



The Empire Strikes Back: Projections of National Identity in Contemporary Russian Advertising

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“Comrades! Let us drown the Russian bourgeoisie in a flood of images!”

A copywriter’s toast to Russian advertising in Viktor Pelevin, *Babylon*

The circulation of allusions, resonances, and emotional propositions connected with the marketing of native products in the Russian Federation today is an important source of information about projections of national identity. Of particular interest is tobacco and alcohol advertising. A ban on access to television means that tobacco companies spend enormous resources on the blanket coverage of urban areas with billboards and, increasingly, on the routes of communication between those areas.¹ The ephemeral nature of these advertisements, and their relatively recent appearance in Russia, means that they are an underutilized resource in the analysis of post-Communist cultural changes.

Since the recovery of the economy after 1995, a large number of specifically Russian products (leaving aside, for the moment, whether the concerns that produce them are Russian-owned or not), as opposed to generic, or multinational brands have been marketed on a scale comparable to that in other European countries. However, it is only since the devaluation of the ruble after the economic crisis of 1998 that the Russian advertising industry proper can be said to have taken off. The rapid switch off of imports after the ruble crash proved a perfect opportunity for Russian companies to respond to consumer demand with cheaper home-produced products. With the exit of multinationals in large numbers the growing advertising industry was quickly transformed into a machine for promoting Russian and quasi-Russian products. The proportion of global products

¹According to recent Gallup figures (2002) the quantity of street advertisements for tobacco products in Russia is twice as large as that of any other product group. Data available from http://www.tns-global.ru/rus/data/monitoring/outdoor/_2002_g_/by_category.wbp. The figures also give expenditure on street tobacco advertising as \$26 million; the next highest expenditure on advertising products was the brewing industry, spending a mere \$9 million. In late 2004 discussion began in government about the restricted access to television for beer advertisers.



promoted on the screen and on billboards fell significantly, even if the Coca-Colas and Gilettes of this world remained stubbornly ubiquitous. Many other multinational players found that the Russian market had become simply unprofitable, and their relative absence gave further impetus to the burgeoning Russian-produced market in the form of much cheaper advertising costs. From 1999 onward, judging by the variety of advertisements appearing on streets and screens throughout Russia, the observer might have logically assumed that a new confidence in Russian products had been found in the consumer.

The truth was and largely remains that most consumers could no longer afford imported products, whether cheap consumables such as beer and tobacco, or higher-cost luxuries such as cars. As real incomes plummeted after August 1998 and the urban middle class that had begun to take tangible form prior to the crash found itself almost as impoverished as the rest of the country, Russian marketers began to use their expertise gained promoting global products to help the rapidly recovering Russian production of consumer goods.² These workers were much cheaper replacements, in the remaining Western ad agency presence, for the expatriates who had left en masse. After nearly a decade of market saturation by products whose foreign names were difficult to pronounce, and whose virtues were sometimes baffling not just to the consumer but to the ad copywriter too, it was wholly logical that marketers would now extol the native virtues of so-called “Russian products.” But unlike other countries, most of which have their share of “buy home-grown” advertising, Russian products have become increasingly associated with propositions about Russian national identity in its broadest and most amorphous sense. It is therefore the marketing of these Russian products that is the focus of this article. Companies selling tobacco, alcoholic, and dairy products and other core comestibles in particular have, over the last ten years but particularly after 1998, utilized images and slogans playing on notions of Russian national identity. How does Russian advertising of these products posit notions of national cultural difference, how are such notions constructed, read, and what, if any, changes do they reflect in Russian culture and society?

ICONICITY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

The iconic register of Russian ads is crucial to the question of their propositions about national identity. A significant number of beer advertisements use images of legendary heroes and events from Russian history to make statements about the “Russianness” and sense of tradition connected to their products. A separate article could be devoted to the role of Peter the Great as advertising’s favorite historical personage. A distant but not insignificant second would be Alexander Nevsky. In an ad for a brand of butter we see the Prince of Novgorod tuck in to some open sandwiches and, having been sustained by the product enough to beat the Teutonic invaders, pronounce “we’ve won the day!” (*nasha vziala!*) During the recent hockey World Cup (2004), a different kind of battle on the ice was staged, but similarly involved a “traditional Russian product” (leading beer brand Three Heroes (Tri bogatyria), from St. Petersburg) and epic heroes in chain-mail, wielding

²See Thane Gustafson, “Beyond coping: toward the recovery of Russian society,” in *Capitalism Russian-Style* (Cambridge, England, 1999), 170–91.



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hockey sticks. Examples of this kind of ad are legion; to illustrate the extremes of sophistication and simultaneous ridiculousness they can reach it is worth mentioning the example of Cadet Beer (Iunkerskoe). Nikita Mikhalkov filmed the ad for this beer brand in parallel to his epic of prerevolutionary Russia, *The Barber of Siberia* (*Sibirskii tsiriul'nik*). The ad replicated the sentimental depiction in the film of the “lost traditions” of great Russia and featured a thwarted revolutionary conspiracy and a final pack-shot (the obligatory close-up shot of the product) with sabers and a revolver.³

A sense of historicity is perhaps then the most common form of Russian, or Slavic, iconicity in these types of advertising and is primarily utilized by companies whose product contains Russian ingredients: wheat and dairy products, and so on. However, the more recent past too can be utilized: Baltika’s extravagant “Friendship of peoples” campaign (2001) featured a commonwealth of nations in identical poses harmoniously enjoying their beer. The pack-shot included a map of Russia, the bottle of beer and glass tactfully hiding the lost nations of the Soviet Union, whose stereotypical representatives were so necessary—cast in the role of Soviet citizens—to the ad’s concept. Even the slogans, “Beer brewed for you,” “Brewed in Russia so as to be closer to you” (we could add other beer slogans such as “Together we are strong” [Three Heroes], “There where Russia is,” and the like) contained echoes of Soviet propagandistic *plakat* language. Iconicism in ads, where the product becomes a relatively incidental part of the *mise-en-scène* and cultural signifiers are given prominence, marks not only Russian advertising’s relation to propagandistic modes of the Soviet *plakat* art but also a fetishism of cultural symbols that nearly supplants that of the product itself.

Finally, Russian iconicity can promote a “compensatory” selling proposition, even when the product is not a native one. The Russian company Grand produces the tea label Great Tiger (Velikii tigr), a granulated lower-quality product from India, which attempted to re-brand itself by associating a projection of quintessential Russian masculinity with the great Russian tea-drinking tradition. The example of Russian national character in question was not a battle to turn back the tides of Teutonic invaders, but did feature a legendary, if modern day, *bogatyr*: the star of the “National Hunt” films, Leonid Buldakov. The creators of this ad were careful to let Buldakov play himself, or rather the gruff but genial character of Mikhalich from the films. The character is a specifically Russian everyman displaying the ostensibly typical traits of resourcefulness, stoicism, hospitality, communal or cooperative spirit, cunning, and rough charm. Enjoying a good steam in his *bania*, Buldakov’s repose is threatened by a group of thugs with shaved heads, but with the help of his pet tiger their attempt to invade is thwarted. The final pack-shot features tiger, *bania*, Buldakov, samovar, and the slogan “The victors’ tea.” The propositions put forward in this ad about Russian national identity and the reality of post-Soviet life are quite representative of this type of advertising. The victory of the Russian everyman, Buldakov, like the victory of the Russian cosmonaut in the Iava ads explored below, provides a “compensatory” factor in the light of stark post-Soviet reality. There is

³Filipp Aleksandrov, *Khroniki rossiiskoi reklamy* (Moscow, 2003), 115–17. Aleksandrov provides an excellent overview of the young Russian advertising industry, from a strictly utilitarian (what works and what doesn’t) point of view.



a conflict between “them” and “us” (*nashi*); “they” often display traits explicitly or otherwise linking them with non-Russian (U.S. technological and economic achievements—in the Iava ads), or post-Soviet realities (new Russian hoodlums—in the Buldakov ad). Typically these kinds of ads are associated with cheaper brands likely to appeal to the lowest income groups. The industry observer Filipp Aleksandrov comes to a conclusion not dissimilar to Theresa Sabonis-Chafee’s about Soviet nostalgia (discussed below), when he calls these types of ads an “intuitively accurate understanding of the psychology of a whole group desiring compensation.”⁴ He concludes that they constitute a form of modern fairytale with elements of social utopia.

The television advertising market and more specifically the wealth of Russian cultural capital (artists, designers, copy-writers) which sustains it is now sufficiently mature to exclude the necessity of agencies employing non-Russian nationals in any stage of the development process for an ad campaign. Even Russian campaigns for major global brands are by and large developed and produced by all-Russian teams.

JAVA’S COUNTERSTRIKE AGAINST AMERICA

Iava is a popular ex-Soviet brand.⁵ It is made in Russian factories owned by the multinational company British-American Tobacco in a country with the highest tobacco consumption rates, and consequently, the second most lucrative cigarette market in the world after China.⁶ At first it was marketed as simply a patriotic product, a “counterstrike” against foreign imports, then as a quintessentially Russian lifestyle accessory.

The whole question of cultural values is a problematic one. First, there is the issue of national origin: prior to 1998 there was a significant involvement by non-Russians in the creative process and development of campaigns for Russian products. Second, after 1998 there is the issue of push versus pull values. Advertising copy is now produced by a tiny Europeanized urban elite who are openly disdainful of significant aspects of their society, but also remain optimistic and unshakably patriotic. Do they reflect or impose values connected with Russianness in their product promotions? It is certainly true that no significant campaign now airs on TV without going through a drawn-out process of focus-group showings to “target audiences,” a watchword in Russian marketing. Whatever the balance between reflection of tangible societal values and projection of mythical “public opinion,” it is clear from even a tentative reading of the tobacco and alcohol advertising campaigns that advertisers, consciously and unconsciously, create different “readings” of

⁴Ibid., 168.

⁵The cigarette name Iava (Java) existed in prerevolutionary Russia too. It was produced in two factories, the quality of the cigarettes from the Iava factory (brands in the USSR not being confined to particular producers) being better, leading to greater brand distinctiveness as Soviet consumers frequently asked their tobacconists for “Iava’s Iavas.”

⁶The extremely cut-throat nature of alcohol and tobacco markets in Russia is significant, in that advertisements of such products have to earn their keep in terms of increasing sales. If they do not they are swiftly dropped. The increasing number of iconic Russian advertisements (and the length of the campaigns themselves, indicating the financial and branding investment) is an indicator of their resonance with consumers, and the brand value of native products. See James Rupert and Glenn Frankel, “In Ex-Soviet Markets, U.S. Brands Took On Role of Capitalist Liberator,” *Washington Post*, 19 November 1996.



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Russian culture in relation to the “West.” The developing tobacco and alcohol advertising campaigns reflect changes in these readings, which I argue accompany changes at the level of popular cultural consciousness. These readings by no means create a clearly definable sum of Russian values in contrast to those of the West, but in all their iterations they posit cultural difference as a selling proposition, however illusory or difficult this difference is to define.

In 1997 the “counterstrike” Iava advertising campaign began, utilizing photomontages of a quality hitherto unknown in Russian product promotion. In terms of form too, these advertisements, featuring a short memorable slogan, uncluttered images and strong backlighting, marked a watershed in Russian advertising. One of the most striking images of the series featured a Russian cosmonaut painting a space shuttle in the red and gold Iava livery with the Russian space station swooping down like a bird of prey on the U.S. craft (Fig. 1). The slogan was “The counterstrike—Iava Gold” (*Otvetnyi udar—Iava zolotaia*). This series of advertisements was indeed striking: all the advertisements mixed

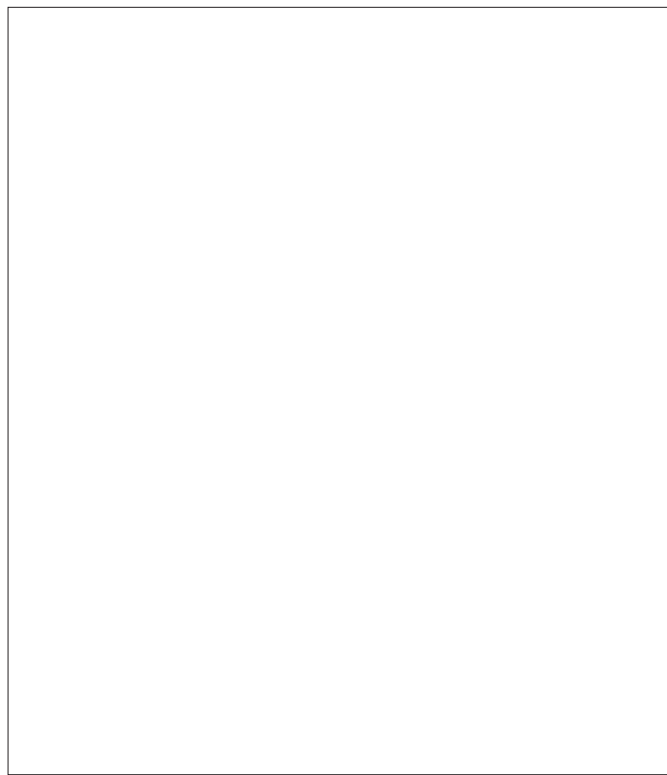


FIG. 1 Iava Gold’s first of a series of counterstrike images: *Otvetnyi udar* (1997–2001), backlit billboard, Moscow Metropolitan.

Russian and American iconic images similar to those in the shuttle ad and together constituted a concrete cultural text containing a number of vectors of Russian national self-image, defined in contrast to the West. In addition, this campaign was one of the first



“critically” successful advertising creations managed and developed by a mainly Russian team.⁷

Like the Great Tiger ad the Iava campaigns attempt to provide the consumer with a compensatory factor as a buying proposition. Unlike the television ads already discussed, until recently Iava utilized iconic images, not just of Russia but of the West as well. The story of the marketing and popularity of Iava cigarettes, and in particular the Iava Gold brand, reflects Russian consumers’ rapidly changing attitudes, not only to their national self-image and relationship to the West but also to their own status as one constituency of consumers in a global market, an attitude itself reflecting changing notions of nation and identity. The enduring images of Iava’s “counterstrike” against symbols of American cultural, technological and economic preeminence have firmly lodged in the Russian cultural consciousness.⁸ The advertisements’ popularity was partially reflected in their effect on sales, commented on below. Other subtle effects are reflected in the continuing parody and pastiche of these advertisements, utilizing both images and slogan. The iconicity of the series of images of places and agents—Shuttle, Mir Station, New York skyline (Fig. 2) (Statue of Liberty, World Trade Center, Empire State Building), Russian

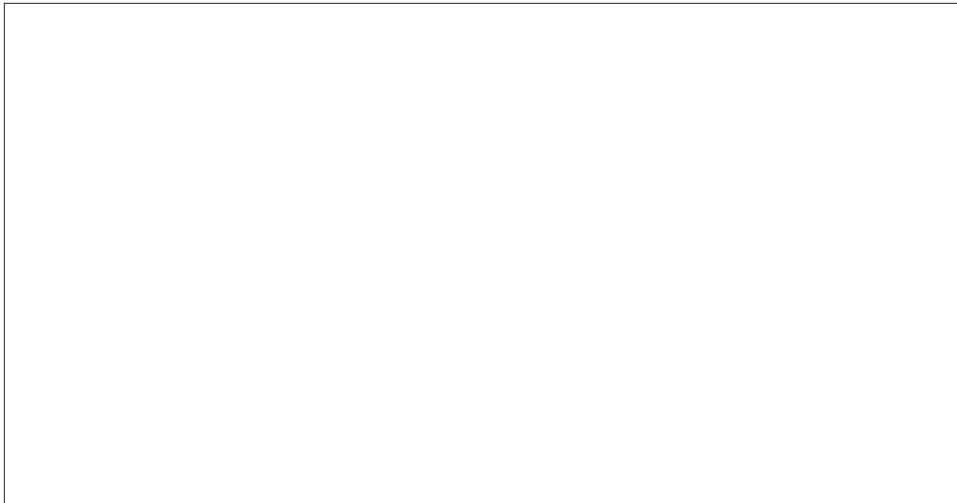


FIG. 2 Iava Gold “counterstrike” series billboards on the Moscow MKAD (2000).

⁷Private correspondence with creative director at a leading advertising agency, 2004. It is relatively difficult to obtain information about the development of a “*kreativ*” (creative idea) associated with a campaign; neither agencies nor the companies whose portfolios they hold wish to draw attention to the individuals responsible for coming up with original ideas. The writer Kira Laskari comments on this phenomenon in relation to TV ads in his “advertising-novel”: *Applikatsii* (Moscow, 2002), 6: “The originator of the idea remains unknown. All the credit, with few exceptions, goes to the ad director.” It is similarly difficult to obtain examples of advertisements no longer in circulation, hence the poor quality of some of the photographs in this article. The re-branded Iava Gold won a number of industry prizes for branding.

⁸The phrase *otvetnyi udar* in contemporary Russian used either literally or figuratively originates in Stalin’s prewar military doctrine of massive counterattack against Hitler (and also defines the postwar nuclear doctrine against the West), adding another layer of meaning to the already aggressive imagery of the slogan



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cosmonaut, flying cigarette packet as rocket, giant bear, *ushanka* hat—is repeated in online parodies, known as *antireklamy*.⁹

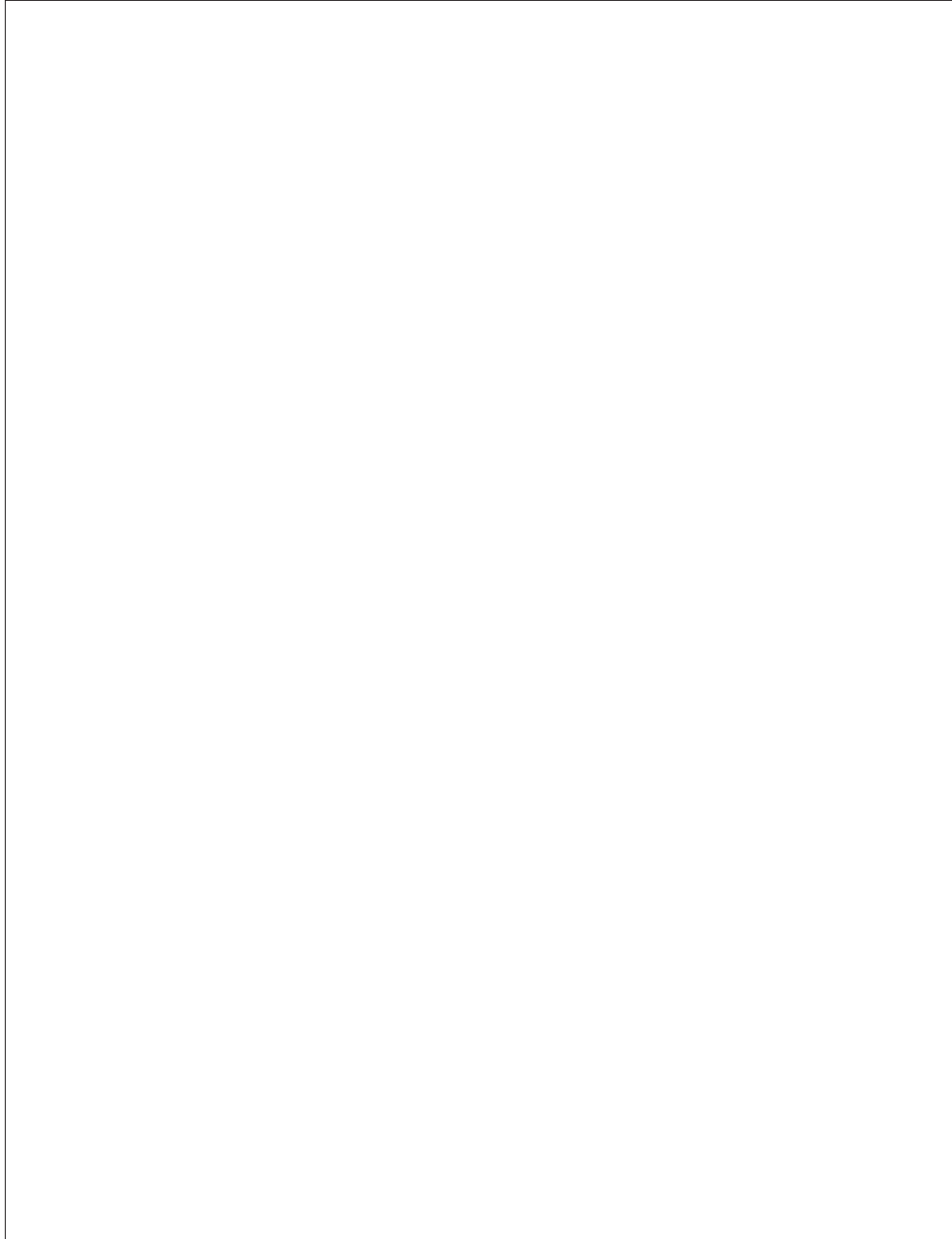


FIG. 3 Online parody of Iava ad (1999). Image by I. Belyi (www.beliy.ru:8083/portfolio/free.htm).

⁹A recent selection can be found at <http://www.beliy.ru/portfolio/free.htm>, <http://www.korova.ru/humor/viewer.php?id=955&types=p&subtypes=nark>, and <http://www.korova.ru/humor/viewer.php?id=693&types=p&subtypes=polit>.



The slogan “counterstrike,” too, can be said to have enjoyed an increase in popularity since the series, appearing regularly in newspaper headlines. One sign that the billboard advertising in particular might have had an effect on the popularity of this specific phrase is that increasingly it appears in quotation marks, as if a common phrase had been recast as a slogan to be quoted.¹⁰ However, the advertisements for Iava did not just become objects of parody for amateur online graffiti artists (Fig. 3). It is now possible to send an anti-American virtual greetings card parodying the advertisement,¹¹ and one site calling itself “Black-PR” drew attention to the fact that one of the Iava images appeared to be a parody itself—of an old Coca-Cola ad.¹² Ten years of foreign activity in the Russian cigarette market have made their mark in terms of producing cultural texts recognizable and meaningful to the vast majority of Russians, and it is clear that mass advertising will increasingly reflect cultural change in Russia. The Iava ads in particular allow a unique examination of the reception of consumers to advertising that plays on images of national identity and the feedback of marketers to this new constituency of consumers. As Nancy Condee has observed in her work on another sign system, prison tattoos, the collapse of the totalitarian system in Russia has led to the end of a relative fixity in the meaning of these signs.¹³ The inflexibility of both official and unofficial sign systems in the USSR is replaced by an unstable mixing of elements belonging to diverse sources, and a similar instability in the reception and interpretation of signs, a situation just as evident in the uses of images and slogans in Russian advertising today.

REBRANDING THE SOVIET UNION: NOSTALGIA AND IRONY

The marketing of the reborn Iava brand began in 1997. Iava has particularly strong associations with the Soviet past related to brand name and image: logo, packaging, and cultural memory. Marketers attempted to mine the positive associations of this psychocultural deposit of Sovietness in their advertising at a time of social upheaval and decline and thus activate consumers’ feelings of nostalgia, patriotism, and pride, and, of course, stimulate consumption. One recent observer of this phenomenon has defined an early post-Soviet Iava advertisement, and popular cultural phenomena like it, as “ironic-nostalgic.”¹⁴ The Iava billboard in question attempted to evoke sentimental feelings of nostalgia for stable Soviet realities by punning on a Soviet song lyric. Sabonis-Chafee defines popular cultural references to the Soviet past in terms of three types of distinct communist kitsch: utopian-nostalgic, ironic-nostalgic, and camp.¹⁵ Though we can agree that the early post-soviet Iava campaign slogan (“always beloved, always with you”) is

¹⁰For example, in the title of an article by Aleksei Khranchikhin, “‘Otvetyi udar’ demokratov,” *Literaturnaia gazeta* 26 (2001).

¹¹In the tobacco section of <http://cards.date.by/>.

¹²See <http://black.pr-online.ru/article.asp?art=197>.

¹³Nancy Condee, “Body Graphics: Tattooing the Fall of Communism,” in *Consuming Russia*, ed. Adele Marie Barker (Durham, 1999), 351.

¹⁴Theresa Sabonis-Chafee, “Communism as Kitsch,” *Consuming Russia*, 371–72.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 367. These definitions are partly derived from those of Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, MA, 1994).



ironic-nostalgic, within a short space of time this use of Soviet cultural referencing to evoke “idiosyncratic and personal” ironic-nostalgia in consumers changes significantly—and the distinction between utopian-nostalgic and ironic-nostalgic marketing becomes increasingly hard to perceive.¹⁶ One of the reasons for the confused development of nostalgia in post-Soviet popular culture is the ongoing psychocultural sense of lack at the heart of projections of Russian national identity. After 1998, nostalgic marketing was no longer directed at a niche segment of the population likely to identify itself entirely with the Soviet past. Against the backdrop of the simultaneous drop in incomes and recovery of Russian manufacturing and consumer goods, nostalgia becomes less exclusively utopian or ironic. The ideological associations of Soviet or prerevolutionary signifiers are watered down to create a vague but compellingly viscous “Russian idea,” sometimes referred to by marketers in describing advertisements as “the national Russian idea” (*obshche-rossiiskaia ideia*). This latter definition has been applied, for example, by Russian marketers reacting to the intended effect of the recent advertisements for Baltika beer similar to the “Friendship of peoples” campaign described earlier. Nostalgia in advertising has, as Aleksandrov argues, attained the equivalence of fairy tale: it refers to a mythic past, it retains utopian distance from the present, masking the reality of the changes since 1991 and thus providing a measure of psychological compensation. But, like fairy tales, contemporary advertising cannot of course replace the reality of everyday life; consumers of these advertisements and their products, like the young consumers of fairy tale, experience them as a space for the exercise of deep-seated fantasies, and therefore a measure of ironic response remains. The changing balance of utopia and irony in these advertisements is reflected in the development of the long-running and representative Iava campaigns.

Four different stages of national identification with, and public reading of, the images and slogans that made up the marketing of Iava cigarettes can be identified. First, general nostalgia for the Soviet past and light-hearted parody of American icons; second, patriotic feelings due to economic crisis; third, more acute anti-American nationalistic feelings during the Kosovan intervention and after the 2001 terror attacks; and, finally, a seemingly less negative positing of Russian communion (the *obshche-rossiiskaia ideia*) and masculinity. The final text, a recent series of advertisements for Iava (Fig. 4), is the most interesting because it appears most confident and therefore chauvinistic. In these ads the utopianism is given full rein and irony is difficult to ascribe. The warm, reassuring renewal-of-Russia approach in this latest series is, as we have seen, also typically found in advertisements for alcoholic beverages like beer and bread products, but is also found in the slogans of television stations, and even public-service advertisements encouraging Russians to vote. Such slogans invariably revolve around emotive use of the word “Russia,” “*Rus'*,” “ours” (*nash*), or “together” (*vmeste*), juxtaposed with images supposed to represent Slavic/Russian culture (prerevolutionary dress, architecture), activities conspicuously located in “Russian” locations (*dacha*, Black Sea resort, trans-Siberian train), or evoking memories of Soviet-era rituals (first day at school, call-up to the army, train journeys, harmonious workplaces where no one does any work, and so on).

¹⁶Sabonis-Chafee, “Communism as Kitsch,” 371.



The rapid replacement of one reading by another, indeed the “dual” reading of adverts, reflects not only the inherent instability of Russian society in the Yeltsin and Putin years but also a state of affairs that might be usefully compared to psychological disorders at the level of the individual. Identity disturbance is a medical term associated with identity disorders. These states are similar to schizophrenia where the sufferer is unable to sort or interpret stimuli and select the appropriate response. A model of Russian popular culture as a sufferer might be posited as the concomitant reception and discrete interpretation of paradoxical signs. Such signs would include (nationalistic adverts selling products widely known to be produced by Western-owned companies and the rapid replacement of brand images, sometimes neutral or positive toward symbols of the West, sometimes hostile.

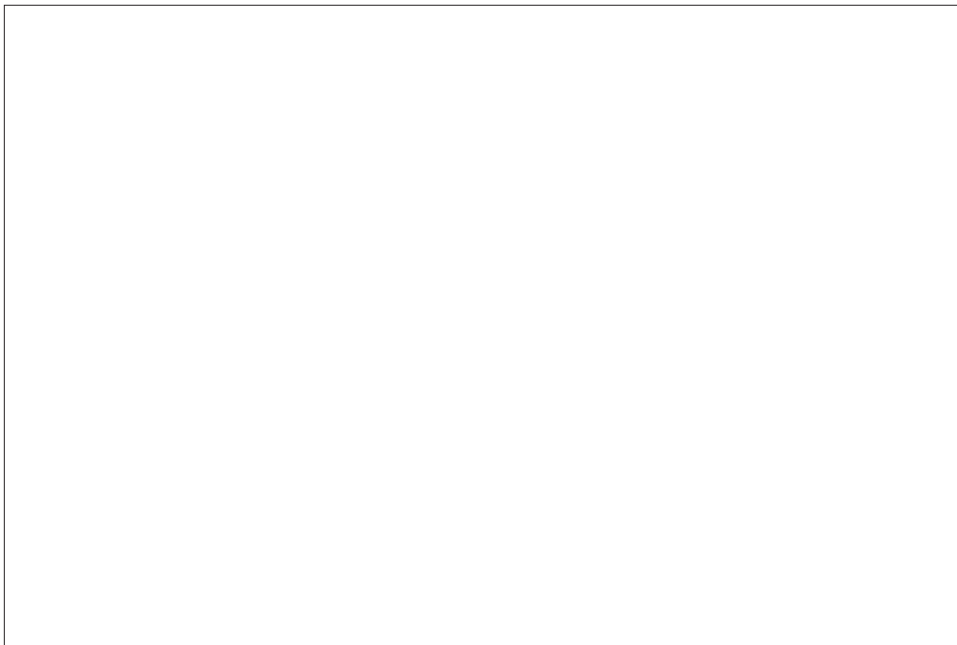


FIG. 4 Fourth-generation Iava billboard, Moscow (2003).

Iurii Lotman famously noted the inherent dualism and characteristic rapid replacement and reversal of binary oppositions in Russian culture.¹⁷ The rapid replacement and diffusion of nostalgic-ironic and utopian images in advertisements containing projections of cultural identity sits comfortably with his insistence on the evolutionary nature of Russian cultural identity, where any seemingly transformational phenomena will, at closer interrogation, contain elements of past forms. We can argue that the operations of psychoses in consumers’ nonrational response to capitalist production (the fetishism of commodities) can be extended in the Russian model to the fetishism in advertising of a modulating form of nostalgia,

¹⁷Iurii Lotman, *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History*, ed. Alexander D. Nakhimovsky and Alice Stone Nakhimovsky, trans. Boris Gasparov (Ithaca, 1985).



against the backdrop of an ongoing chronic lack of confidence in the future of Russia and what it means to be Russian, rather than Soviet. We have already seen how images and slogans about Russia and Russian identity tend to crowd out information about the products themselves. The social and psychological identification with images in advertising and the enjoyment of them does not, however, preclude sophisticated and paradoxical responses to them, including an ironic *and* utopian nostalgia, where the consumer interprets images and text on two levels simultaneously, both rationally and nonrationally. This last response is particularly interesting from the point of view of renewal-of-Russia advertising. Years of being subjected to state propaganda, and the resulting skepticism or ironic response in the population at large, has resulted in the rapid development of highly sophisticated postmodernist advertising evidenced by the nexus of nationalist images in the Iava advertisements and the almost ready-made appreciation in the new Russian consumer market for highly ironic, or postmodernist, playful marketing. Unlike the real sufferer of a personality disorder, where an “appropriate” model response can be ascertained by recourse to previous personality traits, or societal norms, the history of an ideologically driven cultural production means that Russian culture has no medical case-book by which to judge the ambiguous nature, or ‘split personality,’ of current advertising. Consequently consumer responses can appear “inappropriate.” Semiotic production of meaning from these ads continually escapes the control of the advertiser. In the central ad studied here—the “counterstrike” of Iava—simultaneous readings of neoimperialism, nostalgia for the USSR, and also of feelings of deep-seated psychocultural lack, an inferiority complex, and more, can be inferred.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE IAVA BRAND

In the postwar Soviet world the Iava brand was the most popular and consequently, the best known of cigarettes.¹⁸ At this time the staple smoke of the Soviet consumer was the filterless *papirosa*, and most of the production capacity was devoted to producing this rough, cheap blend in a market without legal limits on tar and nicotine content. From the beginning, Iava was a brand rather than a generic product.¹⁹ Significantly, in 1961 the patent on this brand was registered to the factory rather than the Ministry of Tobacco Production.²⁰ When in 1965 the factory received more modern plant, it was decided to improve the quality of the Iava blend and the brand effectively split in two, offering a *papirosa*-quality cigarette analogous in price to the Belomor brand, and a new, “elite” version of Iava in a sturdier pack costing twice as much. The design of the logo was as striking as any Soviet product: the word “Iava” in flowing golden cursives, or *propis'*

¹⁸Interview with Leonid Sinelnikov, general director of BAT-Iava, by Maya Mitreva, *Tobacco Reporter*, December 2001 (online version <http://www.tobaccoreporter.com/backissues/Dec2001/story3.asp>).

¹⁹Brand awareness in the postwar USSR was highly developed, despite the absence of advertising. Consumers quickly discovered which products were of higher quality, and consequently displayed strong brand loyalty in a market dominated by poor-quality goods.

²⁰Vladislav Kovalenko, “Potusknevshee zoloto ‘Iavy,’” *Kompaniia*, 27 January 2003 (online version http://www.ko.ru/document.asp?d_no=6162&p=1).



(Fig. 2), recalling the Stolichnaia vodka brand's design and commercial styles from the 1920s and 1930s. This logo was superimposed on a red band. This strong brand image, which was to become such a well-known Soviet consumer symbol, was developed by a Finnish company, giving a foretaste of future foreign influence over brand development. The Iava *papirosa* also had a makeover and now sported a very Soviet red circle (symbolizing the sun, and recalling the Soviet coat of arms) as the background for the brand name. These examples of production and marketing changes reflected early Soviet experiments in positioning, differentiation, and brand extension common in a number of consumer-goods areas. This in turn reflected the concomitant attempt to expand consumer culture and middle-class tastes and values, or, as Khrushchev put it, "rational consumption norms." Thus this initial attempt at Soviet re-branding, with its complex referencing of both foreign and NEP branding, attempted to exploit consumers' nostalgia for a "golden era" of better quality and more sophisticated tastes.

All was well then in Soviet cigarette production, until, that is, perestroika, which saw the steady deterioration and breakdown of the centralized distribution system coupled with preferential supply by factories to other producers, barter having ousted monetary exchange. Price rises exacerbated this problem, resulting in "vodka riots" in the New Year of 1990, followed by cigarette-related civil disturbances in the summer of that year—the so-called "tobacco rebellion." In the period 1991–93, Russian imports of tobacco and cigarettes grew exponentially as foreign companies began to engage on various levels with the Russian market, finally buying bankrupt Russian factories or developing joint ventures.²¹ By the time of the use of force against the Russian parliament in October 1993, different multinational tobacco companies were still primarily involved in using Russian plant to produce local versions of Western brands like Marlboro. Though home-grown cigarette brands continued to be produced by surviving Russian-owned companies—in fact, in much larger quantities than before—the focus was on pushing the higher-quality brand-leaders through blanket advertising and sponsorship of tobacco kiosks.²²

Because of the enormous size of the Russian market and the hitherto lack of any foreign presence, Western companies pulled out all the marketing stops to establish their existing international-generic higher- and mid-price brands (L&M, Parliament, Chesterfield, Marlboro, Camel, Lucky Strike, Kent, and the like). This resulted in the relative invisibility of the much cheaper Russian brands. It was not only generic brands that Russians had to get used to as multinationals moved into the Russian market: generic billboard advertising carrying images and text used in many subsidiary markets around the world literally blanketed the European cities.²³ By the mid-nineties the city of Moscow was covered in L&M (Philip Morris) billboards encouraging Russians to embrace a

²¹Alexander V. Prokhorov, "Cigarette Smoking and Priorities for Tobacco Control in the New Independent States," in *Premature Death in the New Independent States*, ed. Jose Luis Bobadilla et al. (Washington, DC, 1997), 277.

²²According to Prokhorov, availability of tobacco products had tripled by 1993 since the fall of the Soviet Union (ibid.).

²³The undifferentiated use of images and slogans in advertisements for many countries reflects the thinking of Theodore Levitt on the standardization of consumption patterns throughout the world. See his "The Globalization of Markets," *Harvard Business Review* 6 (1983): 92–102.



nicotine-fuelled “rendezvous with America” (*svidanie s Amerikoi*; Fig. 5). This slogan ran underneath an image of clean crisp youths in rather colorful clothing, sitting on the roof of a skyscraper set against a dazzling cityscape and an azure sky.²⁴ Other brands followed suit, and soon urban Russians could not turn a corner or turn on their televisions without being instructed to incorporate a small part of America into their bodies—to give up a part of their Russianness and “inhale America” (*vdokhni Ameriku*)—in the imperative voice, or to savor the “taste of America” (*vkus Ameriki*).²⁵

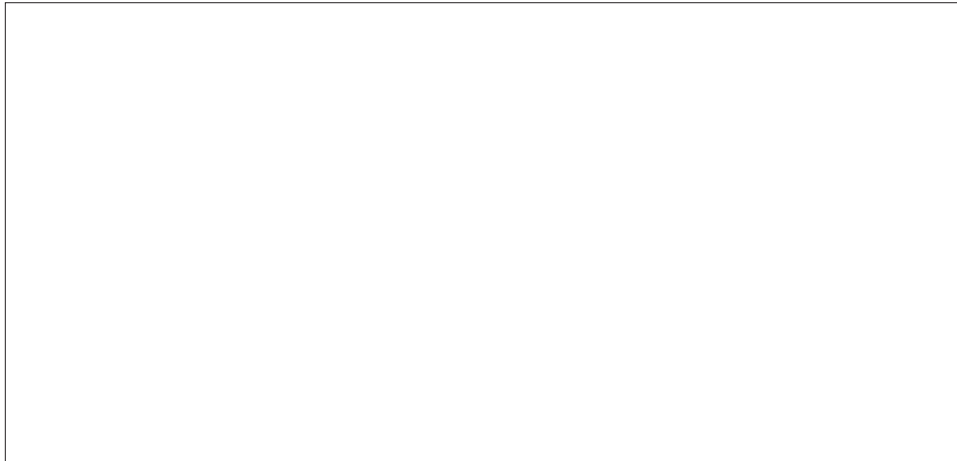


FIG. 5 L&M Russian billboard (c. 1995–2000).

In studies of this kind of global generic advertising it has generally been assumed that U.S.-orientated advertisements result in a positive reaction among younger consumers who are in any case more attuned to changes in fashion and lifestyle signifiers.²⁶ This position has recently been challenged by Marieke De Mooij, who argues that global advertising may actually cause divergence in consumption patterns between countries over time as consumers react negatively to the “Anglo-American values” associated with a product through advertising.²⁷ The case in Russia appears to be confused by the relative

²⁴Because of their absence since 1995 due to a presidential decree of 18 July 1995, television ads for tobacco products are not considered in this article. Some useful information on the early development of post-Soviet advertising (including television forms) and Western influences can be found in Catriona Kelly, “Creating a Consumer: Advertising and Commercialization,” in *Russian Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, ed. Catriona Kelly and David Shepherd (Oxford, 1998), 223–46; and Nancy Condee, ed., *Soviet Hieroglyphics: Visual Culture in Late Twentieth Century Russia* (Bloomington, 1995).

²⁵Brands like Camel (JTI) and Marlboro (Philip Morris) needed little introduction to the Russian public, and the quantity of advertising space devoted to the Marlboro man was small in comparison with other international Philip Morris brands like L&M, Parliament, and Chesterfield. See footnote 19.

²⁶T. J. Domzal and J. B. Kernan, “Mirror, Mirror: Some Postmodern Reflections of Global Advertising” *Journal of Advertising* 22:4 (1993): 1–20.

²⁷Marieke De Mooij, “Convergence and divergence in consumer behavior: implications for global advertising,” *International Journal of Advertising* 22 (2003): 183–202. Evaluating the validity of the myth of the global teenager is especially problematic in Russia, which, according to Hofstede’s individualism index (*ibid.*, 195) scores lowest out of all European countries bar Portugal, but which, for most of the nineties, had very visible vast wealth inequalities and a thriving urban consumer culture. See also Geert Hofstede, *Culture’s Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations across Nations* (London, 2002).



shortages of quality Russian-produced consumer goods through to the early-to-middle nineties and the fall in living standards. In terms of cigarettes it would seem from anecdotal evidence that younger urban consumers were influenced to a limited extent by blanket marketing of new brands, but that Soviet brands retained the loyalty of older consumers.²⁸ When we consider that in any culture younger people are more willing and able to spend a higher proportion of disposable income on status-enhancing goods like cigarettes, then this supposition is not unreasonable.²⁹

It has been assumed for some time that advertising in general plays on deep-seated feelings of “lack” in consumers to provide its rhetorical power.³⁰ Again, this is not unreasonable. In the post-Soviet context not only did Anglo-American advertising displaying “typical” Anglo-American values of masculinity, risk-taking, and individuality, play on the accepted concept of lack in the ideology of advertising, but this lack was visible in the extra-diegetic space of the ads.³¹ These advertisements came at a time of relative national lack—especially of home-grown brands that could compete in providing the veneer of a Euro-American lifestyle, lack of quality in national products, and the ubiquity of Western goods against which the consumer measured the inferiority of Russian goods turned out by Soviet plant.³² It is clear, however, that advertisers and producers themselves were dissatisfied with this state of affairs, as evidenced by the significant changes in policy of multinationals and the corresponding adjustment in marketing that took place in the mid-to-late nineties.

While most tobacco giants pressed ahead with market saturation, utilizing Russian plant to produce generic brands like Camel and Marlboro, British-American Tobacco (BAT) was the first multinational to move quickly to assimilate local cigarette brands across Eastern Europe.³³ In Russia this involved BAT’s investment in the Iava brand and factory. In 1997, BAT relaunched Iava and created Iava Gold. With a filter and a relatively mild taste this was the first “Russian” brand that could be usefully compared by the consumer to L&M (a mid-price international brand leader).³⁴ At about the same time

²⁸It is also important to consider the popularity of goods (like American cigarette brands) that had been scarce until recently, but nonetheless were well known to Russians through television, film, and other media, and the opportunities invariably taken to bring back consumables by Soviet and foreign travelers on every trip abroad.

²⁹Generally, even the urban inhabitants including many manual workers under the age of thirty this author met during the period 1995–2000, smoked almost exclusively L&M and Marlboro (mid-priced brands). Rural inhabitants (and older urban dwellers) continue to define themselves as nonurban consumers through their conspicuous consumption of Soviet brands such as Belomor and Iava, though it has to be acknowledged that they readily accept foreign cigarettes, often placing them in the half-empty packets of native brands. There is some evidence of the encultured rejection of Western products within better-off social groups, too. See Elizabeth Kristofovich Zelensky, “Popular Children’s Culture,” *Consuming Russia*, 156.

³⁰Judith Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising* (London, 1993), 8.

³¹Hofstede’s index of cultural values (*Culture’s Consequences*).

³²As vividly captured in Viktor Pelevin, *Generation “P”* (Moscow, 1999), where the central character throws away a (pre-BAT) Iava cigarette in disgust while trying to think up an advertising slogan for Parliament cigarettes.

³³Taco Tuinstra, “Saturation: Russia’s future potential for the tobacco industry lies in product improvement, not greater volumes,” *Tobacco Reporter*, October 2001. Russian cigarette production is one of the most important sectors of the economy in terms of inward investment, receiving approximately \$2.5 billion up to 2001. By 2001 multinationals controlled two-thirds of Russian cigarette production, split relatively evenly between such players as BAT, JTI, and Philip Morris.

³⁴BAT has since launched Iava Gold Lights. After the ruble devaluation in 1998 other multinationals’ “Russian” brands, such as JTI’s Petr I, increased their market shares, as did Russian-owned brands (*ibid.*).



Japan Tobacco International (JTI) launched a new “Russian” brand: Petr I. Both these Russian brands cost less than L&M and began to eat away at the American brand’s market lead.³⁵ In fact, by 2001 the completely made-over brand of Iava had overtaken L&M and led the mid-range market followed by two other “Russian” brands.³⁶ From a position of having no competitors the American-dream-in-a-cigarette had dropped to fourth place behind Iava, Petr I, and Prima, “Russian” brands all owned by multinationals. But even Jerome Flandinette, a Philip Morris executive, did not dismiss this failure of his brand as due to price differential alone, as L&M still compared favorably in terms of quality to the “Russian” brands and continued to dominate in other emerging markets around the world. He unequivocally put the fall in market share down to the saturation of the market, not by cigarettes, but by American values associated with his product.³⁷ Even before the economic crisis associated with the default on an IMF loan and the devaluation of the ruble in 1998, L&M sales fell by 2 billion sticks a year. This fall must be seen as even more of a failure of brand values considering that 1997 saw real incomes significantly rise among the group L&M was targeting: the young urban professionals, many of whom worked for multinationals and shared more European values. What was it then about Iava, and to a lesser extent other “Russian” or “naturalized” brands, that caused their huge popularity? The answer is both the clever crafting of their advertisements and the serendipitous timing of these advertisements’ promulgation.

NATURALIZATION OF ADVERTISING: EXHALING AMERICA

The launch of the “naturalized” Iava brand was accompanied by suitably “naturalized” billboard advertisements that could be seen primarily in the urban centers of European Russia from 1997 to 2001. As already mentioned, this launch coincided with the loss of TV slots, creating a more even playing field for brands, due to the lower costs of street advertisements. As awareness of the international brands grew, multinationals cut back on advertising, and something of a two-way marketing war broke out between Philip Morris’s L&M and BAT’s Iava Gold. As already posited, Iava’s rise to market dominance was not simply due to economic reasons: advertising also played an important role.

The first, and most common “naturalized” Iava hoarding appeared in mid-1997. This advertisement, designed by the Grey agency, was accompanied by the slogan “The Counterstrike—Iava Gold” (*Otvetnyi udar—Iava Zolotaia*; Fig. 1). The image above this slogan could not have been more striking: in the foreground is the slogan in narrowing italics recalling the opening credits of the Star Wars films (the second of which, “The Empire Strikes Back,” was translated into Russian using the same phrase “counterstrike”). At the bottom of the photomontage planet Earth is just visible, a space shuttle looms

³⁵Vladislav Kovalenko, “Amerikanskii gorki L&M,” *Kompaniia* 20 May 2002 (online version http://www.ko.ru/document.asp?d_no=4280&p=1). The Soviet brand Prima was also relaunched and also outsold L&M, but is significantly cheaper than the three competitors mentioned. The market positions are calculated over a four-year period from 1997 to 2001.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid.



toward the viewer as a cosmonaut with a Russian flag on his jet-pack paints the brand logo and gold color of Iava's carton on the nose of the American craft. Above this the space station Mir with its distinctive solar panel "wings" is pictured performing an Immelmann maneuver, ready to swoop down on the shuttle. Variations of the image subsequently appeared with the same slogan: the Statue of Liberty in an *ushanka* hat, smiling and holding a packet of Iava (World Trade Center and New York skyline in background), Marilyn Monroe, her dress lifted by a flying packet of Iava against a similar backdrop, a huge bear atop a skyscraper holding a packet of Iava, as helicopters buzz ineffectually around (Fig. 2).

Against a backdrop of relative national stability the popularity of these advertisements, regardless of the actual effect on sales cannot be denied.³⁸ Before the 1998 crisis, judging from anecdotal evidence of reactions, these ads were read in two ways. To less-educated viewers they were in a sense direct descendants of the Soviet "propaganda *plakat*" depicting military or technological achievements: proof-positive of Russia's superiority, despite the West's noisy symbols of wealth, technical know-how, and consumer culture. The ads appealed to the "duty-bound" young male lower-class consumer.³⁹ More cosmopolitan readers appreciated the ads for their simultaneously brash and clever parody of the ads for U.S. cigarettes, but were still able to be stirred by a tangible nostalgia for lost greatness. The irony of the brand's ownership was certainly not lost on them; most Muscovites by now understood perfectly what the acronym BAT stood for. This nostalgia took on an even more mournfully insistent tone after the devaluation of the ruble in 1998 and the resulting economic crash. However, when the devaluation very quickly improved the prospects of Russian products as imports dried up, the patriotic message of the advert was able to be reinterpreted again as an emblem of Russian self-sufficiency, economic or otherwise.⁴⁰ Finally, these advertisements resonated with an increasingly aggressive nationalism and anti-Americanism that palpably grew during the Kosovan war.⁴¹ This culminated in the circulation of the slogan *otvetnyi udar* in a number of jokes and anecdotes about the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001.⁴² With their cigarette packets homing in like missiles on the symbols of American cultural and economic

³⁸One sign of this popularity was the surprise these billboards, especially on the Moscow Metro, regularly induced in rural visitors to the city who had not seen them before. It is also important to note that this period 1996–97 onward, marks the beginning of high-quality photomontage in advertisements for Russian and "naturalized" products. Catriona Kelly notes the prior poor quality of home-grown photomontage, and the often tactless unadapted adoption of Western slogans and images, often mistranslated into Russian ("Creating a Consumer," 226). The Iava ad was striking not only because of the choice of image and slogan but also for the high quality of the photomontage, slick design, and ubiquity (most Moscow Metro stations within the Circle Line, 1997).

³⁹Filipp Aleksandrov, "Kot Boris idet za 'Klinskim,'" *Kar'era*, 2002, no. 6 (online version <http://www.kariera.orc.ru/06-02/Tochk052.html>). See also idem, *Khroniki Rossiiskoi reklamy*, in particular his chapter of the demographics and appeal of Iava: "'Zolotaia Iava': Otvetnyi udar po samim sebe," 270–73.

⁴⁰Yeltsin called on Russians to buy more domestic products in 1997, and the entrepreneur Vladimir Dovgan has made a fortune through simply repackaging Russian goods from different enterprises as a readily recognizable Russian brand (Stephanie Baker, "Russian Entrepreneur Taps Into 'Buy Russian' Mood," RFE/RL, 2 March 1998).

⁴¹It may be recalled that during this conflict the U.S. embassy in Moscow was plastered with feces by protesters.

⁴²The slogan and images of the Iava ad were used in parodies of the advert (*antireklamy* on the Internet where websites are devoted to such parodies, as in many countries) but with the twin towers ablaze in the background—the result of a Russian "counterstrike" (see footnote 11).



neoimperialism, the adverts had obviously resonated with deep-seated feelings of national inadequacy and antagonism toward “the West.” The increasing currency of this slogan, used many times in Russian mainstream publications in contexts completely divorced from the original advert, only supports this view of the advertisement expressing powerful fantasies and desires about national consciousness and difference.

FETISHIZING DIFFERENCE, FALSIFYING IDENTITY

Regardless of the popularity of the actual good advertised by the images and slogan, the reception of this advertisement reflects the ability of the Russian consumer in the late 1990s to read and respond both ironically and in terms of wish-fulfillment, acknowledging plural meanings in the ad: its parody and intertextuality.⁴³ The general iconicity of the advertisement meant that Russian consumers were also able to rapidly change their reading of the ad according to local and international circumstances. Correspondingly there resulted a less than predictable rhizomatous generation of myths from the original text. What is particularly interesting is that this iconicity and its success depend on notions, or rather, vague emotional feelings, of national identity, even if that identity in the earlier Iava ads is based on a negative relation with the West. Indeed, charting the course of all the ads for this brand from 1997 to 2005, the advertisements’ coupling of national identity to brand loyalty/consumer identity requires the generic American advertisements in order to function semiotically in the generation of a mythologized Russian consumer and Russian product. The Iava ads’ iconicity as “Russian” in turn depends on an internalization of the generic U.S. ad’s iconicity of “American” culture: skyscrapers, Marilyn Monroe, and so on. It may well be that L&M became associated with the national “lack” in the early-to-mid nineties, a time of crisis and shame Russians wanted to forget, which in turn helped the crop of “naturalized” brands like Iava “defeat” the generic global brands. However, the parodying of the U.S. ads by Russian brands in their initial positioning reflects a continuing “lack” at the heart of Russian national identity. This feeling of lack is, of course, common to most expressions of national identity. It is, however, remarkable that such “patriotic” myth creation should rely so heavily on fetishism of an erstwhile enemy’s cultural capital.

Perhaps primarily because of the unstable myth generation from the Iava ads, BAT has completely renewed the brand image of its leading Russian product. The frequent turnover of brand image and marketing campaigns has accelerated in the Russian tobacco industry as competition has become more intense. Philip Morris has switched from “American values” generic advertising to marketing L&M as a “taste [of] the world.”⁴⁴

⁴³Paul Messaris, *Visual Persuasion: The Role of Images in Advertising* (London, 1997), 7, posits the power of the photomontage in advertising as stemming from the level of iconicity in the image: “The brain is finely tuned to pay special attention to unfamiliar objects when they are only slightly different from our expectations.” In this case Russian consumers already attuned to the iconicity of the L&M advertisements (U.S. cityscape = U.S. individualistic/noncommunal values) were immediately struck by the Iava ads’ parodic referencing of this iconicity.

⁴⁴After experimenting for some time with prize promotions and the slogan *vkliuchais’* (“join in”)—which was ripe for parody, despite its ring of youth-slang, because its use of the imperative voice enabled parodists to link it with Soviet propaganda—L&M advertisements in Russia are the same faintly ridiculous photomontages of chic



This abrupt turnaround in message is undoubtedly connected with a wish for the product not to be associated with America or American values. The Iava slogans are now, respectively: “Trust. Iava Gold. Our character,” “Team,” “Together,” “Soul,” “Speed,” “Strength,” and “Sincerity.” Each slogan runs beneath a close-up photograph of sturdy Russian types engaged in watching sport (“Together”), holding a microphone (“Soul”), clasping hands with out-of-shot male (“Team”), and touching noses with female (“Trust”; Fig. 4). A couple of elements of these advertisements stand out in contrast to other current cigarette advertisements. First, like the previous campaign, the quality of the images and general design is very high. Each advert, through use of typeface, format, and color, is immediately recognizable as part of a series. In contrast, the L&M series are rather cluttered with elements and text more reminiscent of earlier Russian advertising than a multinational’s global pitch. Second, the people photographed in the Iava advertisements are, as far as it is possible to generalize, Slavic types (the use of Russian types is often mentioned as integral to the ads’ pitch by agency executives), and just in case this was unclear to the consumer, three of the males have more or less prominent full beards. Together with slogans immediately resonant to Russians with various projections of “Russianness”—for example, “Our” (*Nash*), “Soul” (*Dusha*), or “Team” (*Komanda*)—it is clear that this campaign is not a rejection of the explicit *obshche-rossiiskaia ideia* values communicated by the original campaign.

In the light of the development of the brand image of Iava Gold, and the continuing preoccupation of advertising with notions of national identity, it is possible to make some initial conclusions about the specificities of Russian advertising in general. First, it is fair to say that Russian consumers are now subject to a sophistication and diversity of advertising almost completely equivalent to that in other European countries. Consequently, many print and television adverts are self-referential or intertextual, and parody in particular both Russian and non-Russian cultural myths and narratives. This presupposes on the Russian consumer’s part a sufficiently developed sense of irony, indeed an appreciation of the art of parody and pastiche of important Russian, Soviet, and foreign cultural artifacts. We can call the semiotic operations of consumers who positively associate such advertising with products “ironic-utopian nostalgia.” This is an intentional imbrication of the definitions used by Theresa Sabonis-Chafee and Svetlana Boym: the ironic intent behind the use of a text or image out of its original context is ambiguous or difficult to recover. The consumer may recognize the original context, but the experience of pleasure in this identification is without a necessarily fixed, or finalized meaning. The advertiser, of course, hopes that this pleasure is associated with the product. Ironic reception of popular culture has also been associated with the undermining of meaning, which has led postmodern advertising in the United States and Europe to be seen as confusing (for example because of the absence of products or brand names in certain advertisements). In the Russian context ironic-utopian nostalgia can be seen as primarily connected not only with the simultaneous enjoyment of Russian and Soviet cultural artifacts but also

multicultural youth as found in any other country. According to various sources L&M is now increasing its market share gradually against Russian brands.



with consumer attachment to notions of Russian “difference,” even while consuming global brands, or products produced in foreign-owned factories and having no concrete connection with Soviet products.

The notion of Russian “difference” from Anglo-American values as an integral pitch of contemporary advertising is most striking. Broadly speaking, advertising in most countries is concerned with provoking feelings of “lack” primarily in terms of social status, gender roles, and wealth, and then portrays products as contributing to wholeness, reducing anxiety, and resolving contradictions.⁴⁵ Contemporary Russian advertising’s successful utilization of anxiety about national identity ironically marks Russia out as “different” from most of the rest of the world. In contrast to a consumer culture like Japan’s where “glocalization” (the changing of only a few elements in generic advertising to cater for local cultural differences) has been a success, a Russian sense of “lack” in terms of national identity means that producers have increasingly avoided using generic advertising altogether.⁴⁶ Accompanying this decline even in adapted Western copy/images, both Russian and multinational companies have attempted to connect the brand identity of products to national origin and national identity. This change broadly reflects the criticisms made of global advertising by Marieke De Mooij and Geert Hofstede, who see globalization as not significantly affecting cultural differences and values.

This does not mean, however that this advertising posits or reflects a stable notion of national identity or “Russianness.” The rapid changes in advertising of cigarettes, beer, and bread products reflect this. The earlier *Iava* ads allowed a new interpretation of spectator theory’s “misrecognition” and the illusion of wholeness, the iconicity of the American cityscape and cultural icons being the mirror in which Russian national identity created an unstable and unsustainable wholeness for itself. The present *Iava* ads reflect the repression of product origin on the one hand,⁴⁷ and on the other, misrecognition of cultural identity as idealized Slavic communion: the *obshche-rossiiskaia ideia*. Consequently, something akin to the well-known proposition by Homi Bhabha of contemporary “unhomliness” haunts all of these advertisements.⁴⁸ Cultural identity is deferred, or found only contingently in the interstices of texts. The clear gap between the ideal and reality of national identity gives rise to the operations of ironic-utopian nostalgia in the viewer. What is most “Russian” about the vexed question of “nationness” in the readings of these adverts is perhaps that its positing is so insistent and at the same time unstable.

⁴⁵Varda Langholz Leymore, *The Hidden Myth: Structure and Symbolism in Advertising* (London, 1975), 2.

⁴⁶Michael L. Maynard, “From Global to Glocal: How Gillette’s SensorExcel Accommodates to Japan,” *Kelo Communication Review* 25 (2003): 57–75.

⁴⁷See Michael Billig, “Commodity Fetishism and Repression: Reflections on Marx, Freud and the Psychology of Consumer Capital,” *Theory and Psychology* 9:3 (1999): 313–29.

⁴⁸Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (New York, 1990), 9.