

Students' Research-1
Global Media Journal – Indian Edition
Sponsored by the University of Calcutta www.caluniv.ac.in
ISSN 2249 – 5835
Winter Issue/December 2017
Volume: 8/ Number: 2

HEGEMONY OF THE TECH AGE: BIO-POLITICS OF MEDIA

by

Ritwik Balo

Master's Graduates in English, Presidency University, Kolkata, India

Email: ritwik5194@gmail.com

and

Sayan Chatterjee

Master's Graduates in English, Presidency University, Kolkata, India

Email: sayanc1993@gmail.com

***Abstract:** Discourse is traditionally seen as the compounding of power and knowledge. In this paper, we try to argue that this understanding is a false-perimeter to a concept that can otherwise be taken to study how, with help from new media technologies, the seller (i.e, the Capitalist) from the domain of Economics and what maybe called 'corporate-religion' facilitates the state (and hence, politics) in a symbiotic manner - both complimentarily and conflictingly. The purpose of this paper is to attempt an analysis of how forms of Media enactment which are intended, apparently, to criticize and perhaps vilify the dominant hegemonic force can potentially facilitate the dominant force in the short and the long run. It is our understanding, after Spivak, that talking is distinct from speaking and as such we try unpack the recent phenomena of the 'talk show' and see it in a counter-intuitive manner suggestive of how the media uses 'bio-power'. Hyphenated to this is our attempt to see how advertisements do the same with the human body while prying upon what Zizek does not quite call "consumer's guilt".*

***Keywords:** corporate-religion, consumer's guilt, hegemony, soft advertisement, tangled hierarchy, discourse.*

Discourse is traditionally seen as the compounding of power and knowledge. However, in this paper, we try to see discourse in a slightly extended manner, as not just power compounded with knowledge, but as something in addition to it. Our suggestion here is: discourse¹, which is colloquially associated with the compounding of power and knowledge, should rather be seen as a set of power and knowledge existing as cohabitants to some other factors, which are less accounted for. We try to argue that the academic understanding of discourse can be outgrown into the domain of economics to study how the seller-that is the capitalist-and the buyer are intertwined with each other in a symbiotic relationship through the mediation of an entity that might be called ‘corporate religion’. The anticipation of this idea, that is of religion as a corporate entity, can be seen in Walter Benjamin’s seminal essay “Capitalism as Religion”. Although Benjamin does not use this phrase, he tries to show that religion functions in structural congruence to capitalism. In other words, capitalism’s existential activities are analogous to the existential activities of religion. To Benjamin’s mind, religion meant Christianity; however, in our discussion of media, politics, and economy, we try to scrutinise religion at large.

Our study suggests that the buyer, the seller and what we have termed ‘corporate religion’ exist in a tangled hierarchy² that strengthens the existing hegemonic force. Here, our contention is that the buyer is not only a buyer of products but also a buyer of advertisements, a buyer of desire in general. In other words, we understand that everything the individual consumes can be read as an act of buying. Our premise, so to say, is that all acts are, in some form of metaphor, acts of consumption to some degree. Here we could take an everyday linguistic example which demonstrates the structural similarity of consumption to buying. When a person says, “no, I don’t buy what you say”, the act of buying is not that of buying a product but is a reference to believing or a statement to show agreement. In effect, to say that a person does not buy what another person says implies that the former does not take it, does not consume it, does not internalise it, or to extend this event in the political domain, the later does not subscribe to the ideology of the former.

¹ According to Oxford’s dictionary of Critical Theory discourse is “(a) specific form of language use shaped and determined by situational rules and context. Discourse can be thought of as the performance of language, but even this is too limiting because the concept is used in place of language precisely as a way of encompassing the extra-linguistic dimension of all forms of communication. In critical theory, it is Michel Foucault who has done the most to develop this concept. In his work, discourse is expanded to include the operation of power: Foucault asks who has the right to use a particular discourse, what benefits accrue to them for using it, how is its usage policed, and where does it derive its authority from? His examples include medical discourse (including psychiatry), penal discourse, and sexual discourse”.

² According to Wikipedia, a tangled hierarchy is a hierarchical consciousness system in which a strange loop, which is a cyclic structure that goes through several levels in a hierarchical system, appears. Such a loop arises when, by moving only upwards or downwards through the system, one finds oneself back where one started.

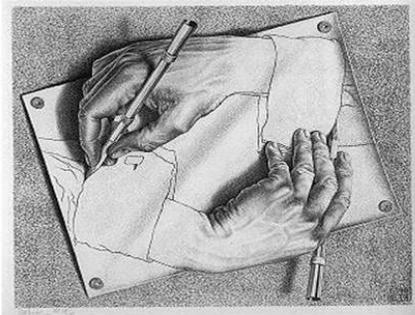


Fig 1. Escher's Drawing hands
(source: Wikiart)

PENROSE TRIANGLE: TANGLED HIERARCHY

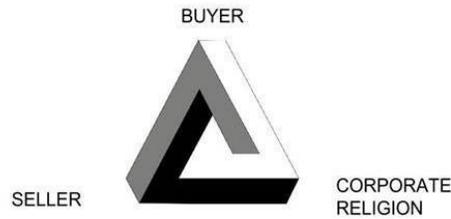


Fig 2. Our Improved Penrose Triangle
(source: Wikimedia commons)

Our understanding of a tangled hierarchy is informed by the drawings of the mathematician and painter Escher. In addition, we also take recourse to the theoretical work of the mathematicians Lionel and Roger Penrose. On the surface, we see Escher's painting "Drawing Hands" (reproduced above; figure 1) as resonating the structural Marxist Louis Althusser's phrase, "reproduction of the conditions of production". We suggest that these three entities (seller, buyer, corporate religion) have a tangled hierarchy within themselves (as depicted in the improved Penrose triangle produced above; figure 2), thereby strengthening each other as if in a symbiotic relationship. As far as our deliberate theoretical attempts goes, the relationship between all these entities/bodies resonate the structure of a food web as found in nature. Any traditional food web diagram will suffice for this purpose.

In our diagram (figure 3), the first food chain shows the grass being eaten by the grasshopper, who is in turn eaten by the Hawk. In the second, it is the rabbit who eats the grass and is eaten by the Hawk; in the third, the mouse suffers the fate of the grasshopper or the rabbit. Finally, these three entities combine to form a food web. It will arguably not be a very ridiculous claim that a similar hierarchy exists in social existence in a capitalist world, with the buyer resembling the grass and discourse taking the almighty place of the Hawk. The state, the seller, and corporate religion in this web, replace the grasshopper, the rabbit and the grass (figure 4).

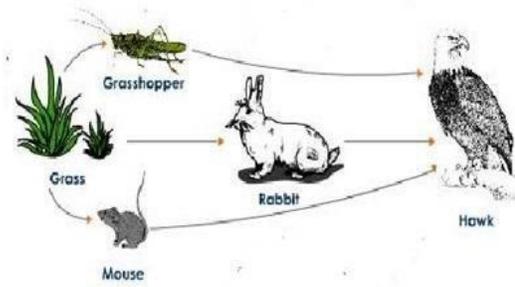


Fig 3. Food Web

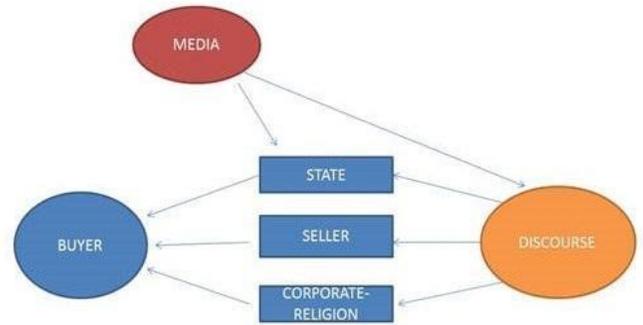


Fig 4. Capitalism's tangled hierarchy

This sweeping claim of resemblance between a food web and the hierarchy that exists between the buyer, the seller, 'corporate religion', the state and discourse demands further scrutiny. Very little opposition is likely to be met against our claim that the buyer is, in the final analysis, eaten by all in the sense that he is the original prey per se. The buyer, it might be said, in a rather humorous manner, is like vegetarian food, i.e., eaten by both vegetarians and non-vegetarians alike. For the buyer, there is, perhaps in the absolute sense, no escape, for he is set to be doomed by default. However, we anticipate questions and contests as to our positioning of discourse at the helm of the hierarchy. Ideology, it is agreed by scholars like Žižek, is like the Big Brother figure from George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* (Fiennes et al., 2014). Slavoj Žižek has suggested that ideology is very much similar to the voice of Dr Mabuse from one of Fritz Lang's masterpieces of German expressionistic cinema, directed in 1933 — the *Testament of Dr Mabuse* (*ibid*). The figure of Mabuse does not exist. Towards the end of the film, when the protagonist, now weary of being dictated to by this monolithic voice, starts shooting at what it takes to be Dr Mabuse, it is revealed that Mabuse is just a voice — a voice that has been, for all this time, the dictator of all the events that take place during the course of the narrative dimension of the film (*ibid*). Mabuse is an absent presence, and a kind of an invisible inner venom.

It is implied from the aforementioned diagram that the seller dictates over the buyer, and since the seller is dictated to by discourse, it can be said that, in the final analysis, the buyer, through ideological state apparatuses or other discursive forces, is ministered by discourse. Again, the state, which is run by the phantom powers of discourse, dictates upon the buyer. Also, the same happens when 'corporate religion' is taken into account. Here, 'corporate religion' seems to play the role of a middleman.

It is worth questioning whether the state inevitably strengthens discourse. However, Antonio Gramsci offers an answer to this question. Discourse is commonly understood as a going what Gramsci has called hegemony which, in his understanding, functions through negotiation and consent. Gramsci had also suggested that hegemony is not just an equilibrium, but rather, very specifically, a 'compromise equilibrium' (Greaves, 2009). In any case, therefore,

no matter how much negotiation is done on either ends of the web, it is the state which always has the upper hand and discourse in turn, without radical opposition, gets strengthened by the state.

The purpose of this paper is to attempt an analysis of how some forms of Media enactment, which are intended, apparently, to criticize and perhaps vilify the dominant hegemonic force, can potentially facilitate the dominant force. The argument here is that even if media (with all its new forms and modes considered) acts radically against the state, i.e., against the discursive ways of the state, it will, and we dare say it does, end up cementing the hold of the state at an ideological level. In other words, even if the media were to set up a challenge to the state so as to create a counter-discourse, the discourse, like the mythical monster Raktabīja³ or 'Blood-Seed', gains more hold.

The idea here is that opposition is to be allowed, but only so that discourse can thrive through such opposition. Here we are reminded of Friedrich Nietzsche who once said, "That which does not kill us makes us stronger" (Nietzsche, 1966). The state, it might be argued, thrives in a similar manner, the difference being that it is never under threat of complete annihilation.

Next, we will elaborate the concept of 'bio-power' in this context. Giorgio Agamben points out that "the ancient Greeks had two different words for what in contemporary European languages is simply referred to as 'life': bios (the form or manner in which life is lived) and Zoe (the biological fact of life). His argument is that the loss of this distinction obscures the fact that in a political context, the word 'life' refers more or less exclusively to the biological dimension or zoe and implies no guarantees about the quality of the life lived." What we have, as a result, is "nuda vita" or "bare life".

It is not uncommon to find that advertisements are effectively statistical. Advertisements, very often, claim that a certain percentage of people have been benefited by a certain product, a certain percentage of experts recommend the product, and so on. In this context, what might be called a 'soft advertisement' becomes very important to our discussion. These implicit advertisements, sometimes publicised by governments and also by what have come to be known as social welfare groups, tend to display a numerical assertion of their good intentions, while never really quite selling a product. When, before the elections, the ruling political parties advertise that electricity has been provided by the them to X number of villages, Y number of schools have been built during their term, it can be said quite safely that the invisible subtitles of the advertisement are a demand for a vote, designed to arouse the emotion always already attached to one's sense of what Benedict Anderson has called "Imagined Communities". Structurally similar are those implicit advertisements where companies or social welfare groups claim, rather sweepingly, that a large number of child labourers have been sent to school by them, a large number of blind people have been gifted (as it were) eyesight by their efforts, or perhaps, a vast number of villages now have access to water due to their tireless effort. The point

³ In Hindu mythology, Raktabīja is a demon who had a boon that whenever a drop of his blood fell on the ground, a duplicate Raktabīja would be born at that spot (Encyclopedia Britannica).

of criticism in bringing up these advertisements is not in order to suggest that there is no real work done, but rather to bring to the fore the fact that there is a capitalistic nature in this phenomena, guided, as Walter Benjamin points out, by the methods of religion.

The subtext of these soft or implicit advertisements, which seem to suggest: “1700 blind people have got back their eyes because of me. Hence, buy my product.” or “I have provided electricity to 3600 villages. Hence vote for me.” and so forth. The element of biopower in the above examples is in the exaggerated emphasis on the human body. In the first case, the audience is told that a person can see due to the work of a certain person, i.e., the audience is given access to the bare fact of a person's newly begotten ability to see, but no information is given about the quality of vision, while in the second case, the audience isn't even led to think of the probability that there is a difference between providing electricity to a village and there being the constant availability of electric power in that village. Gilles Deleuze had spoken about the “Joan of Arc effect” in cinema and had pointed out how cinematography can emotionally stir audiences. In the case of these soft advertisements, where the happy eyes of the blind man, or the smiling child labour with the book in his hand, or the scene of village women collectively stitching, are dramatically orchestrated to create a cinematic and thereby an interpellatory effect. Also to be taken into account is John Berger’s analysis of how music is the subtlest of all ideological machinery. In his *Ways of Seeing*, Berger shows how the unacknowledged presence of music can influence our ways of seeing. Berger says, music “can work almost without you noticing it” (Berger, 1972). Advertisements today have, at their disposal, these new technologies of interpellation, and it must be taken into account that with the advent of Computer Generated Imagery (CGI) and other new technologies, advertising has become much more effective not only in terms of sale but in propagating ideology with greater efficiency as well.

This is also where what Slavoj Žižek does not quite call “consumer's guilt” becomes important. Several companies and their brands in India have (I.T.C, P & G, Hindustan Unilever and so on) started a scheme wherein they claim that a certain amount of money from the sale of each of their products are to be used for helping the underprivileged. (For example, ITC had advertised that with the sale of each of their classmate notebooks, they would donate one rupee for the education of the poor. In a similar fashion, P & G announced that they would make similar efforts with the sale of any of their products.) It is to be noted that these schemes are sites where advertisement, ‘corporate religion’, biopower and what we chose to call “consumer's guilt” meet.

In an attempt to simplify this complex relationship between the various entities involved, we might say: advertisements and talk shows create guilt, following which the guilty buyer is very likely to subscribe to such schemes of ‘voluntary donation’ when sellers apparently offer such opportunities. Let us consider a hypothetical situation in this regard. On a certain day, a talk show announces that a certain number of people in a certain state do not have access to drinking water. On the following day, some well-known companies and brands announce that a portion of their earnings from each individual product they sell will be to help those people. These announcements are made through advertisements with reference to the Company’s previous

social works while taking recourse to biopower as mentioned earlier. On the third day, the average buyer, who had already been made to feel guilty on the first day and had seen the opportunity to do something to get relief from that guilt from the advertisements on the second day, is very likely to go and buy the products advertised about on the previous day.

It is our contention that advertisers not only capitalize on the buyer's desire but do so A) by inventing a quasi-biological or narcissistic lack in the buyer's body, and more importantly B) by using the body and the face of 'the other' so as to engender social guilt and thereby create a 'virtual debt'. This guilt is being called virtual because it is not something that a person experienced first-hand but rather something that was injected into him or her; effectively being a guilt obtained vicariously, as if by osmosis. The usage of biopower becomes apparent when we compare a talk show like *SatyamevaJayate* to a documentary like *War and Peace* by AnandPatwardhan. The very fact that the human body is treated in a radically different manner in these two works make the politics of the body bare. In the talk show, the cinematography, i.e., the dynamic camera movement plays largely so as to emotionally stir the viewer, while in Patwardhan's documentaries, the cinematography, it might be said, is Pre-Raphaelite⁴ insofar as there is no excess romantic focus on a particular speaker, no central figure; thus the voice comes from unpredictable directions.

It is of much interest to us in the present thread of discussion that a talk show is not called a speak show and we could, of course, turn to Spivak to see why. Our premise, contrary to popular belief, is that a talk show takes a person's speech away by allowing him or her to talk. GayatriSpivak suggests speaking involves response, while in stark contrast, talking does not. This distinction between speaking and talking can easily be understood with the help of the colloquial phrase "like talking to a brick wall" ("Be like Talking to a Brick Wall Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary"). According to the Cambridge English dictionary, "If talking to someone is like talking to a brick wall, the person you are speaking to does not listen." We find it interesting that the everyday phrase is not "speaking to a brick wall". In other words, talking might be what Derrida calls the "without-response" (Derrida, 1999), a kind of conversation with the dead with no possible reciprocal speech. In the final analysis, the talk show is potentially a shrine of 'corporate religion', a site where new buyers can always be created and the act of buying can be made to seem like a great social act: one that appears to shoulder herculean responsibility towards the suffering human race.

⁴The Pre- Raphaelites upturned the ideas of the "Raphaelites" (the followers of Raphael), whose paintings consisted of structures based on apexes and pyramids and the scheme of light distribution according to hierarchy. In Pre-Raphaelite paintings, there was no central figure. Here, we use the analogy to distinguish the cinematography in AnandPatwardhan's work from the cinematography used in talk shows, such as *SatyamevJayate*.

Works Cited

1. Althusser, L. (n.d.). Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation). Retrieved November 30, 2016, from <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm>
2. "Be like Talking to a Brick Wall Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary." Cambridge Dictionary, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/be-like-talking-to-a-brick-wall
3. Benjamin, W. (n.d.). "Capitalism as Religion". Retrieved November 30, 2016, from www.rae.com.pt/Caderno_wb_2010/Benjamin_Capitalism-as-Religion.pdf
4. Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1972.
5. Derrida, Jacques. *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*. Stanford University Press, 1999.
6. Escher, M. C. *Drawing Hands* [Painting]. In *Wikiart.*, 1946 Retrieved from <https://www.wikiart.org/en/m-c-escher/drawing-hands>
7. Fiennes, Sophie, James Wilson, Martin Rosenbaum, Katie Holly, and Slavoj Žižek. *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology.*, 2014.
8. Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *Twilight of the Idols*. Great Books Foundation, 1966.
9. Greaves, Nigel M. *Gramsci's Marxism: Reclaiming a Philosophy of History and Politics*. Matador, 2009.
10. "Penrose triangle." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia.*, 6 Sep. 2017. Web. 30 Nov. 2017.