New Theoretical Perspectives on Advertising

Since the emergence of "critical" media studies in the 1970s, a substantial literature has developed that examines and questions the role of mass communications and advertising within the institutional structures of contemporary capitalist societies. In contrast to "administrative" media studies that focus on how to use mass communications within the given political economic order to influence audiences, sell products, and promote politicians, critical research has addressed the social and cultural effects of mass communications and their role in perpetuating an unjust social order.

One facet of critical analyses of advertising — exemplified by Goffman's Gender Advertisements, Williamson's Decoding Advertisements, and Andrew et al.'s Rhetoric and Ideology in Advertising — has examined the content and structure of advertisements for their distorted communications and ideological impact. Employing semiotics and/or content analysis, numerous critical studies working at the micro level have examined how advertising's mass communications "persuade" or "manipulate" consumers.

By contrast, works such as Schiller's Mass Communications and American Empire, Straw's Captions of Consciousness, and Hitchens' The Media Miseducate present broader historical analyses which locate advertising and mass communications within the history of contemporary capitalism and examine their impact on the larger social and political economic structure. Studies such as these have probed how advertising and mass media have contributed to the development and perpetuation of an undemocratic social order by concentrating enormous economic and cultural power in the hands of a few corporations and individuals.

These two facets of critical media studies have generated numerous insights into the conservative social functions and ideological effects of mass communications that were ignored by "administrative research" which tended to focus on the effects which mass communication had in carrying out certain specific tasks (i.e., capturing an audience, selling goods, conveying messages, etc.). One persistent problem, however, has plagued critical media studies and blunted its potential impact on cultural studies and public policy. Very rarely have critical studies of advertising and mass communications adequately articulated the linkage between the macro political economic structure of mass media and the micro mass communication forms and techniques so as to reveal how the overall structure of media institutions shapes mass communications and reproduces existing social systems. The failure to clearly and comprehensively articulate this linkage has often generated an implicit "complicity theory" suggesting that a few elites in control of the mass media consciously conspire to manipulate culture and consciousness. This deficiency has plagued critical analyses of advertising and communications and while there is certainly justification for many of the criticisms of mass communications by critical media, it has not been explained in general, particular, can contribute to that critical task.

New York: Methuen, 1986

Codes of Advertising: Fetishism and the Political Economy of Meaning in the Consumer Society by Sut Jhally
New York: Saint Martin's, 1987

Magazine advertisement, Gillette
The communications media and advertising agencies evolved hand-in-hand into "the modern advertising industry" where advertising is a central institution of the "market-industrial economy."

Another contribution of SCA is its synthesis of works by other scholars in a variety of fields which encompass advertising, communications, and society. The book provides a concise description of the historical and structural context of advertising and its developmental trends, while at the same time introducing positions of the major scholars of advertising, e.g., Aron, Schradin, Pope, Fox, Curran, Barrow, and Pollay, to name a few. One of the more original approaches concerns their studies of "The Theatre of Commercials." Here, they examine the structure and content of advertisements and their social and cultural impact using both semiology and content analysis. The first study, derived from Jhally's doctoral dissertation, involves an analysis of television commercials sampled from sports programming targeted to males and prime time programming targeted to females. Daltal's goal was to illuminate "the differentiated codes used by advertisers in their messages directed at male and female audiences". The study reveals, not surprisingly, that advertisers utilize different codes and strategies to appeal to different audiences and genders. For example, "beauty," "family relations," and "evidence" are codes used to address female audiences while "ruggedness" and "fraternity" are primarily male advertising codes.

The second study, conducted by Letts and Kline, involves an historical examination of magazine advertising (1908-1984) for the trends and uses of audience codes. Following Leymore's semiotic analysis in "Hidden Myths: Structure and Symbolism in Advertising," Letts and Kline analyze magazine ads for their use of "person," "product," "setting," and "text." One important trend discerned involves the steady decline in the use of text or copy in ads and the increase in display and illustrations, confirming claims by Daniel Jessor, Guy Debord, and Jean Baudrillard concerning the increased importance of images in contemporary culture.

A second important trend involves a shift of emphasis within ads away from communicating specific product information towards commercializing the social and symbolic uses of products. To illustrate this trend, the authors present 25 ads from different historical periods. For example, a Bull Durham Tobacco ad from the turn of the century "places greater emphasis upon language — description of the product, promises, and argument," whereas a contemporary Marlboro ad is revealed to have no copy or product information, just an image that "conveys a range of attributes...to be associated with the product..."

In studies of "Goods as Satifiers," and "Goods as Communicators" the authors piece together their main theses. Consumer society has caused a "profound reconfiguration in social life" involving "the change in the function of goods from being primarily satifiers of wants to being primarily communications of meanings." In the consumer society, individuals define themselves and gain fundamental modes of gratification from consumption. Hence, marketers and advertisers generate systems of meaning, prestige, and identity by associating their products with certain life styles, symbolic values, and pleasures.

Informed by sociological and historical accounts of how market relations enable traditional sources of meaning and anthropological insights into how material things perform social communication functions about social standing, identity, and lifestyle, Letts, Kline, and Jhally have expanded the category of "information" within advertising to include not just functional product information, but social symbolic information as well. It is in this sense that goods function as "communicators" and "satisfiers" — they inform and mediate social relations, telling individuals what they must buy to become fashionable, popular, and successful while inducing them to buy particular products to reach these goals. As the authors point out, "quality of life studies report that the strongest foundations of satisfaction lie in the domain of interpersonal relations, a domain of nonmaterial goods." But in the consumer society, commodities are important not merely for their present-day utility, but because they communicate social information to others. "They serve as a 'projection medium' into which we transfer the intricate webs of personal and social interactions..."

The significance and power of advertising, according to the analysis presented in SCA, is therefore not so much economic, but cultural. "Advertising is not just a business expenditure undertaken in the hope of moving some merchandise off the store shelves, but is rather an integral part of modern culture." Advertising is significant because, in consumer capitalism, in...
individually depend on it for meanings, a source of social information imbedded in commodities that mediate interpersonal relations and personal identity. Advertising should therefore be conceived as an important institution in the consumer society because it produces "patterned systems of meaning" which play a key role in individual socialization and social reproduction.

Consequently, the "marketplace" should be seen as a cultural system and not just as a mechanism for moving commodities and money. Furthermore, it is cultural symbolism and images that provide crucial insights into the nature and functions of advertising. The authors' analysis of the "persuasive" form of modern advertising indicates how cultural forms of social communication create meanings through non-discursive visual imagery which come to shape consciousness and behavior directly by sanctioning some forms of thought and behavior while delegitimizing others and by presenting proper and improper images of behavior and role models for men and women. The result is a culture where image plays a more important role than linguistic discourse. While verbal imagery is discursive, visual imagery is non-discursive, emotive, associative, iconic, and fictive. Advertising thus plays a key role in the transition to a new image culture and in the transition from a bookpoint culture to a media culture. In this culture, domains of social life ranging from religion to politics fall under the sway of the reign of images. As the authors point out, "accidental representation," or persuasive images, have a greater impact in decision-making, "affective opinions," and behavior, than verbal discourse, and can be absorbed without full conscious awareness and without being translatable into explicit verbal formulations. Consequently, the authors suggest that advertising is a form of social communication which prevents non-communication, or what Habermas calls "systematically distorted communication." Advertising promotes "commodity fetishism" and in general a fetishized consciousness that pervades goods, services, and individuals, etc., with symbolic properties. Studies of commodity fetishism and the extension of other Marxist categories to the analysis of advertising is the focus of Stuart Hall's "Codes of Advertising."

The final section of the book points out the analysis of the commodity in Marx's Capital and applies the categories of exchange value, use value, surplus value, commodity fetishism, etc., to studies of advertising and the commodification media. He provides perhaps the most detailed and insightful explication of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism yet found in the vast literature on the topic and applies the concept — and other Marxist categories — in interesting and provocative ways, to a vast amount of material. In so doing, he provides a sharp critique of Baudrillard's analysis of the commodity's role in "For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign" and The Mirror of Production, demonstrating conclusively through a wealth of quotations that Marx does not, as Baudrillard claims, "nationalize" need, use values, and so on. Rather Marx provides a powerful critique of bourgeois apologists who claim that capitalism is legitimate because it provides people with what they want and fulfills their pre-existing needs. Against this ideology, Marx argues that needs, use values, and ideologies are all historically produced under capitalism and thus serve as essential elements of social reproduction.

Consequently, the final attempts to demystify how traditional Marxist economic categories and analyses can be used productively to analyze advertising and mass communications and can be combined with sociological analyses of codes and the production of meaning. Both SCA and Hall's "Codes provide much useful analysis of how advertising produces consumers and how the consumer society reproduces itself. Hall's book provides a more systematic use of Marxist categories to analyze advertising as an institution within contemporary capitalist societies. Yet he sometimes resorts to a somewhat vulgar Marxism, as when he insists on interpreting media communication simply in terms of the exchange value and use value produced by capital, rather than analyzing the interactions between media content, forms, institutions, social and political environments, and the uses of the media by the audience. While he provides a critical political economy framework to analyze the social and economic functions of advertising and mass communications, he is less successful in analyzing how audiences produce meaning and what specific meanings and effects are produced. Although he carries out an "empirical study" of advertising codes and fetishism, his study is highly quantitative and abstract and fails to provide a study specific meanings, ideologies, or effects produced in the actual world which he studied, none of which are analyzed in any detail. Moreover, Hall's book fails to offer any proposals concerning public policy aimed at regulating the advertising industry, nor of any possibilities of alternative advertising, or of the use of advertising to promote social change, or how a society might be organized without advertising.

The "Conclusion" to SCA examines advertising for its proper place within a democratic society," and raises some serious questions about modern advertising practice. One is "that the discourse about goods today is too narrowly controlled by commercial interests, and that it should be named more broadly: ... we do not believe that any single institution should control the public discourse about goods." Another issue involves advertising's impact on overall media content and the necessity of "countervailing forces, immediate, and systematic regulations, and own rival media industries," and it points to "the psychological power of mass communication, the influence of mass media, and other domains." These are all significant advertising and demand, however, only a few suggestions are offered, and frequently legitimizing discourse while neglecting to deal with the massive amounts of goods purchased every year. They also avoid the radical critiques of advertising, broad-based generally present a utopian perspective on advertising and advocacy for a new advertising and communication system avoids taking any direct action toward advertising as such. Although the authors does not correctly "suggest that the focus of attention should be directed to the set of goods through which the social issues that industry they do not adequately understand and suggest what modifications to the system are necessary."

Admittedly, this is one of the books that most clearly presents. But, given its analysis, perspective on the nature of advertising, the development of an advertising strategy, it is disappointing. Twelve pages does not do justice to the topic and issues of Communication in Advertising. A more modern advertising book would have in range this most books and the book is well written. They are, therefore, recommended as a one involved in advertising or contemporary aspects of critical social issues in complex societies."
on overall media content, i.e., the "avoidance of controversial subjects, formal pro-
gram formats, stereotyping of audience
s segments, and ownership concentration in
media industries." The authors also
pont to "the reduction in rational ap-
peals" and the incrementing use of "persua-
sive" communication techniques in mar-
keting, politics, corporate "image-build-
ing," and other domains of public dis-
course.

These are all significant issues concern-
ing advertising and democracy. Unfortu-
nately, however, Lees, Eells, and Hall offer few suggestions about "what is to be
done," and frequently reproduce industry legitimizing discourses about advertising,
while neglecting to document and criticize
the massive amounts of wealth squan-
dened every year on commercial advertis-

ing. They also avoid some of the more
critical critiques of advertising of Adorno,
Horkheimer, Breitmann, and others, and
generally present a liberal, Social Demo-
cratic perspective on advertising though
finally adopt a rather orthodox Marxism
theoretical framework. In his own book, he
avoid taking any distinct political stance
among advertising and the consumer soci-
ey. Although the authors of SCA quite
correctly suggest that it is time to change
the focus of attention from advertising
practice to the set of institutional relation-
ship through which advertising is tied to
the social issues that concern us most,
they do not adequately develop this in-
sight and suggest what institutional rela-
tionships must be examined and changed.

Admittedly, this is a difficult task and
one that necessarily involves radical pro-
posal. But, given the thoroughness of the
analysis presented and its insightful inte-
gration of advertising practice into the
historically developing institutional con-
text, it is disappointing to find so few sug-
gestions. Twelve pages of conclusion sim-
ply do not do justice to the importance
of the topic and issues. Yet both Social
Communication in Advertising and Codes
of Advertising provide a wealth of insights into
modern advertising practice and the di-
verse and dispersed literature that sur-
rounds this most controversial institution.
They are, therefore, essential texts for any-
one involved in critical media studies and
contain aspects essential for developing
critical theory of contemporary capitalist
societies.

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Kafka's Revolutionary Theory, Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Maxire, and (with Michael Brain) Genre
Politics: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Fiction. He has just completed Critical Theory, Marcuse, and Windrush and Jean Road/Route From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond, both of
which will be published by Polity Press.

As a translator of major poststructuralist
works into English, Geoffrey Bennington
is perhaps best known for his joint transla-
tion (with Brian Massumi) of Lyotard's The
Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowl-
dge; one might equally know Bennington
from his partial translations of Lyotard
and critical articles in such academic jour-
nals as Paragraph and The Oxford Literary
Review, among others. As Bennington re-
marks in the opening lines of Lyotard,
Writing the event, "Lyotard is without ques-
tion best known in the English speaking
world as the author of The Postmodern Con-
dition." And in some such as called the
English-speaking world "known"
Lyotard through his notorious Report. It
cannot be said to know him very well, a
situation on scene extent rectified by Ben-
ington's book.

What makes Lyotard's work so difficult
to re-present and reduce to the require-
ments of an introduction (theoretical sum-
mary, academic rigorous, dividing and con-
necting the text along various lines) is
simply that it is a collection of events. It
resists the introduction qua summation
which conserve, anticipates and main-
tains the main arguments.

Lyotard, Writing the event "introduces"
three of Lyotard's major philosophical
works: Libidinal Economy (1974), Discourse, figures (1971), and Le Différend (1984), in
that order. Clearly, we are not given a his-
torical survey of Lyotard's long career in
politics and philosophy, nor does Ben-
nington for a moment believe that he has
presented Lyotard's works without lacu-
nas, even important ones.

The major virtue of Lyotard, Writing the
event is that it takes us along the central
but not well-trodden pathways of what
Lyotard has called his "real" books in a
way which is modest, careful and at times
meetical especially with respect to the
section on Le Différend, and it does so
with attention to Lyotard's other writings,
including the Report. Bennington, then,
will undoubtedly find an appreciative
audience in those who are poised to enter
or have already entered and found them-
selves wandering unattended; the world of
poststructuralism and the growth industry
of Lyotard's studies.

I have spent some time with the "intro-
duction" for several reasons. It is one
thing to be aware of the limits and prob-
lems of introductions in general, but an-
other less straightforward matter to enter-
tain the idea that the writing subjected to
an introduction exists and possibly shades
just that sort of attempt to domesticate it.
While I have the slippery Libidinal Econ-
omy in mind here, the concern expressed
also pertains to authors other than
Lyotard.

The introduction is a sort of prosthetic
device that helps the reader stand up be-
fore texts which are disabling and alienat-
ing: it is like a cane, an artificial limb and
even an implant, depending upon the de-
gree to which one relies on it to support