Prof. Key and his Sex Book

By Earle Beattie

In June, this year, Dr. Wilson Bryan Key was reported in the London Free Press and the Toronto Star as having accepted "nearly $64,000" in severance pay from the School of Journalism at the University of Western Ontario.

He was paid to get lost.

The Free Press, long accustomed to bland reporting simply said that Key was "the author of a controversial book, Subliminal Seduction, dealing with dubious advertising practices" and that "he claims pressure was brought to bear on the university to get rid of him."

The Toronto Star story more explicitly pointed out that the book contained "four letter words, orgy scenes, death symbols and human genitals hidden in advertising."

Key's departure ended a six-year academic saga in which I was involved at the beginning. His hiring was a makeshift happenstance. In mid-August, 1969, the Journalism Department had discovered belatedly that it needed another instructor within a month for anticipated increased enrolment. As I was attending a conference of the Association for Education in Journalism at Berkeley, I was enjoined to find one. We were looking for, not just the ordinary journalist, but one who had studied statistical analysis of mass media, who had practical experience in journalism and a Ph.D., or was close to getting that degree.

Key arrived at my door in Berkeley in response to a Bulletin Board ad and applied for the position. He was tall, almost bald in a Yul Brinner way, intense, soft-spoken with a giggly laugh and with eyes that looked as though he were practising hypnotism. He was completing his doctorate at the University of Colorado at the age of 44 and had an unusual background that included war service in the South Pacific, journalism in the Phillipines, freelance writing and finally ownership of a market survey research firm in Puerto Rico.

A second candidate for the position also appeared and showed good qualifications. Neither candidate seemed to have the slightest knowledge of Canada and I regretted that the Department Chairman had not started the search earlier and we had not looked harder in Canada, especially for teaching in this field. It was too little, too late. It turned out that our first year enrolment did indeed shoot up, the Chairman was impressed by Key's
marketing experience and Key got the job.

Key did get his degree, but he showed absolutely no interest in social science research. In fact he repudiated it. His preoccupation — you might say obsession — was with sexual symbolism in media, mostly ads. It seemed that was the only subject he wanted to teach, whether in the first year class in Media and Society or in a third-year class in Magazine Journalism. I believe it was the first time in history that students got sick of sex. Symbolically at least.

Later, Key did broaden out his teaching topics somewhat. But his over-concentration on one theme to the detriment of all others was considered a dereliction. While it might stand up in a specialized program in Visual Communication — the sort of thing John Berger does with insight and historic analysis in his Ways of Seeing — it could not constitute a be-all and end-all in journalism study. Yet in many ways, Key provided students with insights on subliminality in message-making generally, in psychological manipulation by media and in semantics. Short of the ab absurdum level to which he carried his concept, it was certainly more instructive than the use for many years of Time magazine as a model for good journalism. On the effect of Time's extension of American right-wing values into Canadian education, there was little understanding or concern.

_Philip Subliminal Seduction_ was a book that convinced many and made others laugh in derision. When Key presented his slides on hidden sexual symbolism at the St. Lawrence Centre, the audience was reported by The Star as cheering and enthusiastic. The Globe and Mail's Nicholas Cotter reviewed the book favorably (Oct. 3/75) with only one word of criticism, "strained."

Strained it was. Key tells his readers to relax and look at a Gilbey's gin-ad as a "classic design of subliminal art." In the three ice cubes of a tall glass may be found, he says, the word "sex" and indeed anyone can detect at least the S and the E. Then there is said to be a face in the top ice cube, peering and winking at the word. At the bottom of the glass is another face, probably a woman's, ogling the bottle cap's reflection in the table which contains "a man's legs and partially erect genitals." And, the author adds in carnival style, "there is much more to come (if you'll pardon the expression...)"

The melting ice suggests seminal fluid, the use of green color suggest post-orgasm peace, the reflection of the tonic glass and that of the bottle with its vertical opening symbolizes vaginal lips, and a drop of water at the top "could represent the clitoris."

If put in a story line, "the still-open vagina is where the discharged penis has just been" and the frosty gin bottle itself suggests "coitus interruptus." Finally one more female
genital symbol drawn into the tonic glass reflection becomes a closed vagina, "suggesting the owner might be lying down awaiting her turn."

And so, the author concluded, buying Gilbey's has subliminal promise of a sexual orgy after "breaking out the frosty bottle." There follows the moral posture that other ads are "far more morally objectionable than the Gilbey's ad." The moral tone is a technique long used by the Tabloid papers which revel in details of sadism, masochism, pornography, pornography-violence, voyeurism, necrophilia, rape and assorted deviance, then follow with words like "monstrous" and "diabolical." Thus the reader can indulge in pictorial sexual voyeurism and then rationalize his appetite through the morally indignant tone of the text. It is a psychological process when you're at war with yourself known as cognitive consonance: eating your prurient cake and having your self-esteem too. One reduces his cognitive dissonance, in this case guilt feelings over enjoying the pornography, by agreeing with the author's righteous tone. It is aided by his "seeing" the "disgusting" imagery.

If you don't see all these things in the ads, according to Key, it is because you are subject to puritanic repression or in Freudian terms your ego is censoring your libido. Key draws heavily on unrevised Freudian analysis, particularly dream psychology. His basic proposition is that the unconscious mind does exist, that information is collected continuously at this level and there is no conscious awareness of it entering the brain; it is subliminal (sub for below and liminal for sight). Attitudes and desires hidden in the Unconscious dominate the Conscious mind and seek meanings, outlets. Much of this subliminal information, these hidden desires - say the wish for a sexual orgy - are unacceptable to the Conscious mind and so are repressed.

In Freud's dream analysis, a psychic censor cuts off or changes the information into new and puzzling imagery to preserve sleep. Key maintains that the modern ad, on the surface, like the remembered dream is the "manifest content" of the conscious mind and the deliberately implanted sexual symbols hidden therein are "latent content" of the libido. Freud refers to the libido as "a seething cauldron of passions", lodged in the Unconscious. To Key, the ad, the package, the Playboy or cosopolitan cover are manifest content or "camouflage" as McLuhan refers to it in his introduction to Key's book.

Why hide the erotic symbolism? Because the morally-inhibited person will not accept erotica openly and he will resist purchasing the commodity. But his libidinous self will and the commands of this self are powerful; they will have a sleeper effect and will later trigger a purchase that bypasses the critical mind. The top side of the psyche doesn't know what the lower side is doing.
All this is tenable theory, but "he question remains as to whether the erotic symbols are really there and if artists, photographers and other media people have deliberately planted them there to sell goods or get an audience. Of course it can always be said that they did it unconsciously, but this is like saying that all those ads were guided by Ouija boards. No evidence of this sort is advanced in the book and one is forced to the conclusion that they are there only in the mind of Prof. Key.

Moreover, much more devastating theories must be advanced: those of the Rorschach Ink-Blot Test and of Perception psychology generally. Fifty years ago Walter Lippmann observed in his Public Opinion that people "do not at first see and then believe, but believe first and then see." Marshall McLuhan in his metaphoric style has clipped this concept to "Believing is Seeing." John Berger in Ways of Seeing observes that "the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe." Every part of the Ink Blot would suggest sex to Bill Key; he would see what he wanted to see. The ad as an Ink Blot is all sex.

Key's analysis thus constitutes a reduction of all imagery to sexuality. In this frame of mind, all life and symbolism is transformed into genitalia, orgiastic imagery, or Anglo-Saxon four-letter words. Hydro poles on a street become phallic symbols; clouds and shrubbery spell out libidinous language and never represent anything else. Theories of fixation could be also applied.

Key insisted of course that everybody should see the same as he did in the Ink Blot of life and popular art; this to him was objective reality. But as Berger notes that "The world-as-it-is is more than pure objective fact, it includes consciousness." At one point in our conversations Key showed me a photo of Vietnam war dead and contended the photographer or art editor had arranged the bodies to spell out the word sex. The perception had turned sick.

One critic, writing in York's student paper, Excalibur, observed that "there are even those who point to Freud's remark, when Freud was accused of perpetually smoking phallic cigars: 'Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.'"

Key's highly specific symbolic forms follow Freud's very specific dream symbolism, e.g. pits, hollows, caves, jars, bottles and boxes as female genitalia, onanism by pulling off a branch, sliding or gliding in a dream. But as Philip Rief has noted in his introduction to Freud's Delusion and Dream, "Here we see most clearly how the Freudian science may give itself over to a kind of literary extravagance, to the discovery of improbably symbolic equivalences among objects and actions...For in the Freudian view man is an aesthethic animal...Untrained we are
nevertheless very artful, engaged in a continuous act of deception first of all before the naive audience of our own consciousness..."

Yet we all know that ads and other media material contain sexual imagery whether to sell cars or chewing gum. The young female on TV being chased through the woods by the young male, being caught as in the primitive chase, lighting up her cigarette after tamping it with his cigarette - suggests seclusion, youth, freshness in the greenery and above all, a surrounding for sex play. These are all well-known techniques, deliberately designed on psychological principles of association and projection that admen hope will transfer to the product.

Packard in his Hidden Persuasion postulates eight hidden needs that advertisers try to turn into wants: emotional security, ego gratification, creative outlet, reassurance of worth, love objects, a sense of power, sense of roots and immortality. All are based on Ernest Dichter's motivational research surveys and studies by others. Dichter, a witch-doctor of the unregenerate industrial state, probes people's feelings of guilt, fear, insecurity, nostalgia, violence, hope and creativity and turns his findings over to advertisers for a price. Many of these emotions are subliminal in the sense that people are unaware of their longings and hang-ups. The advertiser then goes to work. In effect he preys on human emotions to move goods, e.g. Virginia Slims are designed for the female smoker who thereby buys not just the cigarette but an image of slimness for herself. The Candy company overcomes guilt feelings of tooth decay and indulgence by putting two "bit-sized" pieces of chocolate bar in one package with the presumed human reaction, "After all I don't have to eat all of it, just a bite, and then put the rest away."

This is self-deceit, subliminal, rationalizing - call it what you may - and it arises out of the cynical exploitation, often sexploitation, of the adman delivering people to the market. It isn't necessary to cryptically conceal the Id in the entrails of the ad. On a completely visible level, of course, advertising - whether in magazines or on TV or in news, on packages, on bill boards or wherever you look, has highly visible sexual stimuli in the form of nudity, male-female interaction and print messages like "Fly Me" for the airline hostess. Packard contends that it transfers to the product. But Bill Key wanted to out-Packard Packard and in the process he went from the subliminal to the ridiculous.

There are aspects of Key's book which are praiseworthy, namely his comments on the Con in Confidence, the sales pitch of many news stories, orchestration of the senses, the subtle use of color in packaging and the manipulation of trusting relationships by the media. But all these observations are dovetailed to an untenable theme: sexual cryptography.
Finally there is the evidence of promotional trickery and ad-type exaggeration, e.g. Key's strained attempt to produce effects by saying Time's World Edition has 24.2 million readers - a figure he gets by simply multiplying circulation by 3. This is an assumption that magazine promotion departments use but they are not substantiated. Or his statement that the Gilbey's ad was tested with "over a thousand subjects" - How much over? 150, 300, 600? This is followed by an exact figure that "9.5 percent of the test subjects" pronounced fear reactions. Using a precise statistic like this may sound convincingly scientific to the uninitiated, but what is 9.5 percent of "over a thousand"? And when and where was all this testing done?

As the author says, "...Inmates know that in order to commit a bunk or con, the mark had to be first manipulated into a trusting relationship."

Does that include a book called Subliminal Seduction?

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Editor: Earle Beattie, 85 Thorncliffe Park Drive, #1402, Toronto M4H 1L6

Associates: Richard Lunn, June Callwood, Don Montgomery

Bruce Rogers

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**FOOTNOTES from "TV Advertising" article, p.7**

2. BOTTOMORE, T.B., Karl Marx: Early Writings, McGraw Hill, USA 1964, p.85
5. Ibid., p.130
6. Ibid., p.132
7. Ibid., p.133