

# **Borgesian Vision and Contemporary Commercials: A Select Critical Exploration of Post Truth Reality**

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## **Abstract**

Given the present zeitgeist 'manufactured' by the TV commercials, epistemology and its facets are essentially 'at play' or are 'played on': Myntra's campaign on "End of Reason Sale" rationalises irrationality, Cadbury and Hyundai Xcent alters the empiricist value of celebration and happiness while such corollaries as scientific truth and intellectual erudition are subtly undermined by Fog and WhiteHat Junior respectively. The commercials, when analysed through Aristotle's persuasive triangle combined with Baudrillard's hyperreal market and Adorno-Horkheimer's "culture industry" appear similar with the fictionality weaved through four of Borges' stories alongside the backdrop of their visionary traits. The paper attempts a parallelism between how anticipatorily true Borges' fictionality was and how befittingly false the epistemological reality of commercials is, thereby offering a philosophical module to understand post-truth further.

**Keywords:** Consumerism; Episteme; Ethos-logos-pathos; Fictionality.

Fiction, by nature, is unreal though there is always some epistemological bedrock to buttress the constructed reality therein. In Borgesian world of literary fictions very often the dichotomy between reality and fictionality, between hard-core, tangible, practical affairs and finer, intangible, virtual in-occurrences is interrogated, inversed and intermittently interrupted so as to opportune the epistemologists to re-qualify and re-assess the kind of source of knowledge they have long been dealing with for approaching reality. Inversely, advertisements or commercials, whether printed or tele-

cast, are fictional by application and although there seem to have certain value-schemes for understanding reality, there is nothing epistemological about them.

## I

The persuasive triangle made of Ethos, Logos and Pathos discerned by Aristotle for critiquing Greek sophistry, Baudrillard's mooted of the hyper-real market predominated by sign, image and simulacra and what Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer address as "culture industry"<sup>1</sup> in relation to their studies on consumerist culture are here the methodological tools to examine the commercials chosen on the basis of their ostensible appeal to human understanding and universal knowledge received from the supposed epistemology. Such remarkably popular and frequently watched commercials are the primary sources put against some selected stories of the Argentine author-cum-metaphysician Jorge Luis Borges in order to substantiate the hypothesis of finding a parallelism between how anticipatorily true Borges' fictionality was and how befittingly false epistemological reality of commercials is.

Many a time the stories like 'Argumentum Ornithologicum', 'Blue Tigers', 'On Exactitude in Science' and 'The Book of Sand', when examined from literary-philosophical perspective, tend to envision a sort of reality where epistemology is mostly under 'erasure' — not simply because of perpetual loss of philosophical certainty eroded consistently by the Modernist angst of existence and ennui of experience during which Borges penned down the fictions, but because of the inherently foreshadowing elements those fictions carry for the postmodernist world-order of next three and half a decade. Beyond postmodernism the spatio-temporal reality of epistemology, if it really stands so, is one of Neo-ethics' that has brought in a queer philosophical bankruptcy for which probably the present paper, in a quasi-philosophical manner, attempts to offer an equipoise, if not a full-fledged module, to understand and explain post truth further.

For grasping reality, as recorded by Russell in his *History of Western Philosophy*, Descartes identified God, mind and matter; Spinoza discarded the other two to allow only God to prevail; Leibnitz admitted the role of 'monads' i.e. certain infinite number of substances to deny the reality of matter as such; Kant promoted workings of rational human mind and

based on the distinction between ideas (phenomena) and the things-in-themselves (noumena). The names mentioned in the previous sentence are the Rationalists for whom reason, rather than experience is to be granted as primary role in explaining knowledge about reality. The category of Empiricists enlists Berkeley for his theory of “to be is to be perceived”<sup>2</sup>; David Hume for his preference of experiential learning over the quest for certainty; John Locke for his “tabula rasa”<sup>3</sup> to be impacted by the series of experiences a person encounters. Their empiricism relies basically upon the use of experiences and experiments for knowing the nature of reality presented to human beings. The combination of Rationalism and Empiricism projects Intellectualism represented by scientific truth explored and explained from time to time, bookish erudition stored and disseminated through numerous disciplines of study, further qualified by comparison and abstraction as and when required.

Hence, Epistemology, as it is commonly defined, is the philosophical branch studying the sources of knowledge viz. Rationalism and Empiricism along with their corollary Intellectualism, scientific truth and bookish erudition referred to above. All of them were brought under serious scrutiny when by 1900 the psychological intervention of Freud’s *Interpretations of Dreams* and *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* debunked the notion of unified human consciousness to recognise reality. It was quickly followed by the advent of phenomenology that studied the structure of intentional first person consciousness, thereby denying the possibility of common “episteme” to the extent of bringing it down to the nothingness of Absurd Theatre and Existentialism. The reaction against or responses to epistemological formulations have always been historically witnessed, but never before After Theory and Post Truth the classical orientation of Epistemology was derided the way it has been being gradually and subtly undermined by the contemporary commercials of recent times.

## II

By the time the trend of the discussed commercials steps into the contemporary consumerist zeitgeist or the zeitgeist gets shaped by such commercials, epistemology may be witnessed being filtered through what ages before Aristotle presented as the triangle of persuasion with three “os” on all three sides: Ethos (authority), Logos (logic or reason), Pathos (emotion).

The idea of Ethos implying authority or authorial voice suggests how a person may be persuaded by letting the utility of any product verified and recommended by those who enjoy competent authority upon it. As such the uniform-clad doctors in pretension assure the worried mothers of ailed children of “99.9% germ kill protection” with Dettol; ensure “rapid relief” of Sensodyne to those who cannot bear with acute cold and extreme sweet; even the celebrities without professional specificity of the concerned product motivated the viewers – whether he is Sourav Ganguly promoting Polycrol or Amitabh Bachchan associating his name with every Bikaji product through the voiceover “Amitji loves Bikaji” or even an octogenarian choosing Colgate toothpaste for household use – ethos is all-pervasive in this regard. Having been relied upon same authorial voice in less than one month of Covid 19 pandemic most of the disinfectants like Lizol and Domex and soaps like Lifebuoy and Savlon turned out to be immune to corona virus.

Alluding to the reason inherently associated with the production of the item, sometimes even referring to the most obvious technology involved in producing the merchandise, logic seems to be given preference. For example, the toilet cleaner Harpic has to kill germ and remove stain, but the same is presented in so glorious a manner that the audience tend to believe that the illustrated logic to be an additional quality assigned to the product. Again, it is the anti-bacterial zinc for what Close-up toothpaste is to be bought, onion extracts shown to be added to Mamaearth Shampoo compels the hair-lovers to buy the product, surf excel is to be chosen by the sensitive mothers who believes in the product caption “daag acche hain” (stain is good) for making her child more humane to its peers and surroundings. Targeting relatively more reasonable and more sensible consumer committed to social well-being and environmental awareness are assuaged by keeping a percentile of the product’s (Nihar Shampoo) total profit aside for the education of the underprivileged children and sometimes by reminding them of how Topcem Cement passes on a greener world to next generation. In fact, they sound logical on account of appealing to certain basic human instincts presented otherwise.

In a combined form, the leitmotif of Borges’ story ‘Argumentatum Ornithologicum’ holds these two ‘sides’ of Aristotelian triangle under the facade of fictionality Borges has always been cryptic with. With inter-textual reference to Descartes’ authorial dictum of “Cogito, ergo Sum”<sup>4</sup> in regard

to thinking subject validating ontological essence and also to Berkeley's "esse est percipi"<sup>5</sup> in regard to perceived object reasserting Godly existence, this is Borges' one of the shortest fictional pieces included in the anthology *The Maker* published in 1960. By that time Borges, the author, lost his eyesight for what perhaps the speaker of the story also closes his eyes and conversely "sees a flock of birds" (Borges 299). As the vision is fleeting in nature, the speaker cannot conclude whether the number of birds in the flock is definite or indefinite. Having gone through this ambiguity any voracious reader as expected by Borges' literary convention would immediately be reminded of the opposing theorizations of St Anselm and Immanuel Kant in this regard. Standing between these two different sets of arguments, caging the flock of birds into the narrative of this micro-fiction Borges unleashes meta-fictional labyrinth of logic, pro-logic and anti-logic propositions, further extending metaphysical and ontological loops.

What one understands by the popular trend of celebrity endorsement cannot really be equated with how Descartes and Berkeley, Anselm and Kant enjoyed authority over philosophical deliberation, nor can their line of argumentation and rationalization be equivalent with the hype and hypocrisy the logic behind the commercials celebrate. In a sense, utter absence of the epistemological foundation below the edifice of consumerism turns the commercials into a travesty of Borgesian fictionality: fiction overshadowing what the commercials claim to be reality of premier authority and prominent logic. The pseudo-argument of 'Argumentative Ornithologicum' evidently renders the story in-argumentative, still it shows how rationalism has been put under suspicion, thereby opening up the lieholic ways of illogicality for persuading people and misusing Logos. Following Amazon's "End of Season Sale" the pattern in which Myntra's "End of Reason Sale" campaign rationalises irrationality is to be paralleled against this: rhymed with "season" the word "reason" along with its epistemological implication has been blatantly trivialised, negating the requirement of common human reasoning while buying or choosing to buy any product.

### III

Closed to Logos are the scientific truths and discoveries that form a major part of epistemological edifice. More than what is said by the text of the story 'On the Exactitude of Science' the usage of capital letters at the beginning of each noun pretends to advocate the epistemological value of

science as a source of knowledge. As expected from the title, the story is supposed to talk of the exactitude of science, but it does not exactly talk either science or about its exactitude. It rather talks of the Art of Cartography so much perfected under a fictional empire that it occupied "the entirety of a city, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province"<sup>7</sup>. (Borges 325) Rarely will the readers who are also the consumers in today's advertising world, ponder over the element of fictionality inherently associated with cartography: it usually provides for the representation of the topographical details upon the globe in a format smaller in scope and lesser in volume. The larger-than-life image created by a number of advertisements, like Royal Stag whisky or the latest model of Oppo or Vivo phone with the facility of capturing panoramic photos and videos, replaces the ground of below-the-reality episteme. The magic reality of the given story represents the reality of the topography as it is, though in the process it neither remains proper representation of improper reality nor improper representation of proper reality. The second generation cartographers found the previous unconscionable maps unsatisfying and accordingly designed a map of the empire which is equal in size with the empire. Repeatedly, however, the following generation found the all-comprehensive map useless and abandoned it altogether, suggesting complete collapse of scientific truth.

With Ethos dubious, Logos malicious, scientific exactitude ruinous, the whole gamut of experience the consumer as a thinking subject earlier had is surrendered at the gate of the urban malls. His is an experience apparently similar to what and how the protagonist encountered the inexistence of 'blue tigers' in the story bearing the same title. Every common human experience, no matter how zoologically varied the species is, would like to negate the existence of blue tiger, though fictionality of Borges' story brings it on. The speaker of the story refers to the series of bookish erudition he has on Blake's tiger burning bright, on Chesterton's symbolism of tiger as some terrible elegance and also on Kipling's characterization of Shere Khan as the tiger villain in *The Jungle Book*. All the allusions are, however, fictional, even the news of discovering blue variety of tiger species somewhere in the Ganges delta in India reached him through reading and when the news was confirmed by certain subsequent (written) telegrams, following the assertion that "all of India, all the world somehow can be found" "on the pages of Kipling" (Borges 495), he decided to visit Punjab.

Having arrived at the place, the Professor came to terms with the mundane experiences of the end of rainy season, of the ditch, of the swaying cane-stalk bridges, of the fragile huts – all away and distinguished from the experience of reading pages of books, but presently get diluted by the discourse on a boy witnessing a blue tiger, further confirmed and circulated by the rustics. No one including the Professor could experience anything practical about the existence of blue tiger whose colour-less pug marks must have been counterfeited by some human fist to strengthen the discourse. In order to experience ‘nothingness’ of the tiger’s existence the speaker, therefore, climbed the hillside and caught the glimpse of some magical stones in dreamed colour, carried them in the pocket of his jacket and came back to the practical world of “the late morning sun” and “tickling sensation” (ibid 498). Every step undertaken by the narrator offers the otherness of experience: the stones counted less than ten getting multiplied to become as many as 419, one stone when separated from the rest becoming many. To deal with this mysterious happening the narrator started repeating the definitions and axioms of Spinoza’s *Ethics*, alluded to make the readers understand that since in Spinoza’s formulation there is only one absolute and self-caused and eternal infinite substance, the stones collected by the Professor and all the associated experiences he had while collecting those stones are unreal and hence unable to become key to epistemic foundation. In short, ‘Blue Tigers’ is a conscious recoiling into the dreamt existence with a sobering twist on the author’s “previous explorations of nightmarish objects as subterfuges of experiences that might be all too real” (Kristal 169)

#### IV

The denouement of the story seems to be associated with the atrophy of the value of human experience, offered in combination with the magic realism through which the required fictionality is achieved. In achieving the objectives of product-promotion, however, the advertising praxis replaces the empiricist concern with the devalued parametres of consumerist avarice. Despite such opposing dimensions ‘Blue Tigers’, thus, re-verifies the ways in which ‘otherness’ of experience, for instance magical realism, are constructed to strip empiricism of its significance, thereby manipulating people for subsiding hardcore experiences to embrace the ‘soft-cores’ of brands.

The fictional professor here exemplifies his bookish erudition to perceive and then to conceive reality and though he ought not be identified with the author Borges fully, it is an undenying fact that most of the times it is through the papered reality that the Borgesian characters come to terms with reality, if it really is. Borges' 'The Book of Sand' focuses upon how transient human knowledge trapped in books are and how it may pose an interrogation to the episteme of the intellectual storehouse. Borges maintains the fictionality of his story by taking refuge to the trope of reverse tautology: he broaches the fantastic tales' convention of calling themselves true, though his story despite being more than a fantasy is true. While the other tales are untrue by virtue of their true nature as fantasy, his is true by dint of its untrue nature as fantasy — how can a fantasy tale be true and how can the fictionality be retained if the narrative of the story is true? The answer to this rhetorical question tends to draw a parallel with the kind of strategy adopted by some of contemporary commercials. All the products other than what is advertised are more or less marginalized and then rejected on the ground that their claims are all false or at least less true compared to that of the given advertisement. The pattern of showing the product description of other merchandises to be unreliable and somehow proving the product utility to be inauthentic operates in the same manner of reverse tautology: reliability and authenticity attached to the advertised merchandise are proven true on the basis of falsity the other merchandises are said to be attributed with. A number of instances may be cited from the commercials of Fena detergent powder and cake, Ujala fabric whitener and Duracell battery. Both the story and the commercials are fictional and their fictionality has been verified and validated by the pattern in which the otherness of reality is placed.

In the context of the story the answer to the loop of reverse tautology is the book of sand itself, if not the text of the story 'The Book of Sand'. The book offered to the narrator had random pagination, say, of page number 40,514 followed by the odd numbered page 999; the illustration found on a specific page, once closed, cannot be traced back; like sand it had neither the beginning nor the end. The infinite character of the books hints at how transient human knowledge trapped in books is as the illiteracy of the original owner of the book touches upon how inauthentic and displaced the prescribed values of the book are. Knowledge, indissoluble and authentic, was rarely found in the book which gradually turns into a monstrous, nightmarish, obscenity that corrupts reality whatsoever.



Most of the human emotions including happiness, respect and even patriotism for that matter are either manhandled or belittled every time a commercial promotes its product. A prospective buyer of Hyundai Xcent car will buy the automobile because of the extra happiness the extra space in the vehicle is promising him/her; respect for one Mr Ghanshyam, despite having numerous degrees and accolades displayed over the name plate, may be earned only when he gets his house painted with Nerolac Paints, even a Guard of Honour from the same postman who had thrown letters onto him before Nerolac came in; patriotism can be justified only if an Indian uses Kajaria Tiles & Marbles made of “desh ki mitti” (nation’s soil). It is pathos in relation to persuasion in operation. Instead of physical market where the consumers are at the same time some thinking individual with balanced perspective regarding their desire and desired items, these commercials generate intangible virtual marketing, instead of market supplying products according to the need of the customers, there is introduced marketing to produce desires, not simply needs, among them for the products already produced. To appeal to the delicate emotions of the consumers, to manipulate pathos as exercised by the Greek Sophists, is to incite desire. Having outlined the cultural autocracy of Argentina during the middle part of Borges’ literary career, John King, the editor of Sarlo’s book *Jorge Luis Borger, a Writer on the Edge* commented thus: – “... there was an increase in consumerism, not just of goods, but of many different aspects of culture”.(Sarlo xiii)

The last two sentences of the previous paragraphs remind the researcher of the kind of hyper-real market Baudrillard mooted the notion of. In his first notable essay in this regard ‘The System of Objects’ (1968) he looks through the possibility of how exorbitantly consumption has become the chief benchmark of the extant social order; in his ‘For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign’ (1972) Baudrillard reverses the Saussurean model of signifier and signified and in his ‘Simulations and Simulacra’ (1981) he extends his theory of commodity culture to the point of erasing the distinction between object and representation, later proving how the fourth stage of image i.e. simulation has absorbed the idea of the real within itself only to create a hyper-real ‘market’ of brands and buzzes. Under this hyperreality, everything, right from the stem cell banking initiated at the time of infant’s birth till the death commercialised by LIC’s Jeevan Anand and policybazar.com so profusely, is a just a sign to be commoditised and this process is constantly reinforced by a barrage of television

advertising.

## V

The way Simon During once alleged cultural studies for making Mickey Mouse as good as Shakespeare, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer too pined over using Beethoven symphony in an overtly incongruous sound track of a film. For them the culture, supposed to be enlightening and illuminating in terms of human understanding, is shaped as an industry of mass deception. The commercials, be it Dantkanti toothpaste spread over the bristles of Oral B brush in the morning or Domino's pizza delivered via Swiggy boy before the dinner, be it the social message on woman empowerment depicted through racist commercial of the fairness cream Glow and Lovely or the spiritual serenity to be inhaled with Mangaldeep incense sticks, are discernibly different from each other, but the scanty or faulty epistemological pretensions with which the act of persuading the audience is attempted are all identical, because as Adorno and Horkheimer open the argument in their essay, "Under monopoly all culture is identical" (Adorno and Horkheimer 32). The monopoly belongs to 21<sup>st</sup> century consumerism-centric (not consumer-centric) and promotion-based (not value-based) capitalism where such concerns as individual liberty and creative individuality are straightway shunned and put in their places are identity and conformism to that identity. "The whole world is made to pass through the filter of culture industry" (ibid 35), observed the neo-Marxists and given the present zeitgeist every such commercial presents before the consumers a whole new world of manipulated sentiments where Mom's Magic biscuits ensure the daughters of their mother's hearty feelings, where Tata Salt by identifying itself as the nation's salt ("desh ki namak") support health and patriotism for a country to which belongingness is what Ajay Devgan and Shahrukh Khan feels by chewing Vimal Pan Masala and also for which knowledge and sex are to be redefined by tech-savvy WhiteHat junior kids and Durex or Manforce condoms respectively – all of them gradually yet assuredly stripping epistemology of all its virtues and tenets.

The malls in the urban landscape marks a pedestrianisation of space while the billboards in the consumerist mindscape embarks upon the ensnarement of time and the result is the creation of desire in many a different way. The narrative of most of Borges' stories too did rebuff space and

refute time mostly for fictionalising the spatio-temporal mundanity in an effort to witness the other parallels to reality. Borges' essays "Kafka and his Precursors" and "A New Refutation of Time" are the testaments of his philosophical speculation on these occasions. The commercial world invades the consumer's space and time, implodes them and appropriates the desires of not exactly of the particular products, but of the nomenclature of brands branding both the products and the prospective customers in the surfeit of consumption. The surfeit is all-encompassing, irrespective of the categories to which the consumers belong:

The newly ascribed values like that of being cool and trendy as attached to the products help the advertisers to attract the adolescents, the housewives are encouraged to choose the detergent brands promoting merits of better quality and cheaper price over the others presented as ordinary, the norms associated with heritage and culture as shown in the commercials of Basmati Rice and bridal dress are expected to catch hold of the attention of old and the traditionalists. In inviting responses to such products shown by the people of different age-groups and gender-categories, the trajectory of already fallen values and ideals, merits and norms sprung from epistemological gambit goes far away from the reality of crisis and catastrophe. As the multinational companies can witness India as a booming young consumer market, they are evidently generous not only to award the young people with Mr. India or Miss Universe Title, but also to title the brands with such flashy terminology as Magazine Seventeen, Elle 18 etc.. India's is a market where the increasingly wealthy youths, ranging from age seven to thirty seven, are exultantly willing to spend on almost everything, from Lenovo laptops to Boat headphone, from Behroz biryani to Burger King french fries. These are just the products in particular with no general underlining parameters of human needs and calculated equilibrium.

Given the society under mass deception characterised by hedonism, playfulness and *carpe diem*, it was already very difficult to distinguish in between the recognized epistemological implications of Postmodernism, stepping into the era of Post Truth and that too passing over After Theory session and Neo-ethics, yet carrying most of their residuals, now it is way more slippery to decide whether the philosophy is essentialist or faithfully duplicated one, elitist or socialist, hierarchical or carnivalesque. Under Modernism there had been an undeniable trace of poignancy and angst at

the loss of anything and everything, the same agony under Postmodernism had been replaced by an ironic or satirising take on such loss and the same under Post Truth has been handled with a pyrrhic or neutralising approach. As Eagleton once remarked, “Intellectual matters are no longer an ivory-tower affair, but belong to the world of media and shopping malls, bedrooms and brothels. As such, they re-join everyday life — but only at the risk of losing their ability to subject it to critique.” (Eagleton 3)

The transformation is undoubtedly a catastrophic situation excoriating epistemological values all the way the immediate result (or may be the causes) of which is the advent of TV commercials reversing classical epistemology as analysed above. Borges’ fictionality in this context may be termed visionary in the way of prognosis: the irreality born out of the fictionality of Borges’ stories, in its lowly format, has been unknowingly exploited by the consumerist discourse, thereby rendering an artificial sense of ‘realness’ the contemporary commercials self-mockingly promulgate. In other words, the epistemological reality has been underplayed to the extent of reversing its natural implications. May be there is the need to offer a philosophical equipoise in order to mitigate the crisis of humanities oscillating between epistemological backdrop and advertised surface, between erudite metaphysics and commercialized pataphysics, between Borges’ anticipation about the reality presented through fictionality and the commercials’ flizz about the pseudo-epistemology presented as reality. The provision of such equipoise is further likely to help in re-understanding and readjustment of the zeitgeist through the lens of which praxis post-humanist literary progeny may have a ‘sustainable’ landscape, may be written as “lenscape” to denote our view and to connote how one should view Post Truth vicissitudes and accordingly s/he should frame or de-frame fictionality within the epistemology of new dawn.

## Endnotes

1. Adorno and Horkheimer used the term as the primary title of their essay wherein the concept is elaborated.
2. Berkeley’s famous doctrine, *Esse est percipi* in Latin, has been sourced from a number of books on philosophy including the two referred to in the Reference List.

3. When translated into English, it is “Blank Table” human mind is compared to.
4. Bertrand Russell used a footnote to mention the dictum naming it Cartesian Doubt. (Russell 516, 2008)
5. See endnote no. 2.

**Disclaimer:** All the punch-lines or taglines used alongside the advertised products in the Paper are quoted on the basis of common observation made by these Researchers every now and then and so the sources of their references are avoided in the Endnotes.

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