1990, p. 110).

In addressing the theoretical issues raised by these arguments, it will be useful to distinguish between three different ways in which cross-cultural visual advertising could possibly go awry. First of all, it is conceivable -- in principle, at least -- that members of a culture to which an ad is exported might actually find the ad's images completely meaningless. In other words, in this situation we would be dealing with an inability to perform the fundamental mental act of connecting the shapes on a page or TV screen to real-world objects. If, as some academic writers have assumed (e.g., Goodman, 1976), pictures were a language that had to be learned just as much as any verbal language does, then we should certainly expect images to mean nothing to viewers who were not familiar with the particular representational conventions through which those images were created. Although variants of this hypothesis are not uncommon in the academic world, this type of misinterpretation is not something that advertisers are concerned about (or even aware of), partly because a base-level exposure to a common stock of visual media can probably be taken for granted in almost any culture today (Crane, 2002; Lull, 1995; Olson, 1999; Perlmutter, 2006; White, 2005). More importantly, there is considerable scholarly

evidence that the iconicity of visual images makes them a relatively unproblematic medium for cross-cultural communication about the surface appearance of reality - i.e., what things look like, as opposed to what their underlying cultural significance might be (cf. Hecht et al., 2003). Accordingly, our discussion of potential problems in cross-cultural advertising will look elsewhere. We will consider two possibilities: on the one hand, a viewer might correctly perceive the contents of an image (people, objects, places) but misinterpret the intended cultural implications of those contents; on the other hand, a viewer might be aware of the cultural implications but unresponsive to the values behind them.

### **Cultural Allusions in Images**

What kind of advertisement might lead to the former of these two potential scenarios? Consider a print ad for the film *Spring Break*, a 1983 Columbia production (Figure 1). The ad portrays a group of young men raising a flag with the film's name on it. From that name and their appearance, the viewer may be able to infer that they are vacationing college students. They are standing on - and planting the flag in -- a bikini-clad woman's thigh (depicted on a much larger scale than they are). This picture is a visual parody. The men's poses and the position of the flag are based on a celebrated image from the Second World War, Joe Rosenthal's photograph of U.S. troops raising the Stars and Stripes on their way to victory during the battle of Iwo Jima. This photograph later became the model for a monumental statue honoring the U.S. Marine Corps at Arlington National Cemetery, and it has been the subject of numerous parodies both before and after its use in the *Spring Break* ad. For example, on the cover of the March 2006 issue of *Digit*, a magazine devoted to "The Future of Digital Design," a group of soldiers struggle to raise a flag bearing the initials "DR," symbolic of the magazine's cover story on "The Design Revolution."

In the context of American visual media, the cultural references of the *Spring Break* ad and other such parodies are anything but abstruse. However, it is easy to imagine a viewer from another country missing some of those references. Although the Iwo Jima flag-raising has occasionally been featured in movies or other media with an international audience (as, indeed, is the case with *Digit*, which is a British publication), its status as a recurring symbol is associated more narrowly with the U.S. Furthermore, the concept of spring break as major party time is also distinctively American, although it may of course have equivalents in other parts of the world. So a viewer from outside the U.S. might well find the ad's meaning somewhat opaque, and this example would certainly seem to support the views of those writers who are skeptical about the viability of cross-cultural advertising.

But it is important not to overstate the case here. True, the *Spring Break* ad does contain layers of meaning that our hypothetical non-American viewer might not share. But this observation begs the question of how broadly those layers of meaning are shared by viewers within the United States itself (cf. Peebles, 1989). Even if we assume that the significance of spring break looms as large in the minds of all Americans as it does in those of some college students, when it comes to the Iwo Jima image things are very different. In a test of visual-culture knowledge conducted with a class of 29 undergraduates (Messaris, 1994, pp. 179-180), only 14 students were able to give even an approximate place and time (e.g., a World War II battle) for Joe Rosenthal's original photograph of the flag raising. Others mentioned Vietnam, Korea, and even the American Civil War. Recognition rates were similarly low among U.S.-born graduate students in

visual communication, some of whom placed the flag raising as far back as the American Revolution or the War of 1812.

Furthermore, almost none of these students had any detailed knowledge about the actual circumstances memorialized in Rosenthal's photograph. Historians commonly describe Iwo Jima as one of the most horrific battles ever fought by U.S. troops, a relentless 36-day ordeal in which 6,821 marines were killed, 19,217 were wounded, and some 20,000 Japanese lost their lives, many of the latter being buried alive in underground tunnels or incinerated by flamethrowers (Ross, 1985; Wheeler, 1980). It is hard to believe that anyone familiar with such details could find the Spring Break ad amusing -- or, indeed, could have designed such an ad in the first place.

Figure 1

**STARTS TODAY!**

**BUDCO MIDTOWN 1**

**FRIDAY AND SATURDAY TIMES MIDTOWN—ALL SEATS \$2.50 'TIL 1 PM OR CAPACITY**  
12:20, 2:20, 4:30  
6:35, 8:40  
10:45 PM

**ALSO AT THESE SELECTED AREA THEATRES CHECK DIRECTORY FOR SHOWTIMES**

- **AMC PREMIERE 2**  
Madison Mall at Sears  
Rt. 1 & Pa. Turnpike
- **BUDCO ANDORA TWIN**  
Edge & Henry Ave.
- **BUDCO BARN 5**  
7 1/2 Miles S. of Danforth
- **BUDCO GATEWAY 3**  
Dinner Bell at Rt. 302 S. of  
Essex
- **BUDCO HI-WAY DRIVE IN**  
Beverford
- **BUDCO OLEANS 4**  
Cotton & Boulton, N.E. Pkwy.
- **BUDCO 51st STREET DRIVE IN**  
On 61st St. Above Passant,  
Jerry's Corner
- **BUDCO SPRINGFIELD TWIN**  
Baltimore Pike and Spruce Rd.  
Del. Co.
- **BUDCO 300 TWIN DRIVE IN**  
East of 300 Eastway at Rt. 61,  
Montgomeryville
- **BUDCO 307 DRIVE IN**  
Rt. 302 S. of West Chester
- **ROOSEVELT DRIVE IN**  
Rt. 1, Longhorns (Opp. Culbert  
Valley Mall)

**NEW JERSEY**

- **AMC DEPTFORD 3**  
On Cameron St. Rd.
- **BUDCO ELLERSBURG TWIN CINEMA**  
Rts. 70 & 41, Cherry Hill
- **BUDCO MILLSBURG 3**  
Rt. 130 & W. W. of Pennsylvania  
in Dalton
- **BUDCO PENNSAUKEN DRIVE IN**  
Rt. 73, 2 Mi. From Toll-Paid  
Bridge

**SPRING BREAK**

*Like it's really, totally, the most fun a couple of bodies can have. You know?*

COLUMBIA PICTURES Presents a SEAN S. CUNNINGHAM film "SPRING BREAK"  
DAVID KNELL PERRY LANG PAUL LANG STEVE BASSETT JAYNE MOBEAN CORINNE ALPHEN  
DANIEL FARALDO DONALD SYMINGTON JESSICA JAMES and RICHARD B. SHULL with HARRY MANFREDINI  
Directed by STEVEN ROSTER Produced by MITCH LEIGH and MILTON HERSON  
Columbia Pictures Distribution Co. Inc. A Time Warner Company  
FOUNDRY INC. Edited by DAVID SMILG Written by SEAN S. CUNNINGHAM

Of course, it might be objected that these historical circumstances are irrelevant to the ad's meaning. But that is precisely the point. What this ad demonstrates is that the intended cultural references in advertising are often relatively shallow. There may be a gap in relevant cultural

knowledge between viewers in an ad's country of origin and their counterparts in other places, but in many, if not most, cases that gap is not very profound.

These words of caution should be kept in mind as we proceed with our examination of cross-cultural interpretations of advertising. As we have just seen, the cultural knowledge required for the interpretation of an ad can involve both specific images (such as the Iwo Jima flag raising) and more diffuse cultural practices (such as the rituals of spring break). This is not always a hard-and-fast distinction, but it provides a convenient framework for thinking about the potential sources of cross-cultural misunderstandings of visual advertising. When an ad incorporates an allusion to, or replica of, a specific earlier image, a viewer's ability to comprehend that part of the ad's message can only come from previous media experience. However, references to more general cultural practices may make sense to viewers from other countries purely on the basis of cross-cultural parallels, without any prior exposure to the originating country's media or way of life. Because of this difference, we will discuss these two aspects of cultural content separately.

### Allusions to Specific Images

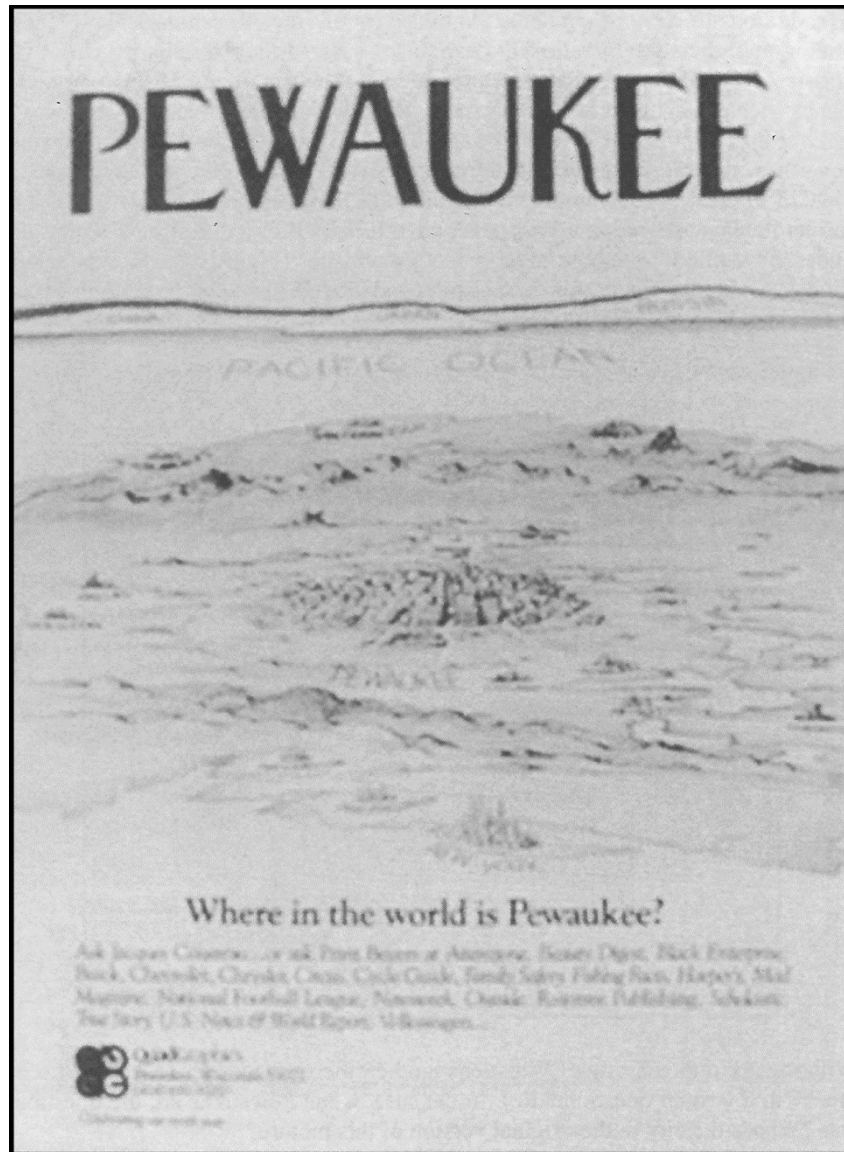
In addition to testing students' knowledge of Joe Rosenthal's Iwo Jima photograph, the study mentioned above also assessed their familiarity with two classic American images that were presented in the form of advertising parodies: James McNeill Whistler's "Arrangement in Grey and Black, No. 1" (commonly referred to as "Whistler's Mother") and Saul Steinberg's New Yorker magazine cover in which radically diminishing perspective is used to give a Manhattanite's view of the rest of the country. In the parodies that were used in this study, the former image appeared in a newspaper advertisement for a department-store sale under the caption "A sale to make a mother whistle" (Figure 2), while the latter served as the template for a magazine ad about business opportunities in Pewaukee, Wisconsin (Figure 3).

**Figure 2**



With regard to the parody of Whistler's mother, the students were asked "Who is this?" (in a written questionnaire). In the case of the Pewaukee ad, the question was "What's the city in the original version of this picture?"

**Figure 3**



The study included a group of 12 international graduate students, who were tested in tandem with 23 grad students born in the U.S. Only two of the international students were able to name Whistler's mother, and three knew that New York was the city in the original version of the Pewaukee image. (Likewise, only two had recognized the Iwo Jima flag raising.) These numbers may appear to offer an unambiguous demonstration of the potential interpretational obstacles faced by advertising when it crosses cultural boundaries. Both the Whistler painting and the New Yorker cover are subjects of frequent parodies in the U.S., and yet these highly educated international students were evidently almost completely unfamiliar with either of the original



images. Once again, though, one should be cautious in one's interpretation of these facts. As it happens, substantial members of the U.S.-born students (seven and ten, respectively) were also unable to identify these two images.

As in the Spring Break case, then, these additional numbers remind us that, when it comes to specific images, advertisers cannot take viewers' knowledge for granted even in the cultures from which those images originated, no matter how widely the images may have been reproduced. Of course, some kinds of ads deliberately use images that only a limited segment of the population can be expected to recognize. This practice is particularly common in advertising that incorporates references to high-art imagery in order to convey a sense of superior status. But when ads are addressed to a wider audience, the ability to make visual references that viewers can actually grasp will always be threatened by the fragmentary nature of visual culture and by the speed with which succeeding generations lose sight of the cultural imagery of the past.

Since advertisers are well aware of these circumstances, ads that borrow previously existing images are often designed to make some sense even to viewers who are not aware of the visual reference. This principle is clearly at work in an ad for Kennedy Funding, a commercial real-estate lending company specializing in "bridge loans" (i.e., short-term loans that allow borrowers to "bridge the gap" until permanent financing is secured). The ad's tagline reads, "WHEN YOU'RE UP AGAINST THE CLOCK YOU CAN GET MILLIONS FAST." These words appear over a photograph of a man dangling precariously from the hands of a clock on the side of a tall building, high above a city street (Figure 4). Fans of silent cinema will recognize the ineffable Harold Lloyd in a scene from *Safety Last* (1927). Much of that film is taken up by Lloyd's gravity-defying stunts as he climbs up the outside of a building, and the image used in the ad comes from the culminating moments of this scene. So, for someone who has seen the movie, the ad serves as a trigger for a host of hair-raising memories, and those memories undoubtedly increase the ad's impact. At the same time, though, the ad's picture of Lloyd is surely an arresting image in its own right. A viewer who had never heard of Harold Lloyd or seen *Safety Last* could still find the ad enjoyable and should certainly be able to get the ad's point, since the relationship between the headline and the picture does not depend on any knowledge of the picture's source. Consequently, we can also imagine an image such as this crossing cultural boundaries with ease.

In fact, even though this image comes from a quintessentially American movie, it may seem strange to refer to it as an example of American visual culture. Unlike most photographs or paintings produced in the United States, Hollywood movies have achieved a certain universality, even when they deal with American society and American themes (Olson, 1999). To put it differently: In most parts of the world, there is already a substantial transplanted visual culture composed of Hollywood movies. A particularly telling demonstration of this point occurred in a political campaign poster that appeared in Warsaw on June 4, 1989, the day of the elections that signaled Poland's transition from communism to democracy (Weschler, 1989, p. 66) (Figure 5). Against a backdrop of the word "Solidarity," we see a tall man in Western garb striding confidently toward us. In place of a gun he is holding a ballot. Except for that metaphorical substitution, this is a picture straight out of another Hollywood movie, *High Noon* (1952), and

Figure 4

**When You're Up Against The Clock  
You Can Get Millions Fast**

Need \$1 million to \$200 million in a hurry? Kennedy Funding won't leave you dangling.  
Traditional lending institutions take their sweet time to close on a multi-million dollar loan—up to 3 months! We think that's about 3 months too late.  
• 2 days for commitment, about 10 days for closing • Up to 75% loan-to-value ratio  
• A proven funding institution • The creative financing expertise you need to beat the clock  
• Commercial loans for Land Development, Acquisitions, Workloads, Turnovers and Refinancing

**KENNEDY FUNDING**  
Tel: 201-342-6300, Fax: 201-342-6322 [www.kennedyfunding.com](http://www.kennedyfunding.com)  
HACKENSACK, NEW JERSEY

the man is the classic Western star, Gary Cooper. Evidently, the image of the Westerner was as potent a symbol of freedom in post-communist Poland as it is in the United States.

So, more generally, this example adds a further complication to our evolving view of the limitations of cross-cultural advertising. In principle, visual references to specific images, such as the Iwo Jima flag-raising, can make an ad difficult to understand when it is exported to another culture. In practice, however, this kind of difficulty is often counterbalanced by other factors. Ads that focus mainly on the surface meanings of borrowed images, as in the case of our Safety Last example, can appeal to viewers regardless of any previous knowledge of those images. But even when previous knowledge does make a difference, as in Solidarity's Gary

Cooper poster, that knowledge can often come from the cross-cultural experience of Hollywood cinema, which has paved the way for a substantially common international visual culture.

### **Allusions to General Cultural Practices**

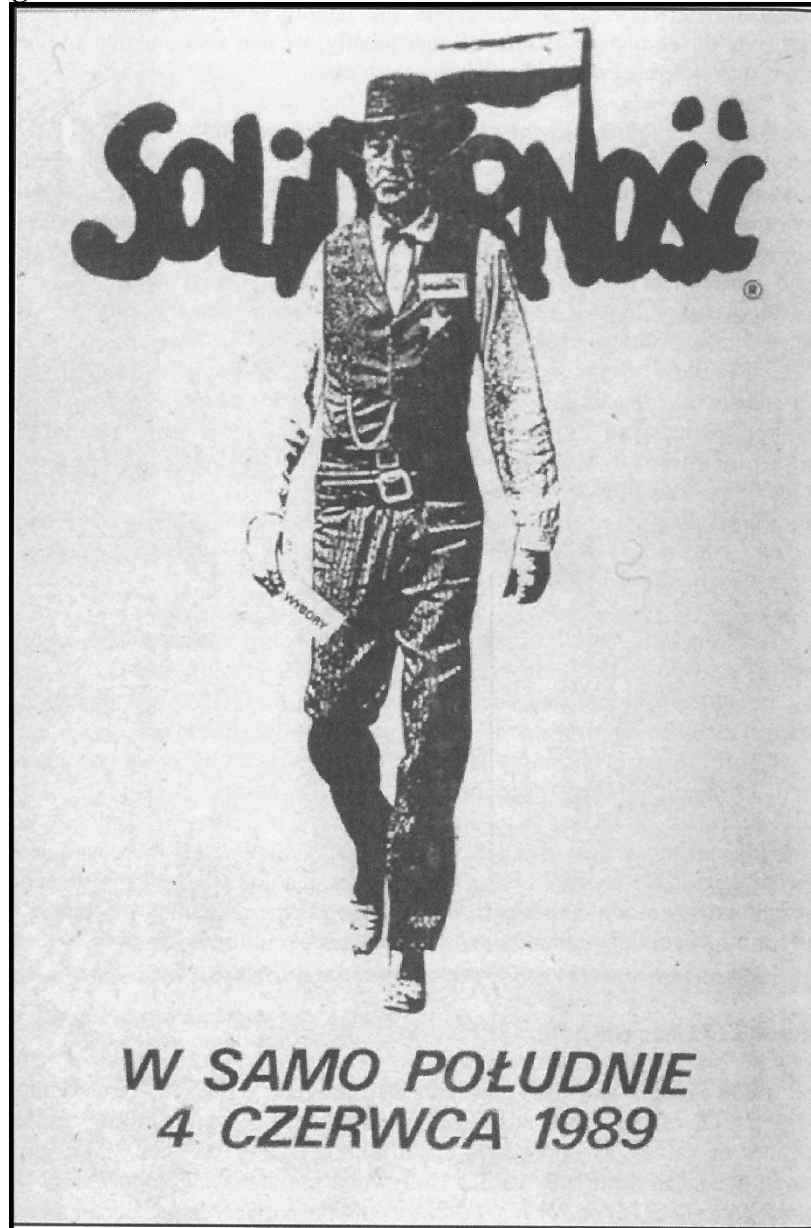
Hollywood cinema and television can also provide a basis for cross-cultural interpretation of American ads that make references to more diffuse cultural practices or values, as opposed to specific images. For instance, international viewers who had seen such earlier Hollywood movies as *National Lampoon's Animal House* (1978) or *Porky's* (1982) would presumably have been in a better position to understand the values expressed in the ad for *Spring Break*, which appeared in 1983. Of course, being able to understand a certain set of values does not mean that one shares them, but that observation is as true of American viewers as of people in other countries. Indeed, it could even be argued that American movies and TV programs provide international viewers with an especially appropriate background for the understanding of American advertising, because, the portrait of American culture that ads are based on is much closer to the fabrications of Hollywood than to the actual way of life of real Americans. But what about viewers who are not familiar with American media and are being exposed to American advertising for the first time?

Although such viewers might not be able to make much sense of references to specific images, their ability to interpret more general cultural depictions cannot be ruled out a priori. In the absence of either first-hand or mediated experience, a person may still be able to form an intuitive understanding of selected aspects of an unfamiliar culture through extrapolation from the known features of familiar ones.

In an attempt to address this topic, Anne Dumas (1988) performed a study with two groups of graduate students attending a university in the United States. One group consisted of students who had grown up in China and were recent arrivals in the U.S. The other group consisted of U.S.-born students. The time frame of this study - the late 1980s - is significant. At that time, students coming to the U.S. from China were still relatively unfamiliar with American mass media. Consequently, while the Chinese students in Dumas's study were certainly not first-time viewers of American advertising, their previous experience was quite limited compared with that of the U.S.-born group. The participants in the study were all interviewed individually regarding their responses to a set of print ads taken from American magazines. Each ad was initially shown with all text and other product information masked, in order to assess the viewer's interpretation of the image by itself.

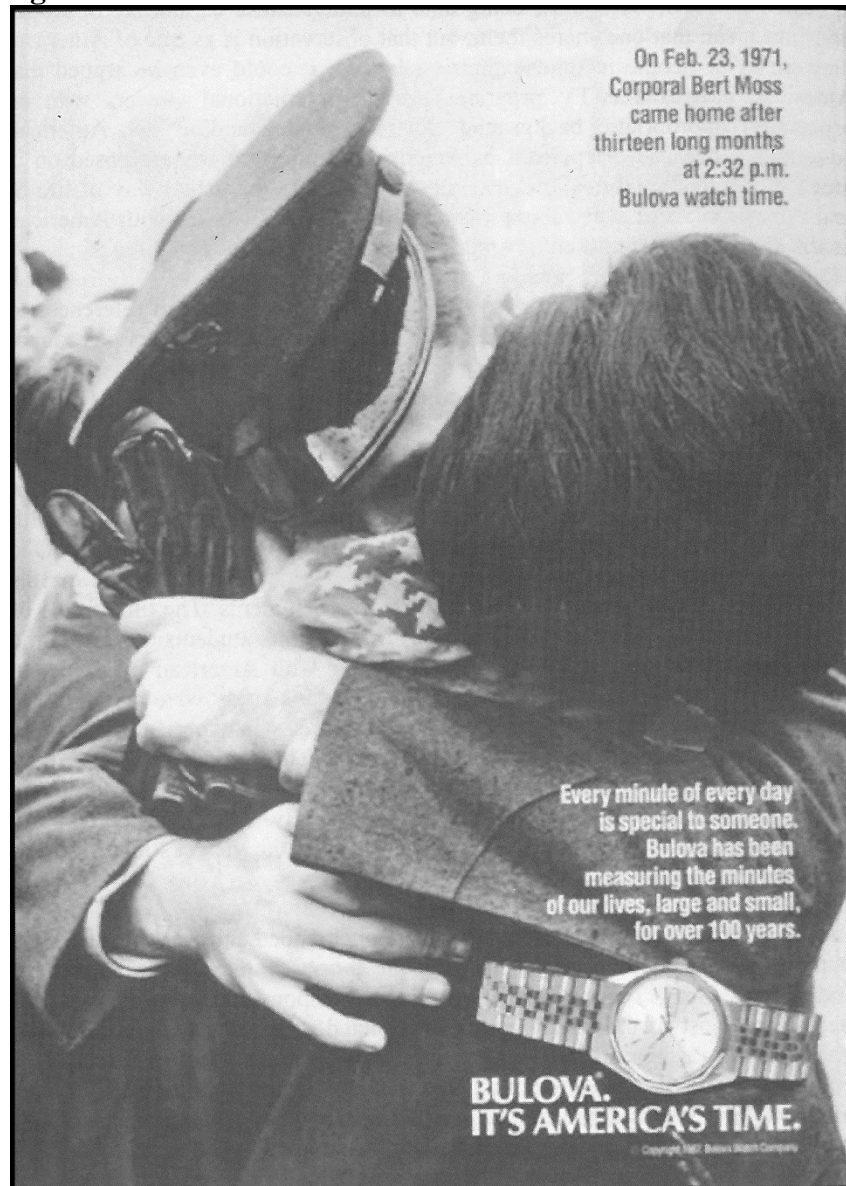
The students' responses to these images were open-ended and were presented by Dumas in considerable detail, but for our purposes the following general findings stand out. To begin with, the Chinese respondents made it clear that they found most of the social situations depicted in the ads culturally remote from their own experiences. Their interpretations of these social situations were explicitly based on conjectures, rather than immediate recognition of familiar circumstances.

Figure 5



It turned out, though, that these conjectures often coincided with the interpretations of the American respondents. In particular, the Chinese students' guesses about family relationships (or their absence) were generally similar to the guesses of the U.S.-born students. On the other hand, the one aspect of the ads that the Chinese respondents were consistently unable to interpret along American lines was the display of social status.

**Figure 6**



One of the clearest examples of an image that appeared culturally alien to the Chinese was an ad for Bulova watches (Figure 6). The ad, portrays a tight embrace between a man in a military uniform and a woman. The text, which was withheld from the respondents until the end of the interview, explained that this was a homecoming scene from the Vietnam War era and that the man's watch had been a parting gift. This image drew immediate and warm praise from most of the U.S.-born students, who lauded its emotional power and its authenticity (e.g., "it really shows a moment of reality," "it's very genuine, I can believe it"). Among the Chinese, however, the first reactions were very different. Virtually all of them expressed some form of puzzlement or difficulty in making sense of what they were seeing (e.g., "it's hard to see what's happening," "it's

hard to understand who is what"). And yet, despite this sharp discrepancy in the initial responses, the Chinese students' interpretations of what was going on in the image were closely parallel to the interpretations of their U.S.-born counterparts. Both groups were much more likely to view the scene as a homecoming than as a departure (a judgment that was subsequently confirmed by the text), and both groups were evenly divided in seeing the woman (whose face was hidden from the viewer) as either a mother or a wife/lover. Dumas noted that the percentages for these various responses were just about identical in the two groups (p. 46).

If the Chinese students' view of what was actually happening in the image was not substantially different from the view of their American counterparts, what are we to make of their initial statements of puzzlement or confusion? The students themselves provided the answer to this question. In part, what they were reacting to was the fact that the faces of the people in the image were not clearly visible, something that no U.S.-born viewer complained about. But the need to see the faces may have been largely symptomatic of a more fundamental lack of familiarity with the situation depicted in the image. In particular, what evidently seemed remote from the experiences of many of the Chinese viewers was the image's open, very physical display of emotion. As one viewer put it,

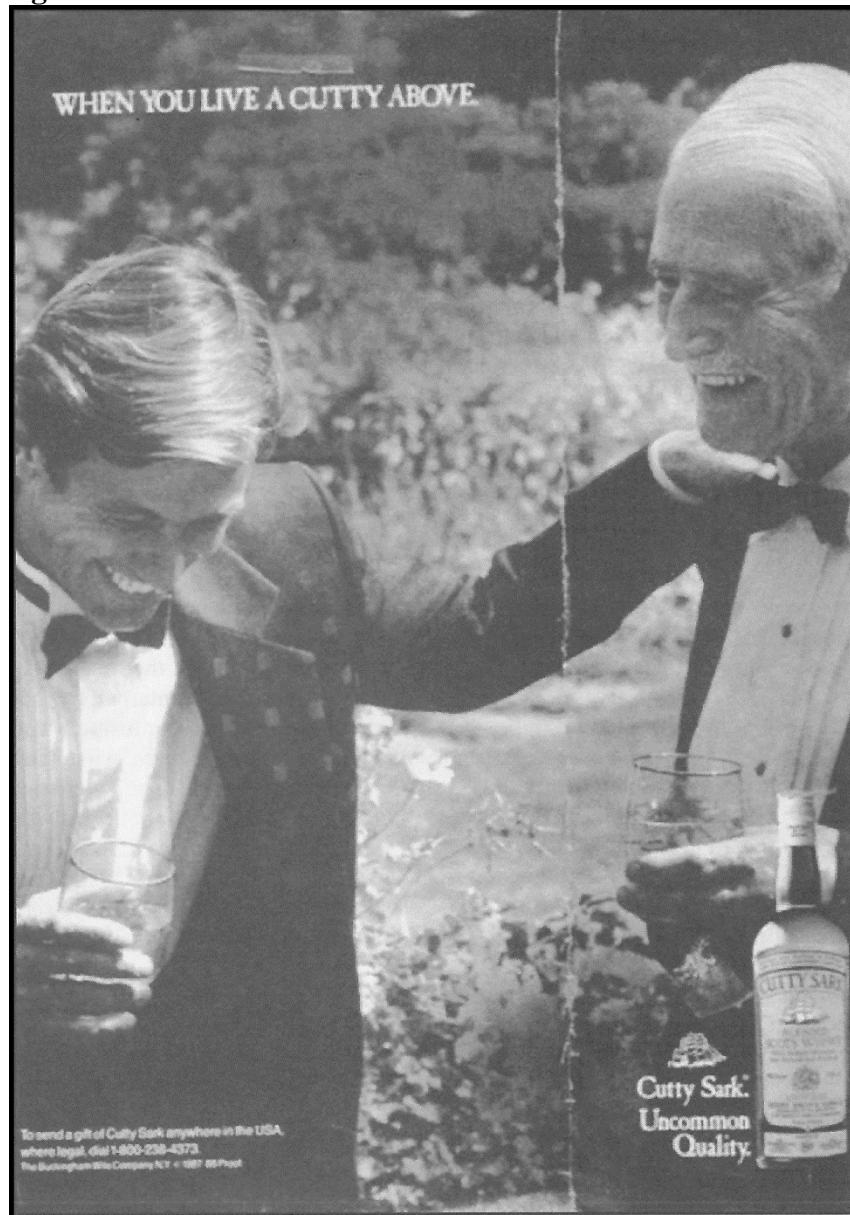
"Chinese people wouldn't express their feeling like this, they're very quiet people. Until maybe five or even two years ago, nobody could have done that" (quoted in Dumas, 1988, p. 49).

This kind of response to emotional expression was a recurring theme in the Chinese students' interviews, and the Bulova ad was not the only image that elicited such remarks. Similar comments were made about a Korbel champagne ad featuring a romantic couple strolling on a beach, as well as a Cutty Sark whisky ad in which an older man affectionately places his hand on a younger man's shoulder (Figure 7). With regard to the former case, the Chinese students noted that the public display of affection between a man and a woman would have been frowned upon in China at the time of the study. As for the latter image, students pointed out that it would have been considered unusual in China because of its violation of traditional standards of formality in interactions between fathers and sons. This point was expressed as follows by one of the male respondents:

Friendship between a father and a son! I like this relationship [i.e., the image in the ad] very much, it's very different from what one sees in China! In China, fathers give serious faces to their sons, they think they're superior. Usually they just give orders or advice, but their relationship is not like friends. Here, they're not just father and son, [they] can talk to each other, [they] can have a drink, [they] can be happy.... I like this, but this is not something I see too much in China [quoted in Dumas, 1988, p. 24].

Note the implied divergence between traditional Chinese cultural norms and this respondent's own professed values. This too was a recurring feature in the Chinese students' statements about the ads. Speaking of the romantic couple in the Korbel ad, a female respondent observed that such behavior outside of marriage would have been considered unseemly back home, and she went on to complain about the status of unmarried women in China:

**Figure 7**



Here in America, if you're a single woman, it's fine, people don't blame you. People say, "It's a career woman, that's O.K." But if I go back to China and I don't get married before I'm thirty, people'll say, "Oh, she must have some problems, mental or maybe ... physical." Sometimes, it's really that they care about you, but sometimes, that kind of care, you don't want it! [quoted in Dumas, 1988, p. 41]

Another aspect of this tension between received norms and personal inclinations was voiced by a young woman who was commenting about the emotional embrace in the Bulova ad:

This reminds me of my leaving.... In China we usually don't hold each other too much, but when I leave, I hold my mother.... Or when I see her again.... I can't help! (rising intonation) This is the first time I left her! [quoted in Dumas, 1988, p. 50]

These remarks are arguably one of the most important aspects of Dumas's findings. In talking about culture, we sometimes tend to think of it as a uniform set of practices or beliefs that everyone in a society subscribes to unquestioningly. But the statements quoted above remind us that the range of behavior that people view as natural or desirable can be considerably broader than the norms prescribed by their traditional culture. So, for many of Dumas's Chinese respondents, incompatibility between the advertising images and the canonical culture of their homeland was ultimately not an obstacle to comprehension. In fact, as these quotations suggest, the Chinese students were often highly receptive to the values implied in the images.

This is not to say that there were no instances whatsoever in which the Chinese missed some message that seemed perfectly obvious to the U.S. born respondents. One situation in which this kind of thing happened repeatedly was the display of social status. Both the Cutty Sark and the Korbel ad featured men wearing tuxedos. To most of the U.S.-born viewers, this attire was a clear symbol of superior wealth and status. Many of the Chinese, however, were apparently uncertain about, or even unaware of, these upper-class connotations. The Chinese also differed markedly from the U.S.- born viewers in their inferences about a man in jeans, who was shown explaining a toy to a little boy in a Fischer Price ad (Figure 8) . Whereas the overwhelming majority of the U.S.- born viewers saw this man as a member of the upper-middle class (e.g., "He is probably a yuppie, like the rest of us" -- from Dumas, 1988, p. 66), every one of the Chinese assigned the man to the working class, and half of them explicitly cited the jeans as evidence. As Dumas pointed out, the American concept of jeans as casual leisure wear was evidently unfamiliar to these Chinese respondents; instead, they treated the man's clothes as a sign that he was a manual laborer (p. 63). Despite these interpretational differences, though, the two groups of respondents were both very enthusiastic about the Fisher Price ad. As in the Cutty Sark case, they applauded the ad's positive father-son image, and this time many of the Chinese said that the scene was typical of their own culture as well, since the ad's emphasis was on the father as teacher.

More generally, then, Dumas's findings point to a somewhat bifurcated conclusion about the possibilities for cross-cultural comprehension of advertising images. As our discussion of jeans and tuxedos demonstrates, and as some other studies have shown (e.g., Farley, 1986, p. 20; Tansey et al., 1990, p.32), there can be no doubt that individual cultural symbols may be meaningless or may have discrepant meanings outside their original settings.

However, when it comes to the fundamental relationships from which social bonds are constructed (nurturance, sexuality, etc.), the cases we have discussed here suggest that there is greater scope for cross-cultural empathy and understanding, even when the conventional values of two cultures differ considerably. Cultures may selectively sanction one mode of social interaction or another (intimacy vs. reticence, privacy vs. display, etc.). But the range of relational tendencies within a society as a whole and within a single person's psychological



repertoire is inevitably broader than the confines of any one culture. Where such breadth exists, cross-cultural communication may be possible, as Dumas's data indicate.

**Figure 8**

**No tools power,  
the imagination better.**

©1987 Fisher-Price, Division of The Mattel Companies, East Aurora, New York 14207  
Not available in Canada.

The Fisher-Price Power Workshop is so realistic, it's perfect for any job junior carpenters have in mind. They can work with a drill that seems to pop through pretend wood. Or feel like they're using a real power saw. Or even level, bolt and buff. Then, when the workday's over, they can pack everything neatly away inside the portable tool caddy.

The Power Workshop from Fisher-Price®. It's just one of over 300 toys we make that make childhood a little more special.

**Fisher-Price**  
Because you're only young once.

### **Cross-Cultural Differences in Values**

Our examination of Dumas's findings has already given us a preview of our concluding topic in this discussion of potential interpretational barriers in cross-cultural advertising. It was noted earlier that many of Dumas's Chinese respondents not only understood but also approved of the cultural values implied in some of the ads they were shown. However, the connection between comprehension and approval is by no means inevitable. A viewer could understand these ads perfectly and yet be unmoved or even repelled by the values in them. It is this aspect of miscommunication, i.e., lack of receptivity to implied values, that we will examine next.

This topic has been the primary concern of much of the formal research on communicational problems in cross-cultural advertising. Typically, studies in this area deal with samples of ads from two or more countries. On the basis of systematic analyses of the strategies employed in these ads, the researchers look for differences in the implicit values behind the strategies. A common theme of these comparisons is the contrast in advertising styles between the United States and other parts of the world. According to a study by Han (1990), for instance, U.S. ads were more likely to use individualistic appeals, and less likely to use collectivistic appeals, than ads from Korea. Han interpreted these findings as reflections of a more fundamental cultural difference between Koreans' emphasis on group responsibility and Americans' emphasis on personal independence. The contrast between collectivism and individualism was also a focus of a study by Choi et al. (2005), who investigated differences between Korea and the U.S. regarding uses of, and reactions to, celebrity endorsers. Applying a similar analytical framework to a comparison between the United States and Japan, Hasegawa (1995) argued that the collectivist tendency of Japanese culture makes Japan an unsuitable venue for comparative advertising (i.e., direct references to competing brands), whereas such ads are quite common in the United States. Hasegawa's argument has been supported in research by Mueller (1987, 1992) and Gross (1993), who found that Japanese advertising was less likely than U.S. advertising to contain hard-sell techniques, including direct brand comparisons. In contrast to these Asian trends, however, more recent data by Jeong & Beatty (2002) indicate a growing acceptance of comparative advertising in Korea, and also perhaps among Thai consumers, although not by that country's regulatory authorities (Polyorat & Alden, 2005). The greater prevalence of comparative advertising in the United States has also been the focus of studies that have examined the differences between the U.S. and various European nations (Appelbaum & Halliburton, 1993; Cutler & Javalgi, 1992; Nevett, 1992). An additional finding of these studies has been that U.S. advertising is relatively more likely to convey information about the product, whereas European advertising has a relatively greater tendency to take indirect approach, entertaining rather than explicitly informing the viewer. In general, then, both the Asian and the European comparisons lead to a characterization of U.S. advertising as more direct and openly commercial than the advertising of other countries. However, it should not be assumed automatically that these differences are reflections of irreconcilable disparities in cultural outlook. Especially with respect to Europe, diverging advertising styles may not correspond to any fundamental underlying cultural divergences. In fact, a related point has even been made with regard to Japan. According to Johansson (1994), the soft-sell approach, which has been considered a characteristic trait of Japanese advertising, may have been a product of institutional arrangements in Japanese advertising agencies (i.e., the fact that a single agency commonly handles ads for competing brands), rather than a direct result of Japanese culture.

Even where advertising strategy does stem from culture, though, it would be premature to conclude that the differences recorded in this kind of research are necessarily impediments to the cross-cultural reception of ads. A small example: Biswas et al. (1992) found that French advertising contained more sex than U.S. advertising; it could be argued that this difference mirrors a more relaxed attitude toward sex on the part of French culture (p. 75); but that does not mean that consumers in the U.S. are unresponsive to sexual appeals. Systematic research on cross-cultural advertising has often focused exclusively on the content of ads, without analyzing viewers' responses, and studies that have actually looked at viewers have been likely to investigate general attitudes towards advertising (e.g., Andrews, 1989; Somasundaram & Light,

1994), rather than responses to specific strategies. However, considerable information on the cross-cultural reception of ads is available in the form of anecdotal evidence.

Perhaps the most comprehensive source of this kind of information is David Ricks's *Blunders in International Business* (1993), a book-length compilation of stories illustrating various things that can go wrong when a company tries to conduct business in an unfamiliar culture. Many of Ricks's stories are about the pitfalls of incompetent translation, as when the Frank Perdue Company's slogan, "It takes a tough man to make a tender chicken," was turned into the Spanish equivalent of "It takes a sexually excited man to make a chicken affectionate" (p. 74). Not surprisingly, such anecdotes have attracted a great deal of attention in advertising circles. An earlier edition of Ricks's book has become a standard reference in discussions of cross-cultural advertising errors, and advertising agencies are now much more likely to check verbal copy for possible cross-cultural double-meanings, especially sexual ones

Although Ricks's emphasis tended to be on verbal malapropisms rather than visual ones, his book describes a substantial number of cases involving visual material, and it is instructive to look at some of these in search of an overarching pattern. The following incidents are representative of Ricks's major themes. A refrigerator manufacturer trying to do business in the Middle East unwittingly offended local viewers by including a chunk of ham – forbidden to Muslims -- in a picture of the product (pp. 60-61). An airline was almost banned from Saudi Arabia when its ads showed passengers consuming alcoholic drinks, which are also forbidden to Muslims (p. 61). Another airline managed to generate irate newspaper headlines in Japan when it inadvertently omitted a major Japanese island from a promotional map publicizing a new route (pp. 50-51). Some customers in other (unnamed) Asian countries object to a red circle on product labels because it reminded them of the Japanese flag (p. 31). Protests by citizens' groups in Ontario led to the termination of an advertising campaign which had used the Canadian flag in an attempt to create a local image for a new imported beer (p. 55). An aircraft manufacturer attempting to make sales in India experienced difficulties with a promotional brochure whose images of turbaned men turned out to be old *National Geographic* photographs of Pakistanis (p. 50). An ad highlighting the fact that a certain brand of toothpaste whitens teeth was received poorly in some regions of Southeast Asia where the local population valued darkly stained teeth as a mark of prestige (p. 60). An Irish-themed beer ad featuring a man in a green hat was ridiculed in Hong Kong because the green hat is allegedly a Chinese symbol for a cuckold (p. 62). A U.S. corporation's efforts to promote its name through fake billion-dollar currency bearing the company logo backfired at a German trade show, because "the Germans felt that the company was trying to show off American wealth, and they resented this impression" (p. 48).

What do these tales tell us about potential impediments to cross-cultural communication in advertising? With one or two exceptions, these episodes are not about viewers' lack of knowledge concerning the cultures in which the ads or other promotional materials were originally produced. (For example, Muslims know all too well that non-believers eat pork and drink alcohol). Instead, the problem in most of these cases has to do with cultural ignorance in the opposite direction, i.e., the advertiser's lack of awareness or sensitivity regarding the culture that the ad is addressed to. This ignorance can give rise to ads that inadvertently offend the target audience's cultural values – e.g., religious restrictions, patriotic sentiments, etc. – but it is not just culture clash that accounts for the problems described in Ricks's anecdotes. Rather, it is

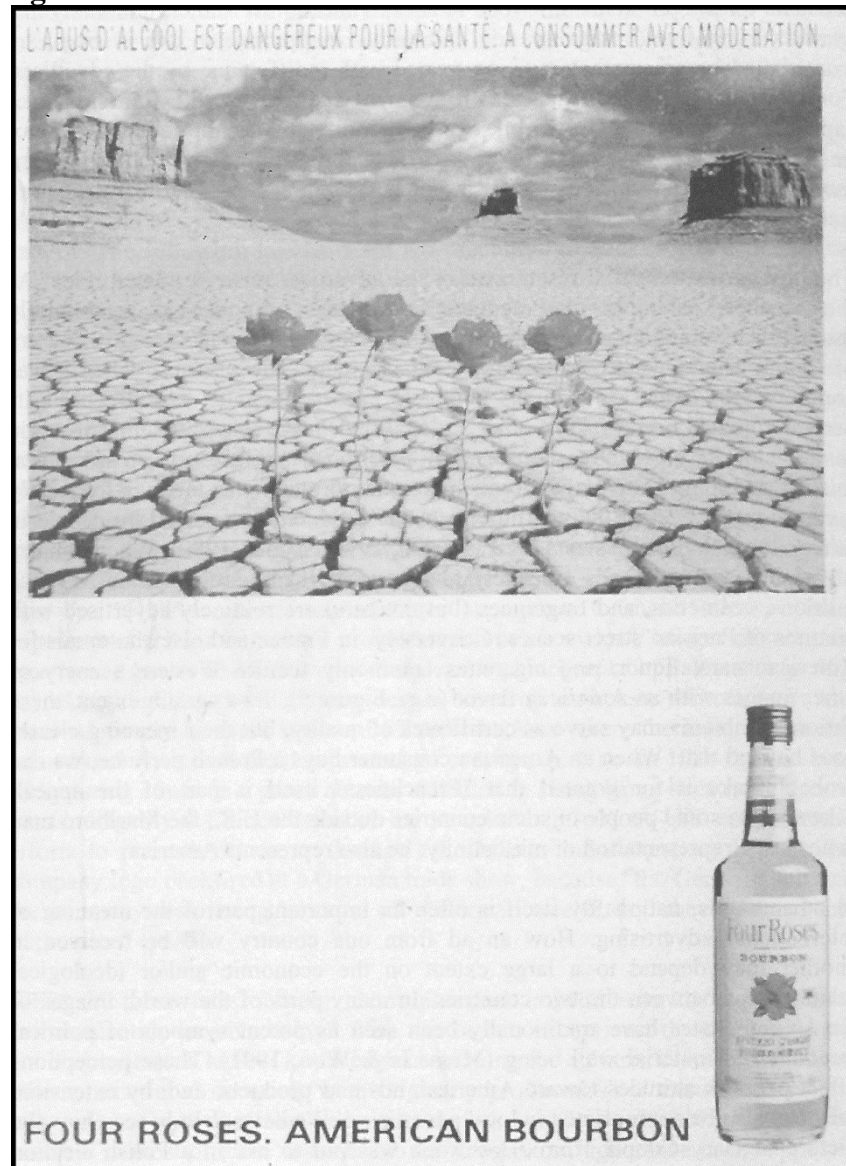
likely that viewers' negative reactions to culturally inappropriate advertising are exacerbated by resentment at being treated with indifference by the advertiser. For instance, while a Japanese citizen might realize that the omission of a Japanese island from a U.S. airline's promotional map was not deliberate, she or he could still feel insulted at the thought that the airline didn't bother to learn more about Japanese geography or consult with a Japanese viewer before issuing the map.

The problem of potential resentment of the advertiser raises a related issue. As the Japanese example may suggest, a viewer's response to a culturally insensitive ad undoubtedly depends to a large extent on the ad's specific country of origin. The same geographical error that angered the Japanese when it was committed by Americans might not have caused as much resentment if its perpetrators had been of some other nationality. But the role of country of origin as a factor in viewers' responses is not confined to cases of cross-cultural misunderstanding. The place in which a certain product was made is frequently a significant aspect of the way in which that product is perceived by people in other countries (Parameswaran & Pisharodia, 1994; Suzuki, 1980). When country of origin is an asset, ads are likely to feature it. In the United States, French fashions, cosmetics, and fragrances (but not cars) are routinely advertised with pictures of Parisian street scenes. Conversely, in France and elsewhere, ads for American cars, liquor and cigarettes commonly feature Western scenery or other images with an American flavor (e.g., Figure 9). To a certain extent, these national emblems may serve as certificates of quality, but their meaning clearly goes beyond that. When an American consumer buys a French perfume, we can probably take it for granted that "Frenchness" itself is part of the appeal. Likewise, to some people in some countries outside the U.S., the Marlboro man is not just a representation of masculinity; he also represents America.

In other words, nationality itself is often an important part of the meaning of international advertising. How an ad from one country will be received in another may depend to a large extent on the economic and/or ideological relationships between the two countries. In many parts of the world, images of the United States have traditionally been seen as potent symbols of political freedom and material well-being (Messaris & Woo, 1991). These perceptions affect people's attitudes toward American ads and products, and, by extension, they can also be appropriated in local advertising. We have already seen how the picture of Gary Cooper from *High Noon* was put to use in a Polish election poster. Similarly, Share Sayer (1994) has described several importations of "Western" imagery into Hungarian political ads, including a Tom and Jerry cartoon clip that was used as a metaphor for the triumph of democracy over communism. A somewhat different use of "Western" images can be found in Japan and some other Asian nations. There, ads for local products have sometimes incorporated pictures of Americans (mostly white, but occasionally also black) in connection with themes of innovation, individualism and freedom from traditional social constraints (Creighton, 1995; Larrabee, 1994).

Of course, even within a single country reactions to such images are bound to vary widely. It has been argued that international advertising originating in the U.S. or other "Western" countries is particularly likely to find a receptive audience among younger, more fashion-oriented consumers (Domzal & Kernan, 1993). By the same token, however, people with a more traditional orientation often see American advertising as a threat. This kind of concern is expressed very poignantly in a letter to an Indian business journal quoted by Simon Chapman (1986):

**Figure 9**

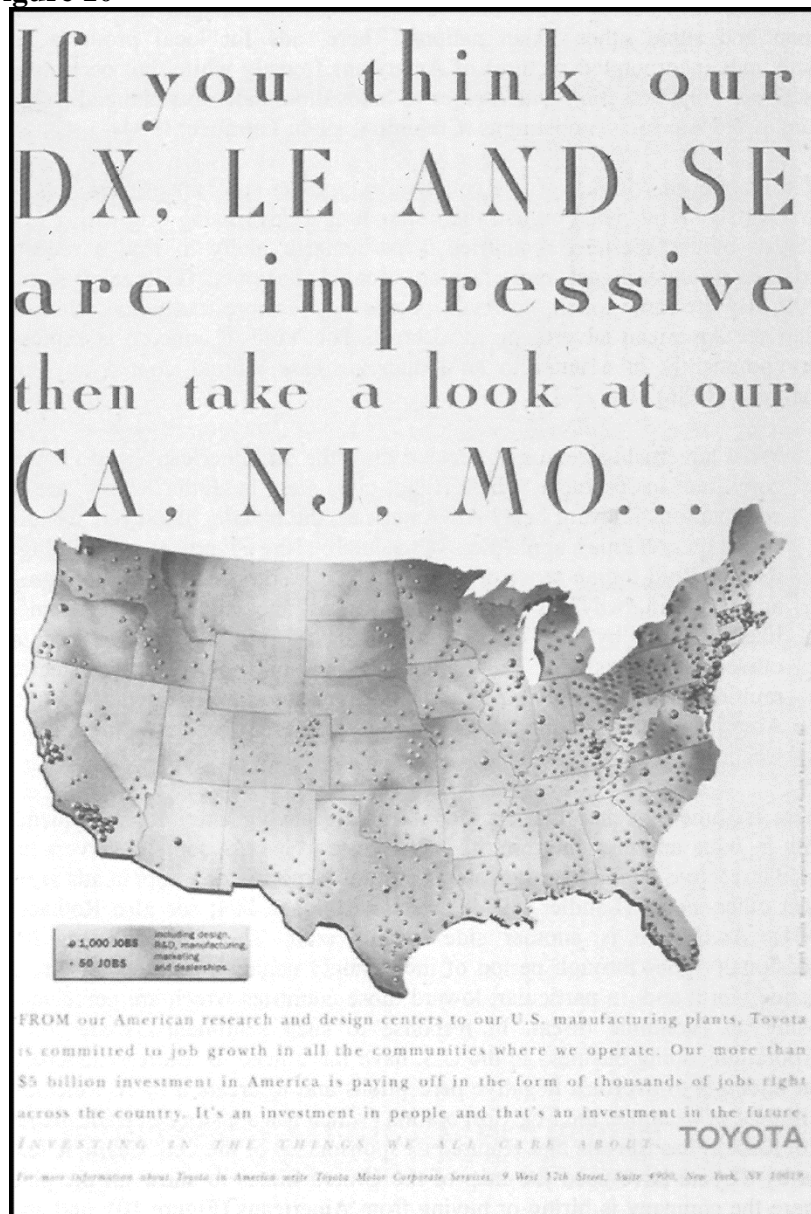


What advertising genius ... decided that "the all American" was a suitable copy-line to promote Chesterfield cigarettes in India? How are the connotations relevant here? All-American, the blonde, blue-eyed six-footer raised on grandma's apple pie...? Presumably [the advertiser is] counting on the good old Indian sense of inferiority in the face of anything foreign.... I am wondering why this sort of self-demeaning message should be deemed a likely winner by one of our advertising agencies.... Can we not take ourselves seriously?... The homogenization of the world by American multinationals is hardly a new phenomenon, but ... this particular assault of Americanization is one of its crudest manifestations yet -- in India [in Chapman, p. 124].

There is some evidence that such concerns are having tangible consequences. Both in India and elsewhere in the "non-Western" world, some observers have noted a reactive trend toward

greater use of local models or actors in ads as well as in other media (Landler, 1994; Oyelele, 1990, p. 204; see also Rothacher, 2004). And there is another side to this coin. The United States itself occasionally goes through period of increasingly negative attitudes toward the outside world and, in particular, toward those countries which are perceived as posing an economic threat. In response to such sentiments, some foreign corporations doing business in the U.S. have felt a need to resort to advertising that attempts to overturn negative perceptions and to create a more welcoming attitude. For example, the Fuji Corporation (which has a history of trade disputes with Kodak) has run ads that featured its sponsorship of the U.S. Olympic team; ads by Toyota have used the map of the United States to show all the places where the company is hiring or buying from Americans (Figure 10); and an ad for Mitsubishi contained a photograph

**Figure 10**



of Albert Einstein as a reminder of the contributions that immigrants (including, by implication, immigrating companies) have made to the United States.

We began this chapter by asking whether the iconicity of visual communication makes pictures a particularly effective mode of advertising across cultural boundaries. The conclusions of our discussion may be summarized as follows. On the one hand, there are several factors that can pose barriers to the cross-cultural reception of advertising images. These factors include: the presence of culture-specific imagery (e.g., the Iwo Jima flag-raising); references to local cultural practices (e.g., the use of jeans as leisure wear by affluent Americans); and incompatibility of cultural values (e.g., American individualism vs. the more collectivist orientation of many other cultures).

On the other hand, however, the impact of these factors is often mitigated by countervailing circumstances. When images are appropriated for advertising purposes, they are often used in such a way as to facilitate comprehension even by someone who is unfamiliar with the original context (e.g., the shot of Harold Lloyd in *Safety Last*). Moreover, the global distribution of pictures through movies, TV, and the Web has created a substantial basis of shared images in parts of the world that differ considerably from one another with respect to current social conditions (e.g., the picture of Gary Cooper that was used as an election poster in Poland). Receptivity to images from other cultures can also be heightened by conflicts between individuals' personal beliefs and their society's official values (as in the case of some of Anne Dumas's Chinese respondents). Finally, acceptance or rejection of transnational advertising images can be affected crucially by general attitudes toward the ads' country of origin (e.g., American admiration of French sophistication vs. resentment of Chinese economic growth).

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