

# ADVERTISING IN THE AGE OF HYPERSIGNIFICATION

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Primitive as it seems now, television advertising in the 1950s aimed mainly at product recall. From the 1950s through the 1970s, TV advertising established the appearance of a seamless web of commodities. In the 1950s, commodities or their representatives sang and danced their way into our hearts and minds with jingles based on the logic of memorization and recall. Short musical rhyming phrases repeated over and over, jingles became associated with the most heavily commodified forms of advertising - e.g., "You'll wonder where the yellow went, when you brush your teeth with Pepsodent." During the 1960s and 1970s advertisers refined and polished the formats into which they plugged product names and images. Streamlined and rationalized formulas for assembling and delivering commodity signs were polished throughout the 1970s, repeatedly built on a trinity of interpretive procedures -- abstraction, equivalency, and reification (Goldman and Wilson, 1983). As this advertising style grew slicker and more colorful, advertisers competed to capture the look of perfection in their ads. Bright colors and seamless editing practices appeared within a framework which was formulaic and over-determined. Advertisers chose to select out only positive moments so that a clean unambivalent connection could be established between the commodity being promoted and the traits of models. From 1946 through 1980 advertising thus painted a social world that was primarily consensual and non-conflictual, a sphere separated from daily life, but supposedly representative of it.

Critical theorists from the 1940s through the 1960s spoke of a "culture industry" that conditioned an ideologically one-dimensional universe of cultural discourse (Adorno, 1941; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947; Marcuse, 1964). They described this as a hegemonic stage of commodity culture during which time "space outside the world of consumption" inexorably disappeared (Wilson, 1988). Yet, by the early 1980s audiences identified the jingle - such a familiar marker of conformist consumerism - as artifice and the jingle's marketing efficacy limped to a halt. Actually, the crisis of advertising went considerably deeper than the failure of jingles. Advertising, and commodity culture in general, had glamorized itself into crisis by both continuously painting an unreal world, and relentlessly trying to top one set of unattainable promises with yet another.

The genesis of 'new' advertising in the 1980s was located in the maturation of this dominant advertising form and the cultural toll it took on spectator-buyers. After nearly forty years of watching TV ads, viewers had grown too

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acclimated to advertising's routinized messages and reading rules. Continual consumer positioning provoked viewer resentment and hostility. Savvy, media-literate viewers now present advertisers with a challenge. Bored and fatigued, these viewers restlessly flip around the channels in search of something that will momentarily arrest their attention and fascination. Viewers belonging to the baby-boom generation have also adopted stances of indifference toward advertisements' mode of address, both for purposes of negotiating the meaning of ads and defending themselves. Other defensive reading postures include cynicism, skepticism, belligerence and intentionally twisted ('off-the-wall') interpretations. Skeptical viewers have grown wary about 'what's real and what's not,' while belligerent viewers refuse to participate in the interpretation process or willfully undermine it. The constant process of simulation on TV eventually contributes to widespread doubts about the credibility or sincerity of media representations.

Ironically, the trends in 1980s TV advertising parallel the theoretical critiques of mass culture dating from the late 1940s. This paper examines advertising campaigns from 1986 to 1989 that tried to reverse the critiques leveled against advertising by incorporating those critiques. Advertising strategies such as hyperreal encoding, reflexivity and the use of hypersignifiers have been motivated by intertwined crises in the political economy of sign value. Advertisers not only confronted disaffected, alienated viewers armed to foil ads with their remote control zappers, they also faced the problem of differentiating their commodity-signs from the clutter of formulaic advertising. Further, advertisers in the 1980s felt the sting of criticisms that ads promoted an unreal world that showed only the positive side of life and cut off all conflict, negativity and tension; glamorized commodities by separating them from daily life; and manufactured 'false needs.' Critics in recent decades have found ads overemphasizing social appearances - superficial sign values - and eclipsing the actual use and exchange values of products. By the late 1980s advertising agencies such as Chiat/Day, Foote Cone & Belding and Weiden & Kennedy were responding to the cultural crisis tendencies spawned by an advertising industry dedicated to hyping sign values and commodity aesthetics. As it grew more difficult to sustain product and image differentiation, this leading edge of advertisers sought to take advantage of viewer antipathy toward advertising by turning criticisms into positioning concepts. Criticism has thus been converted into a series of competing stylistic differences.

Accused of cultivating an unreal world, advertisers have turned again to the shadowy world of "hyperreality" where encodings of reality appear to universally simulate reality itself (Baudrillard, 1983). Self-consciously hyperreal advertising critically 'acknowledges' the generic field of 'hyperreality' by technically modifying the encodings of realism and drawing attention to the codes of media realism. These ads tend to appropriate critiques of consumerism as a means of disguising and masking the question of needs and their satisfaction. Reflexively confronting these criticisms has enabled advertisers 'to say' to viewers that they recognize them as savvy consumers capable of both choosing from among many options as well as recognizing a ruse when they see one.

Advertising has entered a stage based on hypersignification, a stage in which "semiotics gets increasingly annexed by the advertising and marketing industries" (Hebdige, 1988: 211). Signification practices themselves become the currency with which advertisers negotiate a market cluttered by simulated reproductions, and an audience populated by recalcitrant viewers who no longer compliantly complete the meanings of ads. Advertising in the age of hypersignification no longer tries to conceal the code - the meta-language - of the commodity aesthetic, but tries to turn the "code" itself into a Sign. This kind of advertising in the 1980s symbolized a shifting stage of hegemony - leaving open more space not just for interpretation, but presenting a series of claims about stylized individuality which emphasized individuals making choices in their consumption and using products as they see fit. This approach promotes the appearance of individuals playfully adapting corporate signs to their own needs. Artsy print ads in the 1980s stressed the role of individual viewers in the assembly of meaning. Non-conventional narrative forms, editing techniques and photographic styles have been designed to deny the existence of pre-digested meanings and create a hunt for meaning. In the effort to deny the hegemonic content of commodity culture, advertising reroutes and reconstitutes it.<sup>1</sup>

### REALIST CONVENTIONS

#### Footnotes

1 Still, the cultural contradictions continue to proliferate. Advertising efforts to deny media hegemony draw on new media technologies such as video synthesizers, computer/video linkages and digitized images that permit still greater manipulation of frames. Television has become increasingly dominated by the fetishism of technique. The prototype of fetishized TV is MTV which cultivates media reflexivity and jadedness by relying upon familiarity with television codes to subvert and one-up those codes. MTV cuts up the codes and edits (pastes) them into an ever-ironic pastiche of the code.

2 "Come backstage with me darling, and I'll show you the wires and the gizmos. You'll like that! You'll be in on the secret. And that's part of the secret, see - American audiences love to be in the know. They love to go backstage. They want to see the machinery that fools them, the back projections, the special effects. Right? Right! They don't realize that showing them the machinery is the show, and while they're hypnotized by the gears going round, the microchips blinking on/off, while you let them see the marketing surveys that reveal their kinky emotional ratchets and levers, you can really get your hands deep down into their pockets. They get hypnotized thinking they are learning how the rubes get hypnotized" (Canton, 1986).

3 Judging by the reaction, many rock 'n' roll fans felt betrayed that Clapton had sold out. He later apologized to his fans, explaining that he was abusing alcohol at the time.

4 The jerky and searching camera can signify differing moods. With rapid-fire editing techniques, it can convey a sense of energy, but without editing it can connote the strained tedium of daily life. Witness the difference between AT&T ads which dwelt on a single scene to draw out the anxiety and tension of work in the corporate world, whereas Michelob combined the restless camera with flashy editing practices to furnish a feeling of gritty glamour in leisure life.

5 Advertising for airlines and rental cars aimed at business people communicates a hyperreal style by creating a sense

of blurred, rapid horizontal camera movement through negative space - space-in-between - flash-panning past hypersignifiers, fragmented glimpses of décor or objects such as flight schedule monitors, baggage and mechanics' limbs in motion. Space-in-between is designed to pass through as rapidly as possible. It is space governed by norms of efficiency, and emptied of warmth, personality or desire. These scenes have their semiotic flip side in personal touch scenes which punctuate these rapidly paced vignettes aimed at the postmodern nomad: e.g., a flight attendant takes a traveler's drink, careful not to wake him.

6 This produces opposing interpretive tendencies. Hypermagnified objects and gestures are presented to viewers loaded with significance. After being freighted with layers of meaningful association from years of viewing ads, even skimming across the surface of magnified signifiers can bring forth meaningful associations to well-versed viewers. On the other hand, hypersignifiers are by nature spectacularly decontextualized and hence confusing.

7 When pop and rock 'n' roll music saturated ads in the late 1980s, advertisers turned to opera to find differentiated musical soundbites.

8 The Energizer campaign is thus both critical and parasitic - it has lampooned ads for soaps, deodorants, network trailers and Slim Whitman-style record offers.

9 The Sprite ads were actually shot by the high school students who appear in them. They used a video camera given them by the Burrell agency of Chicago. On the other hand, the Surf ads by Ogilvy & Mather were mock-up home movies that featured not actors/real people.

10 Advertisers no longer presume a consensus about social definitions of need. Trendy magazines, such as LA Style and Details, catering to the avant-garde, now openly mock the meaning of consumption. Meanwhile, advertisers (e.g., K-Mart) aiming at working class audiences seek to reassure viewers that the needs they service are not manufactured, but correspond to those of actual people like yourself.

11 Could it be that in the political economy of sign value this declining half-life of sign value is structurally homologous to the rule of the declining rate of profit for capitalism in general?