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## Culture, Hegemony & Advertising: An Analysis of Vice World News Advertisement

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### Abstract:

Advertising plays a crucial role in shaping public perception and is designed to be persuasive. The advertisement for the unfiltered history tour by VICE world news has impacted public perception and won many prestigious awards in advertising. The advertisement contests British Museum's official narrative and emphasises the native experts' historical perspectives. It addresses the issue of the dominant official west-centric narrative in the public sphere and the need for indigenous voices. Postcolonial perspectives on historical discourse and western hegemony have been extensively discussed in academic circles, and this advertisement has played a crucial role in popularising the discourse among the general public. The semiotic analysis aims to analyse the advertisement's narrative, visual and aural treatment to identify the mechanism used by advertisers to combat western hegemony. The use of augmented reality, visual and aural style provides a road map for future efforts that can be made to popularise academic discourses.

**Keywords:** Advertising, Semiotics, Hegemony, British Museum, Vice World News

### Introduction:

History is generally understood to refer to incidents that have taken place in the past. However, it essentially is an art of historians retelling, guessing, and interpreting past events to convey their meanings or "telling the truth." (Arnold, 2000). E.H. Carr, one of the finest historians of the twentieth century, writes in his book "What is History" that history is "a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts,

an unending dialogue between the present and the past" (Carr, 1990, p.55). In the process of 'making' history, it is normal for interpreters to be biased, selective, or imperfect in their interpretation of 'past facts' due to their personal life experiences and the nature of the society to which they belong. Therefore, according to E.H. Carr, history is always subjective, and there is no "objective truth." The representation of 'facts' of the past is contested due to differences in historians' accounts, hypotheses, and interpretations. History matters even more when it becomes a factor in shaping our social and political identities (Tosh, 2008). Carr argues that "the belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the historian's interpretation is a preposterous fallacy, but one which is very hard to eradicate". This position on the subjectivity of historical facts and the difficulty of changing or establishing new facts of the past are validated by the ongoing dialogues between Europeans presenting historical facts about their colonies and colonised or third-world countries interpreting and challenging historical facts.

History Unfiltered History tour is a Dentsu Creative campaign for VICE world news that challenges the official narrative of the British Museum. During colonial rule, the British Museum amassed a vast collection of artefacts from various parts of the globe. Many of the artefacts have extremely significant historical significance, and the countries of origin want the artefacts returned, a request that the British Museum repeatedly denies. The official British Museum guide emphasises only the west-centric narrative. The campaign tells the story from the perspective of the communities to which the artefacts belong.

The production was conducted secretly because the producers did not want the information to reach the authorities. The team on the ground took photographs of the museum and sent them to the production team, which created augmented reality by superimposing real-time data on the actual environment. The process took 18 months, with a particular focus on the aesthetic element. The visual depicts not only the height, angle, and material of the artefact but also the sunlight and shadows at various times of the day.

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The advertisement is part of the campaign that includes a mobile application, website and audio and video guides. With 18 million impressions, the campaign was immensely successful and won a Titanium, 3 Grand Prix, 2 Golden Lions, and 3 Silver Lions at the Cannes Lions 2022.

The advertisement successfully incorporates counter-hegemonical discourse, advocacy and marketing. This study highlights the mechanism used by the advertisers to counter the official narrative in order to provide a mechanism that can be used by civil society to use advertisements as a tool that can challenge hegemony and the west-centric narrative.

The state uses symbolic power to popularise historical narratives and hegemonic discourses through the educational curriculum, mass media, and information control through various institutions. The British Museum, like all other institutions, controls the flow of information to affirm the colonial legacy. Gramsci (1992) argues that the war of position can pose a considerable challenge to the hegemonical structures. He proposed the idea of hidden conflict, where the positioning is as important as the actual war. The campaign by VICE world news uses the advertising domain to counter the hegemonical historical perspective and challenge the official narrative.

Marshal McLuhan's dictum "the medium is the message" (McLuhan et al., 1967) provides a very crucial framework for using media. It is not just the content and its delivery that matters, but the medium is as important as the other two. The content has to be customised according to the medium, and this statement is applicable to all mediums, including the visual medium. In modern visual culture, it is the medium that determines the content, and it is only when the combination is right that the message works. Condit (1991) suggests that when dominant messages are concealed in pleasant, entertaining, or even curiously ambiguous codes, not only is the viewer more likely to be pleasantly engaged, but they are also less likely to decode oppositionally. The advertisers have to ensure that the concealment is properly incorporated. In this study, it is the style and not the content that is under study. For the counter-hegemonical discourse to be popularised, the advertisers have to ensure

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that the medium is used properly, the discourse is properly structured to suit the medium, and the message is properly encoded in order to minimise oppositional reading.

### **History, Power, and Culture of Hegemony**

The modern period is highly regarded as an era of enlightenment and rationalism. But at the same time, the same period is also a period of European colonialism and imperialism. The concept of 'White Man's Burden' had been used to justify colonialism, a civilised European project to civilise barbaric, unsocial and uncultured people (Williams, 2020). Instead of denouncing the brutality, violence, exploitation, discrimination and injustice carried out by the European elites during the colonial era, the mainstream narrative celebrates the imperial power's revolutionary vision that brought socio-economic development and prosperity. The narrative undermines the impoverishment and suffering brought upon the colonised people.

Ferguson (2002) argues that the British 'Empire' laid the groundwork for 'benign laws for the global free market'. The British Empire is also credited with spreading the 'idea of liberty' and 'western norms of law, order, and governance worldwide. As a supporter of colonialism, he revitalises James Mill's idea by arguing that imperialism is a force for good. The British championed liberty and democracy but governed their colonies differently. Moreover, the infrastructure developments made by the colonial powers were more of a matter of their interest than the interest and welfare of colonised people.

Importantly, from James Mill to Winston Churchill to Niall Fergusson, Europeans have defended their colonial interests. The defending arguments were made not only to justify colonial rule but also to intentionally glorify their history of rule and dominance. They created the facts and histories of their colonies to justify and legitimise their unjust and unlawful acts of violence during the colonial period. Similarly, when the 'third world' countries raise demand for returning the looted artefacts that British Museums possess, the British government denies the same and legitimises their ownership by written history and narrative.

Numerous historians believe that erasing or prioritising the history of a specific period is a political act (Hopkins, 2002; Lughod, 1991; Bayly, 2004). The Europeans have been instrumental in acknowledging, glorifying, and promoting modern history over mediaeval and ancient history. Daniel David Levering argues that before the European hegemony, it was the Arabs who dominated the world system, and Europeans learnt many things from Arab civilisation. In fact, according to him, European enlightenment and scientific culture could never have been possible without the contribution made by the Arabs (Lewis, 2009). The exclusion of Arabs or non-Europeans' contribution to the writing of history was a deliberate act. Whenever facts pertaining to scientific invention or enlightenment are revealed, Europeans claim all credit supported by historical discourse.

The work by Edward Said on Orientalism is one of the first efforts to investigate and criticise the Western recorded history of the East. Edward Said describes it as a "Racist Empire" that, even after decolonisation and independence, retained its dominance over its colonies. Even after decolonisation and independence, Said says that the dominant West purposely presents the immorality of Eastern culture and accounts for all historical events in a manner that justifies and preserves its domination over its colonies (Said, 1978). The work of Edward Said has been acknowledged as a seminal contribution to postcolonial literature.

An unfortunate aspect for the colonised people was their educational backwardness. On the other hand, the dominance of the colonial powers, even over academic writings, gave them a license to produce history in which they wrote history according to the best interest of the colonial powers. Therefore, numerous distinguished academicians and historians could not locate the history of colonised people, whose history begins with the colonial period. One of the most renowned German philosophers, G.W. Hegel, emphasised the history of India more than other regions, including Greece (Tola & Dragonetti, 2002). According to Hegel, *India has not only ancient religious books and splendid works of poetry but also ancient books of law....; nevertheless, it still does not have a history* (cited in Guha, 2002, p.9). Despite his

assertions of the richness and significance of Indian philosophy and literature, he was unable to locate India's history.

History of British India by James Mill has been identified as one of the earliest books on the history of India. In his book, Mill wrote history that relies heavily on his observations. By examining India's history and sociopolitical existence, he intentionally justifies British colonial rule. During their colonial period, the Britishers stole valuable objects that are still preserved in British Museums and still present them as Britain's pride.

Not having history does not mean that they do not have history. It may have justifications. Academic hegemony did not recognise the writings of colonial people due to their lack of historical preservation awareness. At the same time, many of their writings were not recognised by academic hegemony. Therefore, the recognition and bringing the question on historical discourse only became possible when Western academicians like Edward Said, or academicians of Eastern origin but representing the 'West' (for example, Ranajit Guha). This appears to be the academic marginalisation or politics of academic writings' recognition. Gayatri C. Spivak penned an essay titled "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in which she bemoans the deplorable condition of colonised people. She argues that the inability of people in third-world countries to 'speak' about what they have experienced or are still enduring is a result of colonisation, which is still causing their social and economic underdevelopment (Spivak, 1988). They are still struggling for their socio-economic needs, and, therefore, they are still unable to 'speak' about their injustice in history, and their history is unheard and recognised. The denial of the British government over the claims for the artefact at the British Museum by their former colonies proves the strength of the colonisers and the vulnerability of the third-world countries.

In recent times, many academicians have made efforts to raise voices against the injustice in history done by European colonisers. For example, Ranajit Guha argues that the available and written history is the history of rulers or the history of 'elites'. The history of ruled or impoverished people – who were also in the majority – was either erased or ignored (Guha, 2002). Providing and writing the history of colonised

by Europeans is arguably regarded as 'Europeanization' of the history of colonised people. In addition, Asif Mannan Ahmed argues that writing the history of Indians by Europeans resulted in erasing and excluding the history of 'Hindustan' on the one hand and enumerating the history of 'India' on the other hand (Ahmed, 2020).

Priya Satia presents more compelling arguments and interprets British imperialism from a unique perspective. She argues that historical imagination plays a crucial role in interpreting and evaluating past events. British people wrote histories of the Indian subcontinent and Middle Eastern, African, and Caribbean colonies in which they describe the conquest, dominance, and expansion of the British Empire while ignoring the brutality, violence, and suppression of the voices of justice. By securing the major events, especially those that glorify the British Empire, British historians ensured that their glorious past would continue to be discussed and pave the way for their future. Therefore, it is challenging to write alternate history based on existing historical writings. Furthermore, when contemporary historians rewrite history, they must reluctantly contend with written history and unwittingly revive the glory of the British Empire (Satia, 2020).

The history of colonies written by British historians and the questioning or rewriting of history by postcolonial historians have created a dichotomy and led to the justification of colonial rule and the blame of colonial rule for their impoverishment, as well as the realisation of colonialism in determining their history, economic development, social identity, and political identity. Whenever colonial history unfolds, it is common for people to argue over whether European imperialism was justified or unjust. When British imperialism is criticised for its evident instances of looting, brutality, violence, and exploitation, colonial powers disagree and re-explain the same history from a different social, economic, and political perspective. However, it is inappropriate for colonisers to glorify instances of brutality and injustice and to transmit imperialism with pride. For instance, Michael Gove announced plans to raise schoolchildren's awareness of the British Empire's legacy and imperial history (Sanghera, 2021, p.40). Similarly, the glorified statues and information about artefacts provided by the British Museum perpetuate the historical discourse in which they will



always succeed in transmitting consciousness and knowledge to generations through their tales of victory rather than consideration of unhealed wounds and injustice of their former colonies.

Nonetheless, the "tug of war" between the history of the West and the history of the East has evolved into two distinct perspectives. The existing history of colonies assists colonisers in maintaining the status quo and demonstrates their historical dominance and power. In contrast, the history written by postcolonial historians produces a different perception by emphasising the incidence of exploitations, massacres, and injustice, or what Caroline Elkins arguably refers to as the "Legacy of Violence" (Elkins, 2022). According to Priya Satia, replacing history or establishing new truths in history is a matter of "fate." However, this paper argues that replacing or establishing new historical facts or altering historical truth is a matter of academic dominance. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, former Lord High Chancellor of the United Kingdom, Francis Bacon coined one of the most famous phrases, "Knowledge is Power." According to him, it is less important for knowledge to demonstrate absolute truth than for it to empower us (Harari, 2014, p.288). The purpose of producing knowledge or historical knowledge was not to establish the truth but to demonstrate the strength of the British Empire. Michel Foucault argues that the inability of postcolonial historians to produce alternative histories or to replace history is a result of their inability or lack of control over the shifting "discourse." The criticism and recognition of injustice by Europeans and campaigns such as the campaign under study and the "Rhodes Must Fall" create hope for "decolonising history" and reveal the alternative perspective of colonised people on history.

### Methodology:

Maya Pines asserts that everything we do transmits information about ourselves in various codes. We receive countless encoded messages through music, gestures, foods, rituals, books, films, and advertisements. However, we are rarely aware of receiving such messages and would have trouble describing the rules governing their operation (cited in Berger, 2010). Semiotic analysis has been extensively used to analyse



symbols and their signification. Semiotic analysis is a study of signs and helps in revealing the deep underlying structure of meaning and cultural representations used to create the meaning. It is a subfield of linguistics that examines how individuals use symbols to communicate and express ideas. Furthermore, semiotics investigates how individuals perceive these signs and symbols and how they impact our view of the surrounding environment. Roland Barthes (1977) maintained that meaning is not inherent in words or symbols but rather is formed by the environment in which they are employed. He argued that signs and symbols are continually negotiated and renegotiated via language and other types of communication.

The study uses semiotic analysis to identify the symbolisms used in the advertisement and identify their relevance in the narrative. This study analyses the technological aspect and visual and auditory significations as semiotic resources and determines the relevance of each of these elements in the transmission and interpretation of the message.

### **Analysis:**

#### **Semiotics of Technology:**

The unfiltered history tour advertisement is made using augmented reality, requiring extremely long hours, tedious efforts and a huge budget to create. Augmented reality is an experience that seamlessly integrates the real world and digital content. It alters the perception of the real-world environment by layering it with computer-generated information. A video created using AR looks like the real world, but in reality, it is a mediated reality and masks the natural environment.

The advertisers could also have delivered the message through a video montage of the museum layered with voice-over and music. The message, even in this case, could be delivered at a much lower budget. But the augmented reality's added cost serves a purpose, providing an immersive experience, and enhancing the impact and the experience. Augmented reality serves many vital functions in this case. Technically speaking, it helps in amplifying the message it wants to convey. At the same time, AR is also used to show the disputed artefacts where they belong and contrasts it with the

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unnatural environment of the museum it finds itself in. The technological intervention unlocks a rich and fuller experience.

Since it was a clandestine operation, the environment in the museum was not controlled, so AR helped create the required environment in post-editing in order to maximise the impact. But at the same time, it also serves another important purpose. It re-emphasises the relationship between the reality and the discourse. The museum is real, but the AR masks the real in order to provide a perspective. Similarly, the discourse offers a perspective by masking the reality. Historicity is always mediated; it always has a mask that brings to the forefront some aspects while hiding many facets in the background. The campaign highlights some of the masked realities that were ignored by the British Museum. The campaign does not contest the authenticity of the official narrative, but it superimposes the indigenous narrative over the official one in order to provide a new layer of information on top of the existing one. The official narrative is not based on a lie but on incomplete truth. By ignoring the history of displacement, it hides an important layer of information that the audience should be told. The AR is used to provide this added layer of information.

### **Semiotics of the Visual:**

The advertisement starts in a classical documentary style, with a timelapse of the exterior of the British museum as the establishing shot. The well-lit exterior is replicated in the subsequent shot of the museum's interior. As soon as the Gweagal Shield is scanned, the evenly lit interior is overshadowed by a blood-red tint and silhouettes of fighting figures. The scene begins with high-key lighting, evoking a sense of an upbeat corporate video, and transitions to a highly evocative blood-red hue, representing a sense of macabre. The transition signifies the change from conformity to defiance, from established normative understanding to unsettling reality, and from a whitewashed perspective to a darker historical background. The transition is also emotive, changing from the informative nature of corporate video to the powerful and suggestive nature of mood lighting. Mood lighting elicits emotions and emphasises the historical injustice to the colonised people. The use of colours plays a

crucial role in altering the emotional response of the viewer. The change from an evenly lit background to a gory red one symbolises danger, connotating danger, provoking a response from the viewer. It also signifies urgency and emergency, a need to realise the issues with the standard narrative. The advertisement could have employed the evenly lit style throughout the advertisement, but it would have lacked an essential component influencing the perspective.

The illustration depicts a battle between spear-wielding natives and gun-wielding colonisers, symbolising the dominance of the powerful invaders over the weaker locals. A symbol that plays a crucial role in altering the perspective of the people. By depicting the conflict between an invading army and underdogs fighting for survival, advertisers shift the conversation to the opposing side. The depiction plays a crucial role psychologically, challenging the dominant narrative. It also challenges the official narrative of a peaceful handover of the artefacts to the colonial powers and demonstrates the power equations that enabled this transfer.

Numerous glitch transitions are utilised in the advertisement to represent an error in the official narrative. The glitch typically refers to the introduction of a bug into the system and represents the advertisement's attempt to contradict the official narrative of a dominant paradigm. Many of the sequences show glitch effects and glitch transitions to signify that the presence of the artefacts in the museum is like a glitch, is problematic and needs to be resolved.

Towards the end, the advertisement shows all the artefacts vanishing from the museum, leaving empty halls with nothing else to see. The advertisement openly advocates for the return of the artefacts to the countries of their origin, and the vanishing artefacts signify the vision becoming a reality.

### **Semiotics of Sound:**

The advertisement begins with a female English voiceover in a familiar authoritative, informative, and punctuated style, which represents the mainstream discourse. The style represents an authoritative documentary voice-over associated with reliable information devoid of any emotional manipulation. The alternative discourse, in this case, is narrated by a non-native speaker with a strong accent, indicating an authentic

indigenous perspective, an informal attitude, a non-institutionalized narrative, and a genuine perspective. The narration for each voice-over has a distinct accent representing their country of origin, thereby demonstrating authenticity. The accented voice-over resonates emotionally with the people compared to the standard authoritarian voice-over.

The advertisement starts on an uplifting musical note, and just like the visual narrative, the sound design changes altogether once the shield is scanned. The sound design, which includes the noise of battle, the clanking of the sword, and the sound of a gun being fired, adds another layer of meaning to the signification. The sound design enhances the feeling of historical injustice and the need for liberation and freedom from the hegemonical perspective.

#### **Conclusion:**

The history of the artefact cannot be limited to the history of its origin. In reality, its history also includes the history of its theft, plunder and dislocation. The official narrative lacks this important historical perspective, and the gap can be filled by civil society and alternative media agencies. This campaign plays a significant role in generating dialogue and reaching out to people in order to challenge the dominant perspective. It offers insight into the ways in which media resources can be used to shift the discourse to the mainstream, especially among younger audiences.

In the audio-visual domain, meaning is derived not only from the information but also from the subconscious anticipation of visual and aural symbolisms. The narrative is not only determined by the information, but the visual structure and sound design also play a significant role in subconsciously altering the perspective. The audio-visual domain is not an informational medium but an emotional medium, and the message can only be effectively conveyed if it also works at the subconscious level.

The advertisement also highlights the efficacious use of emotions. Baudrillard (1998) considers mass communication a medium of emotions that prioritises surface-level spectacle over deeper understanding or meaningful action. Emotions play a vital role

in the narrative, and any counter-hegemonical discourse must incorporate emotional perspective and stylisation to get the desired result. The use of technology adds an important layer of emotional appeal that adds an essential perspective in a fight against colonial narrative and highlights the brutality of the colonial legacy.

This advertisement presents an important pathway and a model that can be emulated. The advertising industry can also play a key role in challenging the western hegemony over historical narratives. The paid-for model of advertising increases its reach to a huge audience. Advertisements can also be used in accordance with Gramsci's concept of the war of position to challenge the hegemony and popularise alternative discourses. Gramsci (1992) highlights the need for the war of position to counter hegemony and enables new discourses.

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