New Theoretical Perspectives on Advertising

Magazine advertisement, *Cointreau*

Social Communication in Advertising: Persons, Products, and Images of Well-Being
by **William Leiss, Stephen Kline, and Sut Jhally**
New York: Metheuen, 1986

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

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 Andren, 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*, Ewen's *Captains of Consciousness*, and Bagdikian's *The Media Monopoly* 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 "conspiracy 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

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criticisms of mass communications generated by critical media studies, what has not been explained is how mass communications in general, and advertising in particular, can excercise the power and impact that critical theorists suggest.

Social Communication in Advertising: Persons, Products, and Images of Well-Being, by William Leiss, Stephen Kline, and Sut Jhally, and *Codes of Advertising: Fetishism and the Political Economy of Meaning in the Consumer Society,* by Sut Jhally, are two welcome contributions to critical media studies that address the problem of linking media analysis to political economy and social and cultural theory in order to explain how advertising and mass communications exercise their power in contemporary capitalist society. We might see their collaborative work as constituting the Canadian contribution to North American critiques of mass culture and society. For William Leiss — a student of Herbert Marcuse — is in the Department of Communication at Simon Fraser University, Stephen Kline is in the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University, and Sut Jhally (now in the Department of Communication at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst) did his graduate work in Canada. His *Codes of Advertising* was originally a dissertation (Simon Fraser University, 1984) which he revised and expanded after his collaboration with Leiss and Kline in Social Communication in Advertising.

Social Communication in Advertising (hereafter SCA) is one of the most comprehensive and thorough critical analyses of advertising yet produced. It contains a thorough summary of the "debates on advertising and society" which provides a concise summary of the controversies surrounding advertising and the analytical frameworks used to address these controversies. The authors' unique vantage point is to conceptualize advertising as a form of social communication which plays a complex set of roles within consumer capitalist societies. By expanding the concept of the "information" conveyed in advertising beyond that of utilitarian product features to include social symbolic meanings, the authors view advertising as an important and influential form of social communication which provides insights into how commodities mediate social relations. This allows them to explore the cultural impact of advertising and its multifarious social functions.

One major strength of SCA involves locating advertising within the larger structure of a "market-industrial economy" where the institutions of media, industry, and advertising converge. A central premise of SCA is that "we can grasp the implications of present-day practices best by seeing how they were composed and put into place step by step during this century". Thus a substantial portion of the book involves tracing the historical development of each of these key institutions and how they formed a constellation making advertising an institution with a "privileged form of discourse". The authors describe the "origins of the consumer culture" and the transition "from industrial to consumer society," and how 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., Arlen, Schudson, Pope, Fox, Curran, Barnouw, and Pollay, to name a few. One of the more original approaches concerns their studies of "The Theatre of Consumption." 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. Jhally'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 "romance" are codes used to address female audiences while "ruggedness" and "fraternity" are primarily male advertising codes.

The second study, conducted by Leiss and Kline, involves an historical examination of magazine advertising (1908-1984) for the trends and uses of audience codes. Following Leymore's semiological analysis in *Hidden Myth: Structure and Symbolism in Advertising,* Leiss 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 Boorstin, 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 communicating 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 greatest emphasis upon language — description of the product, promises, and argument", whereas a contemporary Marlboro ad is revealed to have no copy nor product information, just an image that "conveys a range of attributes...to be associated with the product..."

In studies of "Goods as Satisfiers," and "Goods as Communicators" the authors piece together their main thesis. Consumer society has caused a "profound transformation in social life" involving "the change in the function of goods from being primarily satisfiers of wants to being primarily communicators 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 lifestyles, symbolic values, and pleasures.

Magazine advertisement, *Coca-Cola*

Informed by sociological and historical accounts of how market relations erode traditional sources of meaning and anthropological insights into how material things perform social communication functions about social standing, identity, and lifestyle, Leiss, 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 means to interpersonal relations because they communicate social information to others. "They serve as a 'projective 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-

dividuals 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 delegitimating others and by presenting proper and improper images of behaviour and role models for men and women. The result is a culture where image plays a more important role than linguistic discourse, for while verbal imagery is discursive, visual imagery is non-discursive, emotional, associative, iconic, and fictive.

Advertising thus plays a key role in the transition to a new image culture and in the transition from a book/print 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, "iconic representation," or persuasive images, have a greater impact in decision-making, "affective opinion," and behaviour, 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 promotes non-communication, or what Habermas calls "systematically distorted communication." Advertising promotes "commodity fetishism" and in general a fetishized consciousness that invests goods, services, and individuals, etc. with symbolic properties.

Studies of commodity fetishism and the extension of other Marxian categories to the anlaysis of advertising is the focus of Sut Jhally's *Codes of Advertising*. Jhally takes as his starting point 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 communications 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 Marxian categories — in interesting and provocative ways, to a vast amount of material. In so doing, he provides a sharp critique of Baudrillard's attack on Marxism in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* and *The Mirror of Production*, demonstrating conclusively through a wide range of quotations that Marx does not, as Baudrillard claims, naturalize needs, use values, and so on. Rather Marx provides a powerful critique of bourgeois apologetics which 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, Jhally attempts to demonstrate how traditional Marxian economic categories and analyses can be used productively to analyze advertising and mass communications and can be combined with semiological analyses of codes and the production of meaning. Both SCA and Jhally's *Codes* provide much useful analysis of how advertising produces consumers and how the consumer society reproduces itself. Jhally provides a more systematic use of Marxian 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 communcations, 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 analysis of specific meanings, ideologies, or effects produced in the actual ads which he studied, none of which are analyzed in any detail. Moreover, Jhally fails to offer any proposals concerning public policy aimed at the regulation of advertising, 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 framed more broadly... we do not believe that any single institution should control the public discourse about goods." Another issue involves advertising's impact

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on overall media content, i.e., "the avoidance of 'controversial' subjects, banal program formats, stereotyping of audience segements, {and} ownership concentration in media industries." The authors also point to "the reduction in rationál appeals" and the increasing use of "persuasive" communication techniques in marketing, politics, corporate "image-building," and other domains of public discourse.

These are all significant issues concerning advertising and democracy. Unfortunately, however, Leiss, Kline and Jhally offer few suggestions about "what is to be done," and frequently reproduce industry legitimating discourses about advertising, while neglecting to document and criticize the massive amounts of wealth squandered every year on commercial advertising. They also avoid some of the more radical critiques of advertising of Adorno, Horkheimer, Baudrillard, and others, and generally present a liberal, Social Democratic perspective on advertising (though Jhally adopts a rather orthodox Marxian theoretical approach in his own book, he avoids taking any distinct political stance toward advertising and the consumer society). 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 relationships through which advertising is tied to the social issues that concern us most," they do not adequately develop this insight and suggest what institutional relationships must be examined and changed.

Admittedly, this is a difficult task and one that necessarily involves radical proposals. But, given the thoroughness of the analysis presented and its insightful integration of advertising practice into the historically developing institutional context, it is disappointing to find so few suggestions. Twelve pages of conclusion simply does not do justice to the importance of the topic and issues.Yet both *Social Communication in Advertising* and *Codes of Advertising,* offer a wealth of insights into modern advertising practice and the diverse and dispersed literature that surrounds this most controversial institution. They are, therefore, essential texts for anyone involved in critical media studies and contain aspects essential for developing critical theories of contemporary capitalist societies.

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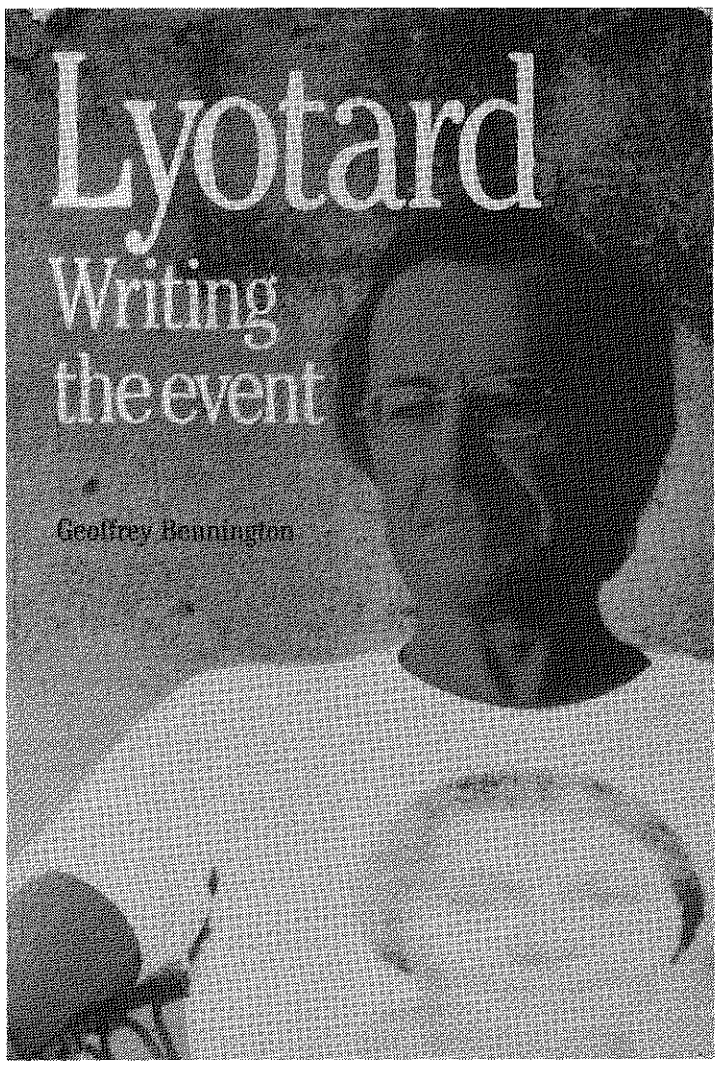

Lyotard, Writing the event
by **Geoffrey Bennington**
New York: Columbia University Press, 1988

Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event
by **Jean-François Lyotard**
New York: Columbia University Press, 1988

Lyotard - photo by Gianfranco Baruchello

As a translator of major poststructuralist works into English, Geoffrey Bennington is perhaps best known for his joint translation (with Brian Massumi) of Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*; one might equally know Bennington from his partial translations of Lyotard and critical articles in such academic journals as *Paragraph* and *The Oxford Literary Review,* among others. As Bennington remarks in the opening lines of *Lyotard, Writing the event,* "Lyotard is without question best known in the English-speaking world as the author of *The Postmodern Condition.*" And inasmuch as something called the English-speaking world "knows" Lyotard through his notorious *Report,* it cannot be said to know him very well, a situation to some extent rectified by Bennington's book.

What makes Lyotard's *œuvre* so difficult to re-present and reduce to the requirements of an introduction (theoretical summary, academic rigour, dividing and conquering the text along various lines) is simply that it is a collection of events: it resists the introduction *qua* narration which conserves, anticipates and maintains the main arguments.

Lyotard, Writing the event "introduces" three of Lyotard's major philosophical works: *Libidinal Economy* (1974), *Discourse, figure* (1971), and *Le Différend* (1984), in that order. Clearly, we are not given a historical survey of Lyotard's long career in politics and philosophy, nor does Bennington for a moment believe that he has presented Lyotard's works without lacunae, 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 meticulous (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 themselves wandering unattended) the world of poststructuralism and the growth industry of Lyotard's studies.

I have spent some time with the "introduction" for several reasons. It is one thing to be aware of the limits and problems of introductions in general, but another less straightforward matter to entertain the idea that the writing subjected to an introduction resists and possibly eludes just that sort of attempt to domesticate it. While I have the slippery *Libidinal Economy* 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 before texts which are disabling and alienating; it is like a cane, an artificial limb and even an implant, depending upon the degree to which one relies on it to support