TASA Conference 2005, University of Tasmania, 6-8 December 2005

Death in Advertising: The Case of Lynx Metamorphosis

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Abstract
Titled ‘Lynx Metamorphosis’, a 2003 internationally produced and broadcast advertisement for the brand ‘Lynx deodorant’, explicitly, and rather daringly, links/lynx sex and death in its narrative construction. Everyone knows that sex sells but what makes this advertisement strategically interesting and worthy of analysis is that it stakes a claim that sex and death sell. The fact that this advertisement eroticises death is highly unusual in commercial advertising.

This paper offers a close analysis of this advertisement, addressing, initially, its specific narrative scenes and representations. Conceptually, it considers this advertising leap into death, focusing, among other things, on the concepts of metaphor and metamorphosis, and questions of pornography and censorship. The advertisement, which intermingles life and death, animal and human, is further deployed in this paper as a vehicle (the very idea of metaphor as transportation) for thinking about the idea of contamination as it relates to censorship, and category blurring and intermingling. Like many Lynx advertisements this one was subject censorship in the UK and Australia. The paper considers this issue in relation to the status of death as obscene in modern Western societies.

Introduction

Birth, and copulation, and death.
That's all the facts when you come to brass tacks;
Birth, and copulation, and death.
T.S. Eliot, Sweeney Agonistes.

Titled ‘Lynx Metamorphosis’, a 2003 internationally produced and broadcast advertisement for the brand ‘Lynx deodorant’ explicitly, and rather daringly, links/lynx sex and death in its narrative construction. Everyone knows that sex sells but what makes this advertisement strategically interesting and worthy of analysis is that it stakes a claim that sex and death sell. This paper offers a close analysis of this advertisement, addressing, initially, its specific narrative scenes and representations. Conceptually, the
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The Advertisement: Lynx Metamorphosis

Over the last three or four years advertisements for the brand of Lynx men’s deodorant have become a self-referential genre—a genre with specific identifiable features such as weedy, ordinary looking young men. Typically these advertisements turn the rules of attraction of their head as physically unattractive men get the girls, and women, not men, are the sexual initiators and aggressors. The sexual potency of the product is marketed as ‘The Lynx effect’ and the advertisements are always unambiguously heterosexual.

The song ‘You Give Me Love’ by Manuk pumps loudly throughout 'Lynx Metamorphosis'.

Scene 1

A thin, weedy, pale young man (the usual Lynx protagonist) stands in front of a full-length mirror in retro blue underpants with white piping. It is an embarrassing, cringe inducing image for the viewer because the young man is wearing sunglasses at night and dancing in front of the mirror. He lifts one arm in a Saturday Night Fever John Travolta dance groove as he sprays on Lynx deodorant. He then slips into a bright, nightclub cruising satin shirt and is ready for action/sexual attraction.

Scene 2

Young Lynx wearing man confidently struts into a bar that is filled with paintings and sculpture. Immediately two women he walks past are sexually aroused. They follow him to a booth and sit in very close proximity. His shirt opens and we see a small gold pendent around his neck. It is like a vial. Suddenly, a mosquito flies in on the scene, lands on his open necked chest and bites him. We view this in close-up. The mosquito turns red
with his blood and leaves a visible imprint on his flesh. Sucking his blood and the perfume, it is about to carry (beyond this scene) the Lynx effect.

What proceeds from this moment onwards is a series of causal relationships where life and death are interchangeable—each contaminating and metamorphosing into the other. The scenes are as follows:

**Scene 3**
A frog eats the mosquito. This frog copulates with another frog and is thus reproducing the Lynx effect. Very quickly a net comes down over the copulating frogs, catching them. One of the frogs ends up as a meal (frog’s legs) on the table of a swank, rather gothic looking restaurant. An elderly man in a cream dinner jacket is voraciously eating the frog’s legs with his hands as an attractive Latin looking woman enters the scene. She notices his eating and instantly the effect has been transmitted to her. Very sexually she puts one of her fingers into her mouth, metonymically performing the voracious orality of his eating and of sex.

**Scene 4**
Next she pushes the elderly man on a bed, aggressively showing her sexual intentions she lifts her little black dress. We see her black underpants. The man looks happy and surprised to find himself in this situation. He has no knowledge of the causal relationships that now incorporate him. He is about to get sex—the pay-off of the Lynx effect that has indirectly come to him through a chain of human and animal bodies and sexual drives.

But he gets a little more than the petite mort of the orgasm. The next image is his smiling face (the cliché of a man dying in coitus) on a headstone in a misty, gothic looking graveyard. The headstone reads: B. Hynnes 1931-2003
While an elderly man has had the sexual benefit of the Lynx effect it has also killed him. Is it too potent for older men? In any case, the advertisement did not kill off its demographic target of young men.

His death and dead body is not the end of the Lynx effect but part of its continual movement through the vicissitudes of life and death.

**Scene 5**

A worm is wriggling underground through the dirt. We do not directly see this worm eating of the flesh of the dead man but the advertisement is about making such links/lynx. This scene is perhaps the most confronting in terms of transgressing the taboo of death. Dirt as Mary Douglas argues has specific resonances in modern societies because it is linked to scientific awareness of the bacterial transmission of disease. However, at a much deeper symbolic level, dirt is ‘matter out of place’ and thus a threat to systems cleanliness and fictions of purity (1979: 34-35).

**Closing Scene**

The final scene is in a bar. The climate is steaming hot and overhead fans are on. A hot and sweaty Latin man is at the bar drinking a bottle of beer. In the bottle is the worm slipping closer and closer towards his mouth. We see and hear him swallow it. He eats the worm that had eaten of the man, who ate the frog that had eaten the mosquito that had bitten the young man.

Instantly upon eating the worm, the bar room is transformed into a hot bed of sexual desire. Three women from nearby tables get up to approach the man and the buxom bar woman, juts out her breasts as she too shows signs of the Effect.

And so the Lynx effect continues, undiminished in its potency. The deodorant is essentially the same while everything it comes into contact with transforms.
The advertisement has no sense of narrative closure in terms of the Lynx effect. The voice over at the end says: ‘the Lynx effect. Now stronger than before’.

**Challenging cleanliness—category intermingling and boundary loss**

At face value combining of sex and death might seem commercially risky but it makes advertising sense given that death more than sex, is the modern taboo of Western culture. Geoffrey Gorer names this taboo the *pornography of death*.

Traditionally, and in the lexicographic meaning of the term, pornography has been concerned with sexuality. For the greater part of the last two hundred years copulation and (at least in the mid-Victorian decades) birth were the ‘unmentionables’ of the triad of basic human experiences which ‘are all the facts when you come to brass tacks’, around which so much private fantasy and semi-clandestine pornography were erected. During most of this period death was no mystery, except in the sense that death is always a mystery…In the 20th century, however, there seems to have been an unremarked shift in prudery; whereas copulation has become more and more ‘mentionable’…death has become more and more ‘unmentionable’ as a natural process (1987: 171-72).

By linking sex and death the advertisement draws attention to the question of what is pornographic in contemporary society—sex, death or both? In modern Western societies, death is a highly managed event through the intervention of medicine, the institution of the hospital, and government regulation of the dead body. While the pornography of death partly concerns its status of hidden ness and containment within spaces of and for death (the hospital and hospice), it also concerns its position as an absolute limit, antithetical to the deeply modern value of human and individual freedom. Death is the *void* that is unavoidable. Furthermore, the modern pornography of death is linked to two main historical trajectories that are intertwined. The decline in traditional salvation religions in the West coupled with the failure of science and technology to overcome the fallibility of the body. Science in its requirement of evidence-based knowledge, not faith, has shaken beliefs in after life survival. Death has stubbornly subverted the Western desire for mastery over nature, and mortal corporeality, through science and technology. In other words, death has a pornographic status because neither religion nor science offers an escape from death and this is a deeply disturbing modern anxiety. Death is a
little too real, perhaps the very definition of the real in contemporary society—it is, I would argue, ob-scene.

This advertisement fits within the secular tradition of historical and evolutionary materialism and its non-egocentric death politics—it offers no human escape from matter into an otherworldly existence. Individual death is reduced to a material event, one in which bodies meld with matter and other life forms.

Like previous Lynx advertisements, this particular one has been subject to television broadcasting complaints in Australia and was banned on UK television. In order to circumvent government censorship, protecting commercial investment, Lynx in the UK commissioned an internet advertising company, ‘Zentropy’, to distribute the advertisement on online at various sites demographically targeted to young, white, heterosexual, and middle class males (www.zentropypartners.co.uk).

Complaints against, and censorship of, advertisements with sexual content are often characterised as the danger of moral contamination—the transportation of erotic images into the conscious or unconscious minds of the sexually naïve, innocent or pure of mind. In a post counter-cultural age of sexual liberation, sex is a significant currency in a free market economy of signs linked to consumption of goods and services. The terms of complaint in letters to the Australian Advertising Standards Board are commonly those such as indecent, disgusting, smutty, crude, vulgar, offensive, and pornographic. All of these terms constitute a moral typology or code that represents a type of person or social group.

The mainstream dissemination of psychoanalytical discourse has created a counter-strategy of questioning the moral authority of those who seek to censor. Common knowledge of the psychoanalytic term ‘unconscious’ as the scene of repressed mental activities that concern sex, death, desire, fantasy, and anxiety has raised the suspicion that those who seek to censor have a pornographic imagination. Contrary to a pre-psychoanalytic belief in a self-transparent, undivided moral consciousness, such ‘moral
types’ are perceived as unconsciously guilty, of enjoying the sexual imagery they condemn. In other words, the morality of the censors is viewed as contaminated by the very thing they are seeking to exclude.

The translation or reading of more complex advertisements is itself a process of contamination or intermingling between the object of analysis (the advertisement) and the subject doing the analysis: ‘The work of textual production takes place in the relationship between the text and reader, although these are neither discrete nor singular textual relations’ (Gibson 1998: 89). Somewhat surprisingly, this recognition of intermingling is part of how the Australian Advertising Standards Board may make their determinations about whether or not to censor an advertisement. For example, another Lynx advertisement (of 2002-2003) had numerous complaints about sexual content.2 This particular advertisement was described on the website of the Advertising Standards Board as follows:

This television advertisement opens on a close-up of what becomes revealed as man’s armpit, with the camera view turning and widening to show the man’s face, part of his upper body and left arm before the scene changes to a view of the advertised product as a caption-supported voiceover states: ‘The Lynx Effect. Now available in roll-on” (Australian Advertising Standards Board: 2003).

Those who have seen this advertisement will recall that in the ambiguity of the unfolding image, an identification can made that the armpit is, at some point in time, the genital, pubic area of a woman’s body. This particular identification was one that all of the complainants made. Many viewers watching this advertisement for the first time would go through a process of making this identification, realising that it is to some extent a misidentification, and finally making an adjusted identification. In any case, the Advertising Standards Board made the following judgement:

The Advertising Standards Board [the Board’] considered whether this advertisement breaches Section 2 of the Advertiser code of Ethics [‘the Code’].

The Board noted that while this advertisement caused offence to some people, the advertiser had pointed out that there is, in fact, no sexual content, that “it is only the viewer’s assumption or imagination that suggests otherwise” (Australian Advertising Standards Board 2003).
From the point of view of interpretation and levels of ideas, the advertisement cleverly raises the question of identification per se. The identification of the sexed-body of a woman is not a misidentification—it can easily be regarded as a represented and constructed image in the metamorphosis of the image that finally emerges. And of course advertises know this—it is a strategy of protection against censorship to displace the responsibility of identification onto viewers themselves. And with these strategies of metamorphosis and interpretive displacement, advertisements can indeed claim a space of intermingling between the writing and reading of a text.

Subversively, Lynx metamorphosis deconstructs any oppositional construction between sex and death, life and death performed through the law exclusion—the bar / of a dichotomy. In this advertisement the category of death partakes of, intermingles with, the category of life and vice versa. And this is partly because these categories are visually represented as fundamentally corporeal and inter-corporeal. The modern tendency to literally and categorically exclude death from life by way of spatial, visual, tactile and symbolic borders is undone through this deployment of category intermingling. For example, there are animals eating of human flesh, animals eating of other animals, humans eating of other animals, and humans eating of humans. In the last sequence a worm mediates the inter-consumption between humans. Culturally worms have a horrible association with death as underground eaters, hastening the decomposition of the flesh. And the worm in this advertisement does this explicitly so, as it appears to have eaten of the flesh of a dead man’s body. And in its eating it has ingested the Lynx effect from his body.

From Metaphor to Metamorphosis

‘Lynx Metamorphosis’ features a mosquito linked to product of perfume rather than the usual insect links to pesticide products. Unlike the genre of pesticide advertising, this one has more in common with the flea of John Donne’s famous poem, ‘The Flea’. In these quite different texts, the insects of flea and mosquito are metaphors in terms of being forms of transportation and of representation. Metaphor is not just about drawing
analogies or thematic connections between often quite different or seemingly opposed subjects and objects. In its Greek origins, metaphor is also about the idea of transportation. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michele de Certeau discusses the link between not only metaphor and travel in Modern Greek language, but also metaphor and story:

In modern Athens, the vehicles of mass transportation are called *metaphorai*. To go to work or come home, one takes a “metaphor”—a bus or a train. Stories could also take this noble name: every day, they traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories (1988: 115).

Metaphors enable movement and connection from thing-idea to another. In Donne’s poem a flea consummates the intermingling of sexual desire and bodily substances as it draws from, and intermixes, the blood of two lovers. The flea also represents a deferred erotic encounter between the lovers themselves. In the Lynx advertisement, the mosquito is a carrier of the erotic chemical that *is* Lynx deodorant.

As carriers of intermingled blood, perfume and ideas, these *metaphor insects* are the life and death drive, *Eros and Thantos*. Freud posited both a life and death drive and initially saw these as two opposing forces within the human organism and by extension within society or civilisation. The life drive is characterised as a binding force, one aims to preserve and extend existence by creating unities—sexual unions, relationships of love and desire, families, communities and so on. The death drive is ultimately destructive (unbinding), and includes events such as war, sadism, and other forms of aggression. However, as Jonathon Dollimore notes, Freud ultimately came to understand that Eros and Thantos are not oppositional drives but intermingled such that one can transform into the other. For example, when love turns into hate and vice versa (2001: 189). More significantly, perhaps, Freud in his later paper ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ posited that death, the inanimate, is the origin of life and that ‘the aim of life is death’ (1986: 246). Thus the life drive is underpinned by, and ultimately at the service of, the death drive.
Like metaphor, metamorphosis is a transforming movement from one thing into another. The transforming can result in a transformation—of species, bodily form or identity. In classical Roman poet Ovid’s text *Metamorphoses*, humans, at the mercy of gods, are transmogrified into trees, animals and nymphs. And in Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* the protagonist, Gregor, awakens one morning to find himself utterly transformed, devolving into an insect—a dung beetle. Metamorphosis as transformation does not necessarily fix upon a state of being, that is, something that stabilises, but can be regarded as a metaphor for existence itself as perpetual becoming. Thus the organic existence of humans, other animal and plant forms never attains a fixed state but is always in a becoming or transitional process of metamorphosis. As humans, we are what we are becoming and not becoming what we already are. The metamorphosis in Lynx Metamorphosis contests the boundaries that stabilise category distinctions of human and animal, life and death, form and matter. As argued earlier, metamorphosis, as a visual strategy in advertising is also a way of dislocating a text’s content as both text and readers intermingle, sharing the space of production.

Footnotes


2 Although community complaints against Lynx Metamorphosis have been adjudicated in favour of continued broadcasting, details of the specific nature of complaints are yet to published on the Advertising Standards Website.

References


