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Commercial intertextuality

Summary:
Commercials have always been an excellent example for intertextuality. However, the ads of the 90s show a degree of self-referentiality and self-reflexivity that transcends this general mosaic or network of bits and pieces of our everyday culture. Like in feature films, we can observe several ways of quoting films and TV shows. The use of *intertextuality* in the sense of *citation* and *allusion* shows how today's ad directors rely on the entire film history as well as that the time span of recycling has decreased during the last years. Moreover, the development of digital techniques has introduced new varities of intertextuality.

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From the earliest days on, filmic self-referentiality has been a steady component of movies, and audiences are used to be confronted with, and amused by, a look behind the screen. Throughout the decades film has developed several ways of referring to *film* in the most general sense of the word. Filmic self-referentiality is characterized by the great variety of movies in which it occurs. It is not at all confined to art cinema, and the various forms can be found on all quality levels and in all genres. Likewise, the aims to be achieved by, and the reasons for, including self-referential plot elements differ extremely: from emancipatory and distancing strategies (in the Brechtian sense of the *Verfremdungseffekt* or alienation effect), mere fascination with cinematographic possibilities or just mere fun, to a strengthening of the emotional bonds of the audience to movies and movie stars, or even the last chance to keep a media-glutted audience watching — and bying, as it is the case with the self-referential commercials of the 1990s.

Commercials have always relied on intertextuality in the sense of a mosaic or network of bits and pieces of our everyday culture, and movie or television celebrities have always acted as spokespersons for brands, thus relating the product to their stardom and features of their screen personae. After a certain decline in the 1970s, ad agencies and film directors started again to produce self-referential commercials in the late 1980s, and in the 1990s the trend could be found in ads for all products. Many ads of the last decade are highly self-referential and self-reflexive.

In view of the many different strategies and the large amount of examples, I will concentrate on quotations and allusions, which are – apart from *film-in-film* – the most *visible* form of self-referentiality. "Quotation-spotting" has become a favorite pastime of both film critics and movie buffs. In his analysis of extensive allusions both to genre characteristics and to film history in general which can be found in Hollywood mainstream movies of the 1970s, first published in 1982, Noël Carroll could still speak of two simultaneous movies which are only visible to the small group of film-savvy viewers.

> There was the genre film pure and simple, and there was also the art film in the genre film, which through its systems of allusions sent an esoteric meaning to film-literate exegetes. [...] It seems that popular cinema wants to remain popular by developing a two-tiered system of communication which sends an action/drama/fantasy-packed message to one segment of the audience and an additional hermetic, camouflaged, and recondite one to another. (Carroll 1998: 244-245)

In the late 1980s and 1990s the situation has changed. Through movie books, journals and websites, knowledge on film and film history has reached a larger public, and more films than ever before are available on television, home video or DVD. Accordingly, the number of film-literate viewers has increased, in particular among the younger generations, and the play with intertextuality and self-reflexivity has almost become a constituent of some genres like in the 1990s horror movies.

Ad agencies and their creative directors know about this attitude of the spectators and use it consciously for their own purposes – not only to sell products, but in the first place to keep viewers watching, as stated by Tom Robbins, vice-president and director of communications at Foote, Cone & Belding (quoted in Philpot 1997): "It sounds sort of simplistic, but ideally you want to create something people want to watch. You have to reward people for watching."

Ads and movies – an ever closer relation

Visual strategies to refer to film start already with the chosen film format when a commercial pretends to be a widescreen movie (appearing on the screen in letterbox format with the typical black bars above and below the image) as a contrast to the general television 4:3 aspect ratio. Some ads extend this type of mimikry and disguise as a fake promo trailer for a new movie, like *Bud Light* "Sin & Sentimentality" (Martin Granger, CA 2001; Palmer Jarvis DDB Dowtown Partners, Toronto)[1]. The ad starts as the trailer for yet another Jane Austen adaptation[2]. Seconds later, the spot gets weird – all the elegantly dressed young ladies run around and slap all the men in the face. However, for the voice-over narrator everything seems to be perfectly alright. The

movie is announced as a 48-hours movie for women about women. While the ladies continue to hit their respective partners, captions with quotes from fake newspaper reviews advise male viewers what they could do when their wives spend a long weekend at the movies. Only in the end, the product is presented verbally ("*Sin & Sentimentality* – A Bud Light Production") and visually by the logo.

But sometimes the ad is indeed both an ad for a particular product *and* sort of a trailer for a new film, as it is the case with large marketing tie-ins which result in a reciprocal promotion by combining extensive product placement within the movie and TV spots for the product using film footage. For many years, James Bond was driving a BMW, and close to the release date of a movie, BMW ads were based on spectactular shots, like in the campaigns connected to *Tomorrow Never Dies* (Roger Spottiswoode, US 1997) or *The World Is Not Enough* (Michael Apted, US/UK 1999)[3] In *BMW 7 series* „Q" (David Tattersall, DE 1997; Scholz & Friends, Hamburg) Q (Desmond Llewelyn) explains to Bond (Pierce Brosnan) that all the gadgets made over the years are nothing compared to the new car and begs, "Bring it back intact! Just this once." However, during this phone call a shot of Q is intercut with footage from the park deck scene. The spot ends with the car dashing through the wall of the park house and a caption indicating the opening date of the movie.

Another example for this close relation is the *Apple* "ID4 Commercial" (US 1996; BBDO Worldwide, Los Angeles). In *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, US 1996) David Levinson (Jeff Goldblum) tries to save the world from an alien invasion, and the tool he uses is an Apple PowerBook. The commercial presents a fast montage of both spectacular action shots and close-ups of the computer as shown in the movie. The voice-over gives the good advice, "If you have only 28 minutes to save the entire planet, you better hope you have the right computer". The ad closes with the Apple logo and the line, "The Power to save the World".

Recycling film history, or: Spot(light)s on Hitchcock

As discussed above, intertextuality in the close sense is a wide-spread discursive mode to address the viewers. However, in order to reach as many recipients as possible with the special film-related subtext, the film quoted has to be sufficiently known to a larger audience. One strategy is to rely on film history. Whatever is available is re-digested, as long as the source is prominent enough to make sure that everyone will recognize it. Who could serve as a better source than the master of suspense.

The shower scene from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (US 1960) is definitely one of the most famous scenes in film history. Accordingly, it reappears in slightly altered

form in movies[4] and it is also recycled in two ads which both quote not only the scene but also the shrieking violin of Bernard Hermann's score. In the first example, *Flogoral* (Asta Medica) "Shower Scene" (Roberto Justus et al., BR 1997; Newcomm Bates, São Paulo), a woman is attacked under the shower by a person with a knife. Both the shots and the montage are composed similar to the source: a close-up of the shower head with running water, the woman under the shower, the silhouette of the attacker behind the shower curtain. But she cannot cry out loud – she badly needs these special cough lozenges; while the product is still shown, we hear a loud off-screen scream. *Head & Shoulders* "Psycho" (Alejandro Harriet, CL late1990s; Leo Burnett, Santiago) opens with the shadow of a person behind a shower curtain who rapidly moves the arm as if somebody is stabbing with a knife. The following close up presents the face of a yelling woman. Contrary to Hitchcock's character, she is not about to be murdered: the rapid up and down movements were hers, as she tried to get the last drops out of a shampoo bottle. The bottle is empty, and she bursts in tears.

Birds (Alfred Hitchcock, US 1963) is another movie which includes shots that have become part of the mental image library of a large audience. Nobody will ever forget the attacking birds or the closing shots when Mitch Brenner (Rod Taylor) gets the car, and he and his family try to leave the city with all the birds closely watching. While Hitchcock shows the entire family driving away, in *Peugeot 406 HDI* "Birds" (Michel Charpentier, ES 1999; Euro RSCG) only Mitch leaves the house. Contrary to Hitchcock's open ending, the commercial clearly states that with the silently going new car the birds won't even notice.

Finally, *Johnson & Johnson* Baby Crema de Manos (Johnson's hand cream) "Hitchcock" (Alejandro Carvajal, ES 1990; Lintas, Madrid) quotes the thrilling scene on top of Mount Rushmore from *North By Northwest* (Alfred Hitchcock, US 1959). However, here the Eve-Marie Saint character seems to be less fortunate than in the original scene: Although Cary Grant holds her hand and tries to pull her up, she slips because of the wrong hand cream.

Yesterday on the big screen – today on the small screen, or: The return of blockbuster movies

Citation and allusion are, of course, not confined to film classics. A recent trend which we find both in feature films and in ads is that the "reaction time" to blockbuster movies is constantly decreasing, in other words, the time span between the release dates of movies with top domestic and world gross income and consecutive allusions in other filmic texts tends to be close to zero. All the raptors and T-Rex dinosaurs populating the

ads of the last years could serve as an example for this development. After a first series in the 1950s, the 1990s are the decade of the digital revival of dinosaurs in movies and documentaries, just think of *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, US 1993), *The Lost World – Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, US 1997), *Jurassic Park III* (Joe Johnston, US 2001), *Godzilla* (Roland Emmerich, US 1998), and the TV series *Walking With Dinosaurs* (Tim Haines & Jasper James, UK-BBC 1999). As a consequence, commercials all over the world participated in this boom by presenting their versions of digital dinosaurs. *Gatorade* "Raptor vs. Raptor" (Steve Beck, US 2000; FCB, Chicago) shows the basketball player Vince Carter of the *Toronto Raptors* during his training in the gym. Suddenly confronted with a "real" velociraptor who starts to play basketball with/against Carter. Both try hard to sink shots, and the panel shows the increasing scores for both "raptors". Finally, after drinking the same soft drink as Carter, the four-legged raptor wins, clinging to the basket. In the end, two more raptors enter the gym.

The strategy works not only with sci-fi and digital film tricks but also with drama. In December 1997, *Titanic* (James Cameron, US 1997) started its triumph on screens all over the world, and it became one the biggest box office hits ever[5]. Already a few months later, we find allusions to the movie, in particular to the famous scene with Leonardo Di Caprio and Kate Winslet on top of the deck of the ocean liner. One example is *Alitalia* "Titanic" (Alessandro Cappelletti, IT 1998; J. Walter Thompson Rome), featuring the four comedians of the group "Premiata Ditta", well-known in Italy both for their theater work and TV shows. When an elegantly dressed fin de siècle couple is about to board the Titanic, they realize that their teenage daughter is already flirting with a young man. The parents keep on arguing and ask themselves, "ma perché non abbiamo preso l'aereo?" The spot ends with the young lovers standing on top of the deck, and he arranges her arms in exactly the same body posture which we known from the original.

Bugs Bunny and his friends and foes

Like many "movie celebrities", cartoon characters have always served as "spokes-persons" for various brands. Their appearance in commercials unfolds a special kind of intertextuality. Since they are part of our everyday media experience, the more general cultural intertextuality is always at work. Moreover, the animation created for the ad has to present the toon according to the established screen persona and it has to be based on the same aesthetic features, and plot structures as the original cartoons. Thus the new film text is more than an allusion (although it seldom can be considered a quotation in the strict sense, because there is no direct source clip which is actually used or inserted).

Among the most prominent classic cartoon characters with a long list of appearances in television commercials (cf. Cooke n.d.) are certainly those created in the 1930s and 1940s for the Warner Brothers or MGM. Due to their permanent presence on various networks, and the release of video and DVD collections for home viewing, their popularity has even increased since the late 1980s. Accordingly, ad agencies both in the US and in Europe use them to promote different products from cereals, fast food or soft drinks to cars.[6]

Sometimes, the interdependence between ads and movies can even work the other way round, as it is the case with the hybrid film *Space Jam* (Joe Pytka, US 1996). The idea to show the basketball star Michael Jordan together with Bugs Bunny was the plot nucleus of two *Nike* commercials. In "Hare Jordan" (Joe Pytka, US 1992; Wieden & Kennedy, Portland) the long-term Nike spokesman Jordan helps Bugs Bunny to fight four guys who harrass him in the gym. Together they defeat the four meanies, using classic toon fighting strategies, including the anvil trick. What seems today to be a perfect match invented for success, was regarded quite different in the beginning. When asked in an interview for the *Harvard Business Review* about possible risks in advertising, Nike's CEO Phil Knight talked about this ad:

> The Hare Jordan, Air Jordan commercial that aired during the 1992 Super Bowl represented a big risk from both a financial and a marketing standpoint. It showed Michael Jordan teaming up on the basketball court with Bugs Bunny. We invested in six months' worth of drawings and a million dollars in production costs to show Michael Jordan, probably the most visible representative of Nike, paired with a cartoon character. It could have been too silly or just plain dumb. But we got thousands of positive responses, and *USA Today* ranked it the best Super Bowl ad. (Willigan 1992)

A year later in "Aerospace Jordan" (Joe Pytka, US 1993; Wieden & Kennedy, Portland) Jordan and Bugs have to face new dangers in outer space. In both commercials, Porky Pig tries hard to have the last saying with his traditional line, "That's all Folks!"

Digital editing, or: Dead celebrities still endorsing a product

To integrate scenes with actors who have long left us into a new movie in such a way that the old and the new characters interact is nothing new — neither in feature films nor in commercials.[7] However, the development of digital editing brought fundamental changes. Whereas in the old days the shots had to be taken as they were and interaction could only be achieved by shot/reverse shot montage, filmmakers now can combine old and new footage within one and the same shot, that is, actors who could have never met each other appear side by side, and the quoted material can be altered to whatever is needed: characters are taken out of the original context and placed in a different scene,

and images are changed in detail, for instance only the lips to be in synch with the new dialog. Already in the first digital ad – *Coca-Cola Diet Coke* "Night Club" (Steve Horn, US 1991; Still Price Lintas, New York; R Greenberg Associates) – living stars were teamed up with their deceased colleagues: Elton John *plays for* Humphrey Bogart and James Cagney, and even *plays together* with Louis Satchmo Armstrong.

With regard to the visual and plot strategies, several categories can be distinguished. A first group of commercials (re-)creates *scenes which are more or less closely related to the stories which are characteristic of the screen persona of the dead stars*.

One of the famous actors who still appears on the small screen long after he left us is John Wayne. A series of beer commercials for *Coors Light*[8] combined remastered old footage from his movies with new material. The digital recreation of a famous star in an equally famous movie scene is at the core of *Ford Puma* "McQueen" (Paul Street, UK 1997; Young & Rubicam, London), one of the few European examples. Some 17 years after his death, Steve McQueen is driving once again through the streets of San Francisco, just like he did in *Bullitt* (Peter Yates, US 1968).

A second strategy could be labeled "*same scene — another prop*". In these ads an entire scene is used, but the original props are replaced by the promoted product.[9]

Finally, there are commercials in which the digital interventions are more extensive, since not only a single object is replaced. An example for this digital composition is *Federal Express* "Oz" (Joe Pytka, US 2000; BBDO, New York) which was first aired during the Super Bowl.

The ad opens in Munchkinland with a shot of the Three Tough Kids singing their welcome song in the name of the "Lollypop Guild" for Dorothy (Judy Garland). (However, they are not the original Munchkins, but three actors shot in greenscreen, and the new film was matched with the original footage; cf. Suydam 2000.) As they sing, their voices grow deeper and deeper, and they angrily realize that something is going wrong. From the sky, a today's FedEx truck swirls down like Dorothy's house in the original version. The driver takes his delivery papers and gets out of the truck. A shot shows the Wicked Witch of the East's feet protruding from under the truck (yet another intratextual reference back to the earlier scene of Dorothy's landing in Munchkinland). The delivery man hands the three guys a FedEx parcel with helium filled balloons. After inhaling the gas, they continue the song with their normal voices and hand Dorothy a lollypop. The truck drives away on the Yellow Brick Road accompanied by the cheers of all the Oz inhabitants. Starting from the outline of the old scene, the new footage first changes the plot and adds the dramatic twist (the voice troubles of the Three Tough Kids), and then presents the solution of the problem through the endorsed service.

The “commercialization” of filmic intertextuality

As stated above, ad directors try very hard to keep us watching their spots in order to keep us buying the products. Considering the increasing number of spots which refer to movies, self-referentiality and intertextuality seem to be a good way to achieve both goals. Part of the reward Tom Robbins was talking about is that the viewers can be proud of themselves to have recognized the play.

> Advertisers know that their viewership prides itself on being able to deconstruct and understand the coercive tactics of television commercials. By winking at the audience, the advertiser is acknowledging that there’s someone special out there – someone smart enough not to be fooled by the traditional tricks of the influence professional. (Rushkoff 2000)

Another part of the reward is the fun viewers have while watching these commercials. But while watching and having fun, we should be watchful and recall the fact that self-referentiality not necessarily aims at emancipation or distancing:

> The self-referential humor signals to the spectator that the commercial is not to be taken seriously, and this relaxed state of expectation renders the viewer more permeable to the commercial message. (Stam 1992: 203)

Notes

1 The filmographic data of the commercials are given as complete as possible in the following way: *product/brand* “title of the ad” (director, country [ISO 3166] release year; agency).

2 Another commercial which refers to films based on Jane Austen novels is *Heineken* “Pride and Prejudice” (Graham Rose, US 1998; Lowe Howard Spink, London). In an English mansion a young woman, an elderly lady and a young gentlemen are engaged in a sort of murderish smalltalk. While exchanging nice and polite remarks, they shoot at each other with firearms of increasing size: pistols, guns, bazookas, until almost every piece of furniture is damaged.

3 Apart from BMW the list of enterprises with long-term James Bond movie tie-ins includes Avis, Ericsson, Heineken, Omega watches, L’Oreal, Smirnoff Vodka and Visa. However, in the 20th and so-far latest James Bond film *Die Another Day* (Lee Tamahori, US/UK 2002), 007 drives again an Aston Martin, the car brand of his earlier films.

4 Several films of Brian de Palma include allusions to the shower scene (*Phantom in Paradise*, US 1974; *Dressed to Kill*, US 1980; *Blow Out*, US 1981). Although the male victim is not attacked with a knife but with a newspaper, the most detailed citation with regard both to shot composition and montage can be found in *High Anxiety* (Mel Brooks, US 1977). Examples for TV series which refer to *psycho* are *Forever Knight* (season 1/episode 4 “Last Act”; Rene Bonniere, US 1992), and *Degrassi High* (season 4/episode 14 “It Creeps”; Kit Hood, CA-CBC 1989).

5 As of October 2002, the “World All-Time Box Office Chart” at IMDb the movie listed still in first rank with a world gross income of US$ $1,835,300,000.

6 An Italian campaign for the *Nissan Micramatic* (Maurizio Longhi, IT 1999; Dipace/Concato & Partners) uses two well-known pairs of foes: “Titti e Silvestro” (Tweety and Sylvester) and “Wile E Coyote” chasing the Road Runner.

7 Film examples are for instance *The Last Remake of Beau Geste* (Marty Feldman, US 1977) with Marty Feldman talking to Gary Cooper (William Wellman, US 1939), or Carl Reiner’s *Dead Man Don’t Wear Plaid* (US 1982) which uses clips of some 17 movies to show Steve Martin in interaction with almost everybody who was famous in the film noir of the 1940s, from Humphrey Bogart to Lana Turner. In a series of ads for *Holsten Pils* (‘Wayne’, ‘Bogart’, ‘Horror Film Censors’, ‘Gary Cooper’, ‘Psycho’, ‘Cagney’, ‘Marilyn’; Richard Sloggett & Graham Rose, UK 1983-88; TBWA GGT Gold Greenlees Trolt, London), Griff Rhys Jones is edited to interact with Hollywood stars like George Raft, Marilyn Monroe (1987), John Wayne, James Cagney, or Humphrey Bogart (all 1983).

8 *Coors Light* “The Inspection” (Joe Pytka, US 1997; Foote, Cone & Belding, Chicago) shows Wayne as a two-star general (taken from *Cast a Giant Shadow*, Melville Shavelson, US 1966). Digitally remastered words and images of John Wayne from *The Comancheros* (Michael Curtiz, US 1961) and of the Cartwright family (from the *Bonanza* episode “Enter Thomas Bowers”, Murray Golden, US-NBC 1964) are blended into new footage in *Coors Light* “Showdown” (Joe Pytka, US 1997; FCB, Chicago). *Coors Light* “John Wayne” (Rick Levine, US 1999; FCB, Chicago) combines footage from *El Dorado* (Howard Hawks, US 1967) with new scenes showing two guys walking into a Western town after their car has broken down.

9 With regard to the degree of digital remastering, there are different procedures. The scene can be taken wholesale, as it is the case with *Braun Hand Blender* “The Honeymooners” (Maria Kostyk-Petro, US 1996; Lowe & Partners/SMS, New York), an ad featuring Jackie Gleason and Art Carney. The commercial is based on a film-in-film TV commercial ‘made by’ Ralph Cramden (Jackie Gleason) and his friend Ed Norton (Art Carney), which was part of Episode 7, “Better Living Through TV”, of the classic TV sitcom *The Honeymooners* (Frank Satenstein, US 1955). Although another variant is also based on replacing the original prop by the new product, the intervention is by far bigger, and sometimes the genuine atmosphere of the original footage is not preserved in the new text. At least according to critics, this is the case with a series of three commercials for *Dirt Devil* (Greg Strom & Doug Magallon, US 1997; Meldrum & Fewsmith Communications, Cleveland) in which Fred Astaire is used to endorse various types of vacuum cleaners. The ads are based on classic dance routines, like the famous scene from *Royal Wedding* (Stanley Donen, US 1951) showing how Astaire dances with a hat rack.

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