THE CULTURE OF ADVERTISING

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There are times when I have the feeling that ad talk is everywhere. It's not just because you can hardly watch any kind of TV, including PBS, without being confronted by some kind of commercial. Or that virtually all magazines and newspapers are chock full of ads in these halcyon days of Reagan's prosperity. Or even that going to some moviehouses in Toronto you'll be compelled to watch a commercial on the big screen before getting to see the feature you've paid for (fortunately many people hiss at this unwanted imposition).

The fact is that the style and rhythms and messages of commercial speech are embedded in our collective and public life. Those recent expressions of public joy, Expo '86 and the 1988 Winter Olympics, were an excuse for a binge of promotion and commerce. At election time, parties fill the airwaves with a special kind of partisan rhetoric, the thirty-second spot, to win our votes (Diamond/Bates, 1984). In normal times the government is continually cajoling people with commercials to instil public virtue or defeat some new vice—the biggest single advertiser in Canada, according to 1982 figures, was the national government. A visit to the supermarket or the clothing store means coming to terms with a huge range of competing brands and their images:
we're all followers and victims of 'the philosophy of Pierre Cardin', in the words of a friend of mine.

It has become so familiar that you don't really notice what's happened until you leave North America for some more 'backward' place. I recall a visit to Cuba some years ago where the absence of commercial speech was as noticeable as the presence of a rather tired revolutionary rhetoric. A local who'd somehow made the trip to the mainland reflected on his sense of surprise and distaste over the plethora of billboards, TV commercials, radio spots, print ads, and the like which suddenly impinged upon his life. We live in a society of abundance in which the language of commerce has attained a privileged status akin to that of religion in the nineteenth century or communism in the Soviet world (Potter 1954).

Yet for a long time academe largely avoided talking about what was, for most scholars, a distasteful dimension of life. Far more attention was paid to the discourse of news or to the dangers of mass entertainment than to the lowly arts of advertising, outside the domain of economics where scholars pondered at great and often boring length just how effective ads were as marketing tools. The few critiques were left to maverick scholars like Marshall McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride* (1951) and popular writers like Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders*, (1975) and they carried a heavy moral freight which made advertising look a lot like the devil's work. Although the tradition has continued, Wilson Brian Key's (1972, 1976) exposés of subliminal seduction being the most outlandish of recent attacks, in the past decade or so a variety of scholars have begun to take advertising a good deal more seriously. I'm thinking of books such as Stuart Ewen's diatribe against capitalist propaganda, *Captains of Consciousness* (1976), Judith Williamson's exercise in semiotic analysis *Decoding Advertising* (1978), Erving Goffman's marvelous account of sexism and stereotype in *Gender Advertisements* (1979), or Daniel Pope's *The Making of Modern Advertising* (1983). They've made commercial speech a legitimate field of inquiry in a range of different disciplines. (A more extensive list, and discussion, can be found in Leiss et al. 13-42.)

The six books I'm dealing with here belong to a second wave of academic study that's testing and extending the earlier observations, and in the process manufacturing a new consensus about the role of advertising in modern capitalist society. The mix of specialties amongst the authors is striking: Marchand is a historian of American culture, Schudson (whose past work was on news) and Singer are sociologists, Leiss and Jhally are in communications departments and their associate Kline in environmental studies, Vestergaard and Schröder employ something called "applied sociolinguistics". Not surprisingly they focus on quite different aspects of the common topic. Singer surveys the existing literature, and plugs in some Canadian data, to introduce university students to a sociology of advertising, which doesn't allow him to make personal observations about the meaning or import of advertising. Schudson takes on the garb of a philosopher to cast doubt on assumptions about the power of advertising.
Marchand has produced an eminently readable and heavily researched exploration of magazine and radio advertising during the heady days of the 1920s and the hard times of the Depression to identify how advertising became so much a part of America's popular culture. Leiss, Kline, and Jhally take a similar approach, employing tools from both semiotics and content analysis (using Canadian source material), but over the whole span of the twentieth century to show how advertising has become the pre-eminent form of social communication today. Jhally, on his own, has mixed Marxism, anthropology, and psychoanalysis to elaborate a highly theoretical account of how capitalism "valorises consciousness itself" (205), a phrase I'm still not sure I understand. Vestergaard and Schrøder, writing out of the British experience, provide a detailed semiotic analysis of ads in various weekly, women's and men's publications (they avoid television altogether!) which often seems a gloss on the work of Goffman and Williamson. Leiss and his colleagues, Vestergaard and Schrøder, and above all Marchand, whose book is full of commercial copy and imagery, make use of actual photographs of ads to give the reader a much better appreciation of what they analyze. By contrast Singer, Jhally, and Schudson spend more effort on the overall phenomenon of advertising than on the discussion of actual advertisements, although Jhally's book does contain an extensive empirical analysis of primetime and sportstime commercials in the 1980-81 TV year.

But the differences in approach aren't as marked as one might expect. They convey an impression of advertising and the advertising agency which I suspect would be alien to many a client or an account executive in the business. For the fact is that each of these works share a common assumption, namely that commercial speech is best seen as a cultural phenomenon whose social significance, and perhaps social power as well, is far greater than its economic significance or its impact on the marketplace. That's why I've decided to treat these works as a single body of work, rather than to analyze the individual books separately.

It won't surprise that the authors usually discuss only one kind of advertising, national and consumer brandname advertising. Classifieds and industrial or retails ads, are a sort of commercial news, providing information about the marketplace to interested buyers. The fact is that consumer advertising often isn't very informative, at least about the character or price of the product in question. Study after study has noted that the amount of hard information about a product in the average ad has declined since the early years of the century. It offers consumers information about something else, about themselves or their lifestyle. That's why assorted debates over 'truth in advertising' are a bit strange: ads often don't make the kind of explicit or factual claims which can be proved or disputed properly. Consumer advertising is "an ideology of efficacious answers" (Marchand, 227), where individual discontents whether over appearance or status or joy can be readily solved merely by purchasing the right product. Put more generally, advertising is the chief form of talk about "the interplay between persons and objects" (Leiss et al., 47) in our culture, about what a
product means rather than what it is. So to understand the force of advertising it's necessary to recognize how closely it's integrated with our daily lives.

It's worth emphasizing that none of the authors regard this "discourse concerning objects" (Jhally, 2) as illegitimate in itself. They've discarded the old saw that advertising is an unholy instrument of materialism which must therefore debauch the public mind. The lessons of anthropology show that in virtually all societies, advanced or otherwise, goods have had a symbolic as well as a material content (Douglas/Sherwood, 1978). People consume to satisfy much more than their simple biological needs. They give gifts to special people which signify their love and their honour: Schudson (141), for instance, wonders whether we ought not to look on a housewife's "food shopping as part of gift giving, serving to sustain valued social relations?" What we eat or wear tells ourselves and others "what kind of people we are, or would like to be" (Vestergaard & Schrøder 5). The power of advertising derives from the fact that it attempts to satisfy the well-nigh universal need to assign goods a specific meaning.

Which doesn't mean, however, that advertising lacks a history. Most authors date the rise of advertising from the late nineteenth century (although an over-enthusiastic Singer finds seven distinct stages beginning as far back as 3000 B.C.) when both mass communications and the consumer culture really got going. Both Schudson and Leiss et al. have chapters devoted to the roots of this culture wherein people believe they can satisfy their desires and needs "by buying mass produced, standardized, nationally advertised consumer products" (Schudson, 147). It rested on a new myth about the virtues of the American and the capitalist way, namely "the democracy of goods" (Marchand, 217) where the consumer was queen (since most consumers were women). The emergence of a national marketplace required that consumer industries fashion tools to reach out and persuade a huge number of anonymous folks of the virtues of purchasing brandname shirts, shoes, soft drinks, perfumes, and on and on. The decline of tradition, the impact of industrialism, the new abundance—the reasons vary—led consumers to search for new guides to understand the meaning of particular goods. In short advertising fulfilled both an economic and a social need.

The key institution in the new process of communication was the advertising agency since it acted as the necessary bridge between producers and consumers (Leiss et al., 98-104). At least in the beginning the admen saw themselves as "ambassadors of the consumer" (Marchand, 29) and "missionaries of modernity" (ibid, xxi) who strove to help people adjust to and accept the realities of an economy of abundance. The reality, then and later, as Schudson makes clear, was that they were more often like "confidence men" (175) in the employ of the businessmen. The hucksters' means were the media, of course. The admen were able to 'conquer' easily first print and then broadcasting because advertising promised their masters a never ending stream of money. That ensured a superlative vehicle to deliver the admen's message to the millions, and by the by shaped the content of whatever else the media offered. Once touted as a medium of uplift and enlightenment, radio fell from grace during the 1920s,
notes Marchand, its programming becoming ever more popular to win the mass audience wanted by advertisers. That kind of story has led some scholars to the exaggerated notion that the media are chiefly advertising vehicles. So Jhally (64-123) argues that TV's selling of the audience, more properly of "watching time", to advertisers has converted viewing into a form of labour where the viewer 'works' by looking at commercials to produce profits for the broadcaster in return for his daily 'wage' of entertainment (for the highbrow critique see Barnouw, 1978). A neat theory perhaps, though I personally prefer Marshall McLuhan's description of the same process as "paid learning", if we must have some sort of an analogy with the world of work (McLuhan 1962: 366).

It was the copywriters and art directors of the ad agencies who crafted the consumer ad, which Leiss and his compatriots (72) claims is, "in some senses", "the quintessential communications form of the modern ear." There's certainly no doubt it's one of the most expensive forms of communication around: the amount of money, talent, and time devoted to TV commercials in particular is staggering, and often the commercial minutes have cost much more to produce than the host programme itself.

The consumer ad has a logic and a grammar all its own because of the constraints of space and time. What's so impressive about the advertisement is the way it packs so much meaning into one picture, a few words, or thirty seconds of airtime. "In advertising language, metaphor is an extremely frequent device." (Vestergaard & Schrøder, 38)--because metaphor ('put a tiger in your tank') is a way of quickly associating a product with some desirable attribute, situation, or person. It's obvious that there's little hope for rational argument in a television commercial these days, thus producers reply upon some kind of "shorthand" (Singer, 128), readily available stereotypes, to get across their message. What may not be so obvious is the admen fifty years ago, so Marchand demonstrates, were well aware of similar kind of shorthand was essential for magazine ads and the like.

There is a rather natural tendency to believe that commercial speech has evolved to reach some present state of power and sophistication, if not perfection, as a result of the rise of applied psychology in the 1920s and motivational research thirty years later, the postwar notion of market segmentation and the charting of audience demographics, and above all the recent dominance of television. That's implicit in Singer's brief survey of the so-called "era of electronic advertising: 1920-80". And it informs the detailed survey of "the structure of advertisements" carried out by Leiss, Kline, and Jhally: they used samples drawn from Maclean's and Chatelaine over the past seventy years or so to show how "basic advertising formats", assorted codes of "style" and "appeal" and "values", and different themes have waxed and waned over the years to bring us, for instance, to the present-day emphasis on lifestyle ads.

The trouble with such notions, however, is that they impose a bit too much order upon what has always been an extraordinarily eclectic brand of communication. Marchand's account demonstrates that admen in the 1920s and 1930s were employ-
ing a marvelous array of genres, from "scare copy" to "quick-tempo sociodramas", styles of direct address and pictorial appeal (modern art, for example, infected ads for cars, baby powders, even paint), an assortment of parables about life (the parable of the first impression, the democracy of goods and the democracy of afflictions, civilization redeemed), and a range of visual clichés (fantasies of domain, the family circle, the heavenly city), to bring their messages to the consuming public. He found, for example, that the same contrast between "the predominance of a solid, firmly planted stance for men and an unbalanced stance for women" (185) noted by Erving Goffman in recent ads as a sign of sexual stereotyping was very common in illustrations sixty years earlier. No doubt there are fads and fashions in advertising circles, when admen rush to some new technique like "reason-why" ads or humour, overheard testimonials where the consumer seems to be eavesdropping on reality, the anthropomorphizing of goods like the famous Jolly Green Giant, images of fun times and classy living, and on and on. Yes there has been a tendency for wordy ads to decline and pictorial display to become more and more important. But the fact is that most of the present range of tools have been around at least since the 1920s. A Whiggish interpretation is no more applicable to the history of advertising than to, say, the history of politics.

Leafing through a copy of the latest edition of *Time* (23 May 1988), for example, I can find a whole range of different types of consumer ads, some of which wouldn't have been out of place forty or fifty years ago. There are wordy promises of service (Four Seasons Hotels and Restaurants) and quality (IBM DisplayWrite 4/2); icons, or visual displays, of a product (Finnish Vodka) and a rugged male (Players Cigarettes); happy lifestyle ads (Johnnie Walker whiskey and the diamond industry); beautiful people, in this case youth (a government of Canada ad for the "Hire a Student" campaign); a celebrity ad, associating achievement in racing and business with the performance of a watch (Rolex); use of a fictional character right out of PopCult, in this case superman, to connote speed and scope (Bell's Calling Card/Carte d'appel).

Throughout advertising has shown an ability to take virtually any kind of imagery or language, even to appropriate notions like the love or Nature or the fear of Bigness which seem to run counter to the consumer ethic or the capitalist way, to sell goods. "Advertising borrows its ideas, its language, and its visual representations..." from everywhere, writes Jhally (142), "then it artfully recombines them around the theme of consumption." In particular, Vestergaard and Schröder (following in the footsteps of Judith Williamson) lament the recuperative capacity of advertising, the way it can absorb nearly any criticism, exploiting the women's movement (remember Virginia Slims?), a yearning for natural ingredients (so often featured in hair shampoo ads), or even public cynicism about advertising itself. Advertising has to be a "reflection of a common symbolic culture" (Schudson, 210), it has to be accessible to a very wide range of people, if it is to work its magic. It doesn't reflect reality so much as "public aspirations" and "popular fantasies", which is why Marchand aptly calls advertising "a distorting mirror" (xvii) that privileges certain images of individuals, ages, classes,
genders, settings, and habits. The people who appear in ads are representatives of "a social type or a demographic category" (Schudson, 212), normally a type that’s esteemed which is why upper class men and women have always been far more common in the ad world than the real world. The over-representation in present-day ads of youth and leisure is "a symbolic representation of the social esteem accorded to the young, the free and the beautiful" as well as a sign of "people’s wishful thinking about their own future" (Vestergaard & Schröder, 122-123). I was struck by the very wide range of groupings, relationships, activities, and lifestyles, however distorted, however bourgeois, that Jhally found in his analysis of commercials.

This, of course, is what makes the study of advertising so fascinating: it’s a way of gaining an understanding of the public mind at any point in time. But be careful--at times advertising reflects only the special perceptions of a very atypical people, namely the admen themselves, which explains why the ads of the 1920s and 1930s so often featured golf, hardly a shared passion of the American people at that time.

It’s a lot more difficult to answer the question what advertising does than what advertising is, however. People don’t concentrate on ads the way they might upon news or a sports contest or a story. Whatever the medium, they’ve usually been "perceived by the audience in an inattentive 'state of distraction" (Marchand, xx). Little wonder that the rate of ad recall has never been very high: "Unprodded, about 9 percent of viewers can name the brand or product category they saw advertised on television immediately before answering the phone call from the market researcher" (Schudson, 2). Research has shown that the influence of advertising upon children, widely considered amongst the most vulnerable element in society, is often "mediated or filtered by the influence of peers and parents and by the individual’s own social characteristics" (Singer, 89). And adults typically "discount or discredit advertising, to some extent, because they know it to be a message from an interested source" (Schudson, 101).

Yet commonsense alone suggests that ads do leave a mark on the public, especially when they are repeated ad nauseam. We can all recall particular jingles or slogans or images that came to us via ads: Coke, in particular, is famous for spreading its clichés around the world. That’s hardly an accident: Marchand’s admen came to believe they "were addressing an audience that lived not by logic and reason but by 'its rather raw and crude emotions'" (69). So, over the past half century, advertising agencies have endeavoured to send their messages to what’s been called the "emotional brain" (Singer, 215). The commercial can thereby fix elements of its message in the reader’s or viewer’s mind, unbeknownst to that person, which might trigger an act of purchase later on. That fact has lent credence to the belief that ads "function on the level of the day-dream"--they "construct an imaginary world in which the reader is able to make come true those desires which remain unsatisfied in his or her everyday life" (Vestergaard & Schröder, 117). We play an "ironic game" with advertising, just as admen play the same game with us, claims Schudson (227). "In a sense, what we’re
"Perhaps the least important aspect of advertising's significance for modern society is its role in influencing specific consumer choices--whether wise or unwise--about purchasing products," declare Leiss and his colleagues (45). Marchand cites research which demonstrates that ads may be most important to consumers to "provide reassurance of the correctness of their original buying decision" (349)--ads work their magic after the actual purchase. Yet of all the authors, it's Schudson who devotes the most attention to worrying about the impact of advertising on consumer choices. He even includes a fascinating chapter on the rise of the cigarette in the first decades of this century to test the role advertising had upon the emergence of new consumer habits. His conclusions suggest that people's assumptions about the potency of advertising in the marketplace are woefully exaggerated. The cigarette study convinced him "that major consumer changes are rarely wrought by advertising" (179). The cigarette became so popular with men and women because its convenience suited the times and made tobacco accessible and pleasurable for all sorts of consumers. On the whole, he feels ads usually work with other tools of marketing and have an effect which is less than say packaging or price or retail promotions. They can’t counter a weak demand, and normally they only redistributed heavy users of a product amongst the competing brands. The fact is that most of the time most of the people are not even in the marketplace for a particular good. All of which may be very true, though I think the force of his thesis can too easily be exaggerated: there have been too many instances in North America where sales have zoomed during the course of ad campaigns to
discredit the notion that advertising can be a most effect marketing tool, whether for established products or newcomers. I recommend a reading of Jerry Goodis’ *Have I Every Lied to You Before* (McClelland & Stewart 1972) for some descriptions of the import of advertising in the Canadian circumstance.

Even so, I do find persuasive the view that the social import of advertising is greater than any effect it might have upon the marketplace. Allow me to quote a few of the claims made:

"Its [advertising’s] real ideological role...is to give us meaning. That is why it is so powerful. If it is manipulative, it is manipulative with respect to a real need: our need to know the world and to make sense of it, our need to know ourselves" (Jhally, 1997).

"Advertising does more than merely manufacture consumers; it is constantly redefining the range and repertoire of roles and identities available within our society" (Singer, 75).

"Through repetition, bold display, and ingenuity, advertisements infused their images and slogans into America’s common discourse. If the metaphors, syntactical patterns, and verbal and visual ‘vocabularies’ of our common language establish our parameters of thought and cut the furrows along which our ideas tend to flow, then advertising has played a significant role in establishing our frames of reference and perception" (Marchand, xx).

Which still leaves the question of exactly what advertising does do to us. Marchand is convinced ads played a vital therapeutic role in America by promoting modernity, advising and guiding a bewildered people, and assuaging their anxieties about life. Leiss and his colleagues observe, time and again, that advertising has become the chief means of providing the social cues necessary for people to know how to act, to dress, to entertain, what foods to choose or prepare, how to furnish a room, in short all the little ways of daily life. Vestergaard and Schröder refurbish the old radical belief that advertising works to serve the elite by treating the status quo as a given, natural, unquestionable, unchangeable. In a similar vein Jhally believes that the emphatic sexism of ads has fostered an obsession with gender and sex which is unique in history. Another way of putting all this is to say that advertising has become the chief means of shaping commonsense in the so-called First World.

These powers don’t please the authors: except for the historian Marchand, who really isn’t interested in questions of ethics, they evince a certain moral repugnance toward advertising. Schudson can’t quite get over the fact that advertising "fully merits its reputation as the emblem of fraudulence" (10). Vestergaard and Schröder are deeply troubled by what they see as "its misrepresentation of human relationships and feelings, which are made dependent on purchased commodities" (1972). Singer worries about the impact of advertising on children, about the impact of sexual
stereotyping on women, and about the way the elderly are "visible minorities" are treated or rather mistreated in the ad world. Schudson hopes, naively I think, that admen may come to question "the morality of marketing" (238) and so make their copy and images something "that enhances human and humane values" (242). Leiss, Kline, and Jhally make some vague proposals about opening up the discourse on goods to other groups, notably consumer organizations, reducing the influence of advertising on the media and placing some unspecified public controls on what they called "persuasive communication" (310). This is all a bit lame. I’m inclined to agree with Vestergaard and Schröder who believe (though they manage to find one ad, this for Johnson’s Baby Shampoo, which served consumer interests) that at bottom advertising really isn’t reformable, without a revolution that would overturn capitalism itself.

I can’t say that this worries me too much. I’ve two reasons for my lack of concern over the ethics of advertising. First, I’m not convinced that the social power of advertising is an extensive as some authors suggest. The fact is, as Marchand’s account demonstrates, that the messages of advertising blend into the popular culture of the day. Although I agree with Jhally (198-199) that an unthinking faith in technology, more religious than rational, imbues a lot of advertising, that’s also true of so much of our popular literature, movies, and TV entertainment. I don’t think advertising is responsible for our present obsession with gender and sex, any more than Hollywood is, and it would take a well-documented study of sex in history to prove that modern North America is more possessed by questions of sexuality and gender than any other past society. What moulds commonsense in Canada, the United States, and so much of Europe is the whole range of messages dispersed by the mass media, and especially television because it occupies such a central position in the communications experience. Maybe some people do learn about having fun from watching beer commercials, but they or others may well learn about the international scene by reading spy novels or about Latins and South America by viewing Miami Vice. Indeed I think the most important form of discourse remains news which supplies us with believable information and impressions about all kinds of things, including what products we should or should not buy. One of the lessons of the study of the culture of advertising should be that the impact of advertisements and commercials can’t in the end, be analyzed in isolation from all the other bits and pieces of information available to the public.

Secondly, I look upon advertising not so much as a nefarious kind of propaganda but rather as a sometimes amusing, sometimes enlightening form of art. I do, on occasion, look through a magazine to read the ads, rather than the stories. Over the years I’ve found commercials which are witty, poignant, or striking comments on the human condition. I’m not alone: almost two decades ago, the Davey Report on the Mass Media learned that seven out of ten Canadians thought advertising was an art form, and fully one-third of viewers believed commercials were "sometimes more interesting than the programme within which they are shown" (Davey, 1970: 33). Schudson has called advertising "Capitalism Realism", akin to socialist art, which simplifies and
typifies reality—"advertising is capitalism's way of saying 'I love you' to itself" (232). Its little stories, its portrayals of the good life, its lush photography are things to be enjoyed and discarded.

"In thirty seconds, everybody notices everything" (Arlen, 1980: 211). Well, that's just not true. But one can understand the concern of the speaker, Jerry Pfiffner, then an executive vice-president of N.W. Ayer and leader of a Creative Group that had designed advertising for A.T.& T.'s ad campaign in 1979—the famous "Reach Out and Touch Someone" commercials intended to get more people to make long distance calls. Everything, including the colour tint, had to be just right when the first commercial debuted on Johnny Carson's The Tonight Show. That wasn't only because so much of the client's money had been spent on every scene. Or that an enormous amount of talent, time, and effort had gone into making the commercial. It was also because Jerry was an artist, a corporate artist perhaps, with all the enthusiasms of that breed. One can forgive the artist a lot of faults when he remains true to his calling.

Notes

1. Though Schudson explicitly, and I think rightly, take Ewen's Captains of Consciousness to task for suggesting that advertising had a consciously political purpose to defuse worker unrest and prevent worker rebellion in capitalist America. Frankly I think that Ewen's flawed work has been superceded by Marchand's much more subtle and more convincing history.

2. Jhally (111) claims that commercials ought to be seen as "capital goods" and programmes as "consumer goods". Commercials aren't sold to the public, they're made for repetitive use, they're a part of the distributive system, they're costly (like machinery), and they're even tax deductible.

REFERENCES


