

# Poster Girl – Billboard Rhetoric

Jessica Foley

The following article is neither expert nor amateur, it is a subjective, loosely researched observation, which I felt was worth knocking into some shape. The article in question began formulating whilst I was cycling about Dublin City, absorbing the multifarious sights, sounds and smells of a traffic-burdened, western, 'developed' metropolis.

It was the beginning of Lent and Irish charity Trócaire's annual Lenten campaign had just been launched. Consequently buses and billboards across the city (as well as collection-boxes, posters and leaflets in schools around the country), had begun to assert themselves, vying for the attention of the public. The billboards and bus banners, most frequently the realm of the commodity, had become host to a charitable campaign, a 'not-for-profit' venture aiming itself at the hearts and pockets of the Irish public. Of course this is a perennial effect – charities appropriating the capitalist means of the production of consumption. It just so happened that its effect had something of an impact on the author in April 2007.

I found myself jolted somewhat by Trócaire's Lenten campaign 'advertisement', so I undertook to ruminate a little upon the nature of the billboard, which carried the advertisement, and the effect of advertising charity. Through a detailed description of the advert, both denotative and connotative, I came to a realisation of sorts (by no means conclusive) that there seems to be a discrepancy between the language and the political effect of the 'campaign' advertisement.

## Semiotic denotation

The billboard was designed as follows: A young baby sleeps, nestled into what looks like a soft cotton blanket, lying on her stomach. Her face is relaxed, peaceful. Her right arm is extended towards her lips, which are slightly ajar, and on her wrist is strapped a 'baby pink' band, which is set off dramatically against the deep shade of the baby's skin. The baby's hair is a tight accumulation of short black curls. Below the image is printed 'Amina Francisco, 10-weeks-old, Malawi'. Underneath this, at the bottom of the design reads: 'Support Trócaire to help end gender inequality'. The main slogan reads: 'She may never be given a chance [written in bright pink] simply because she's female [written in a shade of purple]'.<sup>1</sup>

It is nothing new that charities use commercial methods such as advertising to raise money to fund their work – in this case by Trócaire, "the official overseas development agency of the Catholic Church in Ireland". But what of this apparent contradiction; that a charity, a not-for-profit organisation, should use the profit generating means of advertising? The charity might argue that it is one of many ways employed to raise monies which we are told go toward the development of projects such as women's shelters in Afghanistan and literacy training for women in rural Pakistan. Is it enough to say simply that the ends justify the means? It's not exactly a left-field statement to say that a politically disengaged public encouraged to throw money at a simplistically and externally framed problem won't fix it. But unfortunately for charities this is a very attractive idea, particularly for a relatively affluent society whose main focus may be monetary despite clinging on to notions of allegedly passive philanthropy. Whereas, an advertisement such as Trócaire's billboard campaign does not fulfil its objectives simply through the public generation of funds; there must be political will involved in order to bring about change. And though the advertisement itself may seem to be a clever appropriation of an extremely successful medium, it is not without its deceptions.

Initially the campaign had as its sub-slogan: 'Support Trócaire's Lenten Campaign to help end Gender Inequality'. The Broadcasting Commission of Ireland, under section 10(3) of the 1988 Radio and Television Act, deemed that this sub-slogan infringed upon this section of the Act, which states: "no advertisement shall be broadcast which is directed towards a religious or political end".<sup>1</sup> The Act defines a political end as one not confined to a party political end, but which "encompasses procuring a reversal of Government policy or particular decisions of Government". The BCI went on to say that Trócaire's ad campaign called upon the Government "to produce a National Action Plan and seeks public signatures for a petition in this regard. Therefore the campaign has a political objective as contemplated under the legislation". The BCI said that it was an implicit objective of the Trócaire campaign to change Government policy so as to influence Governmental action.

Essentially this section in the Act was intended to eliminate any potential misuse of the broadcasting medium for political or religious purposes within the Irish State. But, as a press release on the Trócaire website puts it: "The construction that is being put on 'political' by the Commission means that any campaign, be it against bonded labour, child soldiers, trafficking, or slavery, which may even have been the subject of a United Nations Resolution, could be precluded from broadcast".<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, the ad campaign is reduced to a cosmetic for a much more complicated and divergent issue; simply a means of generating funds in a way that cannot politicise issues of gender inequality, essentially the abuse of women and children in countries targeted by the Church's charity at a time in a country such as Ireland whose population is diversifying at a rapid rate, when issues such as female genital mutilation are no longer so far removed from the Government's doorstep.<sup>3</sup>

## Semiotic Connotation

At play in this particular advertisement is any number of representational stereotypes. Particularly, of course, the representation of the female, but also of the 'black baby', the notion of 'Africa', the 'Third World', and of the neutral benevolent giver.

For example, the baby girl represented is sleeping. The child is passive and vulnerable... attributes often traditionally assigned to the female. Helen Cixous writes about the representation of the female in relation to the fairytale, the 'Sleeping Beauty' who will only be roused when her prince comes to save her – it is only he who can awaken her. He will lift her from one place (bed) to the next place (invariably bed again) and so it goes, happily ever after. (The same is true of Little Red Riding Hood; she sets out on the shortest path from mother's house to grandmother's house, takes a detour that was forbidden to her, and ends up being put in her place, the wolf's stomach). Cixous sees woman as being culturally confined; "between two houses, between two beds, she is laid, ever caught in her chain of metaphors, metaphors that organise culture..."<sup>4</sup> Cixous asserts that the female is set up in opposition to the male, like the passive to the 'powerful'. These kinds of representations of the female only serve to perpetuate a phallogocentric categorisation of the hierarchical oppositions. It goes without saying that the reality of gender inequality, and all that spins out from it, is no fairytale.

This billboard campaign does not articulate the wider implications and devastating effects



of gender inequality, rather it dresses up the situation in a way that will appeal to the sentiment, that will instil a sense of patronage in the consumer, that will move them to donate, but not act, at home or abroad. The use of stereotype in the advertisement is problematic in many ways, particularly when perpetuated within the allegedly affluent Celtic Tiger. Homi K. Bhabha writes that it is the stereotype's "force of ambivalence" which gives it its currency and which "ensures its repeatability in changing historical and discursive conjunctures; informs its strategies of individuation and marginalisation; produces that effect of probabilistic truth and predictability which, for the stereotype, must always be in excess of what can be empirically proved or logically construed".<sup>5</sup> This insight into the stereotype reveals it to be a fixed representation that manages to hold on relentlessly, despite changes in discourse and shifts in history. The 'force of ambivalence' could be related to a superfluous protestation; the stereotype 'doth protest too much'.

And what effect, if any, can such a blatant use of stereotypes have on the Irish public, other than an effective reinforcement of the status quo? I can recall from the age of about five, the priests bringing the Trócaire boxes into our school and handing them out to each pupil. Each year it seemed the same people were being collected for; 'the black babies in Africa'. An impression was formed that 'Africa' was a poor country (as opposed to a continent), where there exist huge populations of poor, hungry, black babies and children, and the only way to help this struggling nation was to put our pennies in the little cardboard box, and to encourage others to do the same. Twenty years later, the image of the 'black baby' reappears once more – this time it is not so much the bleak outlook of that baby's 'reality' that is reaffirmed, but perhaps it is our, the consumer's, impression of that baby's 'reality' which is reconstituted. Perhaps it is not only the baby Amina who becomes the stereotype, but it is the Irish consumer who becomes stereotyped in our response of hands-in-pockets-and-head-in-clouds.

## Joining the Dots

The projects and initiatives set up by charities, such as Trócaire, work on a micro level with the people who are in crisis, such as in cases where women are in danger of rape, or death, or where mothers fear that their daughters will be beaten and raped. Or in such cases as in parts of India where it is believed that women are a burden, and women are choosing to abort female foetuses

rather than go to full term.<sup>6</sup>

There is a conflation of discourses in the Trócaire billboard, between the discourse of charity and the discourse of advertisement, or capitalism. The means of generating funds which charities use are varied, but when advertising across billboards is employed, and where constraints of Broadcasting Commissions usurp the political contestations of such charities, questions need to be asked about the appropriateness of these means. The tactics employed by charities and NGOs to approach alleviating or eliminating injustices, such as gender inequality, and the poverty that follows in its wake, must perhaps become more aware of the semiotic practices with which they engage. (Having said this, it is not the sole responsibility of charities to effect change, this change must be effected at a governmental level.) The task may be to rethink the means and try to find other avenues, which will reassert the political nature of the work of charitable organisations. Anthropologist James Ferguson, speaking from a critical point of view of 'development' in Lesotho, suggests: "A first step, many would agree, toward clarifying that goal and the tactics appropriate to achieving it is to reformulate it somewhat more politically: since it is powerlessness that ultimately underlies the surface conditions of poverty, ill-health, and hunger, the larger goal ought therefore to be empowerment."<sup>7</sup>

While the use of advertising and its semiotic practices of denotation and connotation, signifier and signified, may be relatively successful in generating funds for projects abroad within affected communities, the separation of the political from the representational is a serious one. There must be a political engagement with such issues both in areas and countries that are directly

and indirectly affected by them.

As Ferguson goes on to say: "Working for social change is not synonymous with working for governments; indeed, it is perhaps not too much to say that the preoccupation of governments and government agencies is more often precisely to forestall and frustrate the processes of popular empowerment that so many anthropologists and other social scientists in their hearts seek to advance."<sup>8</sup> Though Ferguson was speaking from the context of Lesotho and the intervention of aid by foreign governments for 'development' projects in the area of Thaba-Tseka, something rings true for the case of the billboard in question here. The longer stereotypes and representations of a 'Third World Other' remain in our streets and on our billboards, the less likely it is that change will ever be effected, either abroad or at home. According to the Irish government's Equality for Women Measure, which seeks "women's full and equal participation in the labour market", as of 2005 women were earning almost 15% less than men in Ireland, to say nothing of unpaid work, such as caring, much of which is undervalued and carried out by women.

Change can only seriously be effected through empowerment, and through the people, through the *polis*. Representations through advertising only serve to reinforce a status quo rather than subvert it, and serve to further fracture the tentative relationship between representation and reality. At least, that's the opinion of this perplexed cyclist.

#### Notes

1. BCI: [http://www.bci.ie/news\\_information/press121.html](http://www.bci.ie/news_information/press121.html)
2. Trócaire: <http://trocaire.org/news/story?id=979>
3. Irish Independent article on FGM: <http://www.independent.ie/national-news/prosecutions-ordered-on-female-mutilation-cases-353169.html>
4. Helen Cixous, 'Marginalia: Displacement and Resistance – 'Castration of Decapitation'', in Ferguson, Russel et al, ed. *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), pp346-347.
5. Homi K. Bhabha, 'The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism' in Ferguson, Russel et al, ed. *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), pp71-89.
6. There are countless sources of examples and stories of the struggles women face around the world. See Raeka Prasad and Randeep Ramesh, 'India's missing girls', *The Guardian*, Wed. Feb 28th 2007, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,,2022818,00.html> ; accessed April 26 2007. Also see Amartya Sen, 'The many faces of Gender Inequality', *Frontline*, Vol.18, no. 22, 27 Oct – 09 Nov 2001 (available at <http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl1822/18220040.htm> ; accessed April 26 2007). Another first hand account of the struggle of women is the personal story of Mukhtar Mai. She suffered a gang rape, condoned by her village council, to restore honour to her family name and in forgiveness of a supposed wrong doing by her 12 year old brother (he was accused of flirting with a woman in her mid twenties). Mukhtar Mai, 2006, *In the Name of Honour*, (Paris: Oh! Editions).
7. Ferguson, James, *The Anti-Politics Machine: "Development", Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1995, USA, p. 279.
8. Ferguson, James, p. 285.