Advertising as Capitalist Realism

Michael Schudson

Michael Schudson is not a knee-jerk critic of the advertising industry. In the acknowledgment section of the book from which our excerpt is taken, Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion, *Schudson mentions that as a boy he worked for his father, a copywriter. And though he didn't go into business himself (he became a professor), he says that his experience in the advertising business has never allowed him to "share the academy's contempt for business enterprise."*

In the excerpt we have chosen, however, Schudson discusses the negative effect that advertising and the consumer culture have on the values of those who live under their influence. Advertising, Schudson says, is "capitalist realism."

> In a fundamental sense the basic source of the drive toward higher consumption is to be found in the character of our culture. A rising standard of living is one of the major goals of our society. Much of our public policy is directed toward this end. Societies are compared with one another on the basis of the size of their incomes. In the individual sphere people do not expect to live as their parents did, but more comfortably and conveniently. The consumption pattern of the moment is conceived of not as part of a way of life, but only as a temporary adjustment to circumstances. We expect to take the first available chance to change the pattern.

That sounds like a world advertising would love to create, if it could. But it also sounds like the world Tocqueville described in 1830, well before advertising was much more than long gray lists of patent medicine notices in the newspapers. It sounds as much like a world likely to invent modern advertising as a world that modern advertising would like to invent.

Then what does advertising do?

Advertising might be said to lead people to a belief in something. Advertising may make people believe they are inadequate without Product X and that Product X will satisfactorily manage their inadequacies. More likely, it may remind them of inadequacies they have already felt and may lead them, once at least, to try a new product that just might help, even though they are well aware that it probably will not. Alternatively, advertising may lead people to believe generally in the efficacy of manufactured consumer goods for handling all sorts of ills, medical or social or political, even if a given ad fails to persuade that a given product is efficacious. There is the question of belief in a small sense—do people put faith in the explicit claims of advertisements, change their attitudes toward advertised goods, and go out and buy them? And there is the question of belief in a larger sense—do the assumptions and attitudes implicit in advertising become the assumptions and attitudes of the people surrounded by ads, whether or not they actually buy the advertised goods?

Michael Schudson, "Advertising as Capitalist Realism," *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

Social critics have argued that the greatest danger of advertising may be that it creates belief in the larger sense. It has been common coin of advertising critics that advertising is a kind of religion. This goes back at least to James Rorty who wrote of the religious power of advertising, holding that "advertising . . . becomes a body of doctrine." Ann Douglas has written that advertising is "the only faith of a secularized consumer society." In more measured tones, Leo Spitzer relates advertising to the "preaching mentality" in Protestantism and says that advertising "has taken over the role of the teacher of morals." The advertiser, "like the preacher" must constantly remind the backslider of "his real advantage" and "must 'create the demand' for the better."

Others have observed that many leading advertisers were the children of ministers or grew up in strict, religious households. The trouble with these remarks, and others like them, is that they fail to establish what kind of belief, if any, people actually have in advertisements. And they fail to observe that advertising is quintessentially part of the profane, not the sacred, world. Marghanita Laski has observed of British television that neither religious programs nor royal occasions are interrupted or closely juxtaposed to commercial messages. This is true, though to a lesser degree, with American television—the more sacred the subject, the less the profanity of advertising is allowed to intrude. If it does intrude, the advertiser takes special pains to provide unusually dignified and restrained commercials. If the advertiser fails to make such an adjustment, as in the commercial sponsorship of a docudrama on the Holocaust in 1980, public outrage follows.

So I am not persuaded by the "advertising is religion" metaphor, on the face of it. But the problem with seeing advertising as religion goes still deeper: advertising may be more powerful the *less* people believe in it, the less it is an acknowledged creed. This idea can be formulated in several ways. Northrop Frye has argued that advertisements, like other propaganda, "stun and demoralize the critical consciousness with statements too absurd or extreme to be dealt with seriously by it." Advertisements thus wrest from people "not necessarily acceptance, but dependence on their versions of reality." Frye continues:

> Advertising implies an economy which has some independence from the political structure, and as long as this independence exists, advertising can be taken as a kind of ironic game. Like other forms of irony, it says what it does not wholly mean, but nobody is obliged to believe its statements literally. Hence it creates an illusion of detachment and mental superiority even when one is obeying its exhortations.

Literary critics have been more sensitive than social scientists to the possibility that communications do not mean what they say—and that this may be the very center of their power. There has rarely been room for the study of irony in social science but irony is a key element in literary studies. Leo Spitzer, like Frye, observes that ads do not ask to be taken literally. In a Sunkist oranges ad he analyzed, he found that the ad "transports the listener into a world of Arcadian beauty, but with no insistence that this world really exists." The ad pictures "an Arcady of material prosperity," but Spitzer holds that the spectator "is equipped with his own criteria,

and subtracts automatically from the pictures of felicity and luxury which smile at him from the billboards."

According to Spitzer, people are detached in relation to advertising. They feel detached, disillusioned, and forcibly reminded of the tension between life as it is lived and life as it is pictured. This is a characteristic attitude toward precious or baroque art. In this attitude, no condemnation of the excess of the art is necessary because one is so firmly anchored in the matter-of-fact reality that contradicts it.

For Spitzer, people are genuinely detached in relation to advertising. They view it from an aesthetic distance. For Frye, in contrast, people have only "an illusion of detachment." For Frye, it is precisely the belief people have that they *are* detached that makes the power of advertising all the more insidious. Advertising may create attitudes and inclinations even when it does not inspire belief; it succeeds in creating attitudes because it does not make the mistake of *asking* for belief.

This corresponds to the argument of a leading market researcher, Herbert Krugman, of General Electric Co. research. He holds that the special power of television advertising is that the ads interest us so little, not that they appeal to us so much. Television engages the audience in "low-involvement learning." Krugman's argument is that the evidence in psychology on the learning and memorization of nonsense syllables or other trivial items is very much like the results in market research on the recall of television commercials. He draws from this the suggestion that the two kinds of learning may be psychologically the same, a "learning without involvement." In such learning, people are not "persuaded" of something. Nor do their attitudes change. But there is a kind of "sleeper" effect. While viewers are not persuaded, they do alter the structure of their perceptions about a product, shifting "the relative salience of attributes" in the advertised brands. Nothing follows from this until the consumer arrives at the supermarket, ready to make a purchase. Here, at the behavioral level, the real change occurs:

> . . . the purchase situation is the catalyst that reassembles or brings out all the potentials for shifts in salience that have accumulated up to that point. The product or package is then suddenly seen in a new, "somehow different" light although nothing verbalizable may have changed *up to that point.*

Consumers in front of the television screen are relatively unwary. They take ads to be trivial or transparent or both. What Krugman suggests is that precisely this attitude enables the ad to be successful. Were consumers convinced of the importance of ads, they would bring into play an array of "perceptual defenses" as they do in situations of persuasion regarding important matters.

Any understanding of advertising in American culture must come to grips with the ironic game it plays with us and we play with it. If there are signs that Americans bow to the gods of advertising, there are equally indications that people find the gods ridiculous. It is part of the popular culture that advertisements are silly. Taking potshots at commercials has been a mainstay of *Mad* magazine and of stand-up comedians for decades. When Lonesome Rhodes meets Marsha Coulihan, station manager for a country radio station, in Budd Schulberg's story, "Your Arkansas Traveler," he says to her: "You must be a mighty smart little gal to be handlin' this here radio station all by yourself." She replies: "My good man, I am able to read without laughing out loud any commercial that is placed before me. I am able to

pick out a group of records and point to the guy in the control room each time I want him to play one. And that is how you run a rural radio station."

If advertising is the faith of a secular society, it is a faith that inspires remarkably little professed devotion. If it is a body of doctrine, it is odd that so few followers would affirm the doctrine to be true, let alone inspired. Christopher Lasch has seen this problem. He argues that the trouble with the mass media is not that they purvey untruths but that "the rise of mass media makes the categories of truth and falsehood irrelevant to an evaluation of their influence. Truth has given way to credibility, facts to statements that sound authoritative without conveying any authoritative information." But this analysis will not do for the problem of advertising. People are not confused about the importance of truth and falsity in their daily lives. It is just that they do not regularly apply judgments of truth to advertisements. Their relationship to advertisements is not a matter of evidence, truth, belief, or even credibility.

Then what is it? Whether Krugman's formulation is right or wrong, his view at least leads us to ask more pointedly what kind of belief or nonbelief people have in relation to advertising. Again, this is in some sense a question about religion. The form of the question of whether or not people believe advertising messages is like the question of whether or not people believe in and are affected by religious teachings. On the latter question, anthropologist Melford Spiro has distinguished five levels at which people may "learn" an ideology:

1. Most weakly, they may *learn about* an ideological concept.
2. They may learn about and *understand* the concept.
3. They may *believe* the concept to be true or right.
4. The concept may become salient to them and inform their "behavioral environment"—that is, they may not only believe the concept but organize their lives contingent on that belief.
5. They may internalize the belief so that it is not only cognitively salient but motivationally important. It not only guides but instigates action.

Tests of the effectiveness of advertising are most often tests of "recall"; ads are judged by the market researchers to be "effective" if they have established Level 1 belief, learning about a concept. Advertisers, of course, are more interested in Levels 4 and 5, although their ability to measure success at these levels is modest. Most theories of advertising assume that the stages of belief are successive, that consumers must go through Level 1 before Level 2, Level 2 before Level 3, and so on. What Krugman argues and what Northrop Frye can be taken to be saying, is that one can reach Level 4 without ever passing through Level 3. The voices of advertising may inform a person's "behavioral environment" without inspiring belief at any time or at any fundamental level. The stages are not sequential. One is independent from the next.

"What characterizes the so-called advanced societies," Roland Barthes wrote, "is that they today consume images and no longer, like those of the past, beliefs; they are therefore more liberal, less fanatical, but also more 'false' [less 'authentic'] . . ." Barthes is right about the present but very likely exaggerates the break from the past. A few years ago I saw a wonderful exhibit at the Museum of Traditional and

Popular Arts in Paris, dealing with religion in rural France in the nineteenth century. The exhibit demonstrated that religious imagery was omnipresent in the French countryside. There were paintings, crucifixes, saints, and Bible verses adorning the most humble objects—plates, spoons, cabinets, religious articles of all sorts, especially holiday objects, lithographs for the living room wall, greeting cards, illustrated books, board games for children, pillowcases, marriage contracts, painted furniture for children, paper dolls, carved and painted signs for religious processions, and so forth. Of course, the largest architectural monuments in most towns were the churches, presiding over life crises and the visual landscape alike. And, as French historian Georges Duby has argued, the grandeur of church architecture was intended as a form of "visual propaganda."

None of this necessarily made the ordinary French peasant a believing Christian. There were pagan rites in nineteenth-century rural France, as there are still today. Nor, I expect, did this mass-mediated reinforcement of Christian culture make the peasant ignore the venality of the church as an institution or the sins of its local representatives.

Still, the Church self-consciously used imagery to uplift its followers and potential followers, and there was no comparable suffusion of the countryside by other systems of ideas, ideals, dreams, and images. When one thought of salvation or, more modestly, searched for meanings for making sense of life, there was primarily the materials of the Church to work with. It has been said that languages do not differ in what they can express but in what they can express *easily*. It is the same with pervasive or official art: it brings some images and expressions quickly to mind and makes others relatively unavailable. However blatant the content of the art, its consequences remain more subtle. Works of art, in general, anthropologist Clifford Geertz has written, do not in the first instance "celebrate social structure or forward useful doctrine. They materialize a way of experiencing; bring a particular cast of mind into the world of objects, where men can look at it." Art, he says, does not create the material culture nor serve as a primary force shaping experience. The experience is already there. The art is a commentary on it. The public does not require the experience it already has but a statement or reflection on it: "What it needs is an object rich enough to see it in; rich enough, even, to, in seeing it, deepen it."

Capitalist realist art, like socialist realism, more often flattens than deepens experience. Here I judge the art and not the way of life it promotes. Jack Kerouac may deepen our experience of the road and the automobile, but the advertising agencies for General Motors and Ford typically flatten and thin our experience of the same objects. This need not be so. The AT&T "Reach Out and Touch Someone" commercials for long-distance telephone calling sentimentalize an experience that genuinely has or can have a sentimental element. If these ads do not deepen the experience they at least articulate it in satisfying ways.

There is another side to the coin: if an ad successfully romanticizes a moment, it provides a model of sentiment that one's own more varied and complicated experience cannot live up to. Most of our phone calls, even with loved ones, are boring or routine. When art romanticizes the exotic or the exalted, it does not call our own experience into question, but when it begins to take everyday life as the subject of its idealization, it creates for the audience a new relationship to art. The audience

can judge the art against its own experience and can thereby know that the art idealizes and falsifies. At the same time, the art enchants and tantalizes the audience with the possibility that it is *not* false. If it can play on this ambiguity, art becomes less an imitation of life and turns life into a disappointing approximation of art.

The issue is not that advertising art materializes or "images" certain *experiences* but, as Geertz says, a *way of experiencing*. The concern with advertising is that this way of experiencing—a consumer way of life—does not do justice to the best that the human being has to offer and, indeed, entraps people in exploitative and self-defeating activity. But what can it really mean to say that art materializes a way of experience? What does that *do*? Why should a social system *care* to materialize its way of experiencing? The individual artists, writers, and actors who put the ads together do not feel this need. They frequently have a hard time taking their work seriously or finding it expressive of anything at all they care about.

Think of a smaller social system, a two-person social system, a marriage. Imagine it to be a good marriage, where love is expressed daily in a vast array of shared experiences, shared dreams, shared tasks and moments. In this ideal marriage, the couple continually make and remake their love. Then why, in this marriage, would anything be amiss if the two people did not say to each other, "I love you"? Why, in a relationship of such obviously enacted love, should it seem necessary to say out loud, "I love you"?

Because, I think, making the present audible and making the implicit explicit is necessary to engage and renew a whole train of commitments, responsibilities, and possibilities. "I love you" does not create what is not present. Nor does it seal what is present. But it must be spoken and respoken. It is necessary speech because people need to see in pictures or hear in words even what they already know as deeply as they know anything, *especially* what they know as deeply as they know anything. Words are actions.

This is also true in large social systems. Advertising is capitalism's way of saying "I love you" to itself.

The analogy, of course, is not perfect and I do not mean to jump from marriage to market with unqualified abandon. But in social systems writ large—and not just capitalism but all social systems—there are efforts both individual and collective to turn experience into words, pictures, and doctrines. Once created, these manifestations have consequences. They become molds for thought and feeling, if one takes a deterministic metaphor, or they become "equipment for living" if one prefers a more voluntaristic model or—to borrow from Max Weber and choose a metaphor somewhere in the middle, they serve as switchmen on the tracks of history. In the case of advertising, people do not necessarily "believe" in the values that advertisements present. Nor need they believe for a market economy to survive and prosper. People need simply get used to, or get used to not getting used to, the institutional structures that govern their lives. Advertising does not make people believe in capitalist institutions or even in consumer values, but so long as alternative articulations of values are relatively hard to locate in the culture, capitalist realist art will have some power.

Of course, alternative values *are* available in American culture. In some artistic, intellectual, and ethnic enclaves, one can encounter premises and principles that directly challenge capitalism and the expansion of the market to all phases of life.

In contrast, the mainstream news and entertainment media operate within a relatively circumscribed range of values. But even in this narrower discourse, there is often criticism of consumer values or of the excesses of a consumer society. I came upon attacks on materialism, suburbia, conformity, and advertising in the 1950s as a student in social studies classes in a public junior high school and high school. Only a few years ago, people spoke contemptuously of the "me generation" and President Jimmy Carter diagnosed a national "crisis of confidence," opining that "we've discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning." Recent lampooning of "Preppies" and "Yuppies" (young, upwardly-mobile professionals) betrays anxiety about, if also accommodation to, consumption as a way of life. So I do not suggest that advertisements have a monopoly in the symbolic marketplace. Still, no other cultural form is as accessible to children; no other form confronts visitors and immigrants to our society (and migrants from one part of society to another) so forcefully; and probably only professional sports surpasses advertising as a source of visual and verbal clichés, aphorisms, and proverbs. Advertising has a special cultural power.

The pictures of life that ads parade before consumers are familiar, scenes of life as in some sense we know it or would like to know it. Advertisements pick up and represent values already in the culture. But these values, however deep or widespread, are not the only ones people have or aspire to, and the pervasiveness of advertising makes us forget this. Advertising picks up some of the things that people hold dear and re-presents them to people as *all* of what they value, assuring them that the sponsor is the patron of common ideals. That is what capitalist realist art, like other pervasive symbolic systems, does. Recall again that languages differ not in what they can express but in what they can express *easily*. This is also true in the languages of art, ideology, and propaganda. It is the kind of small difference that makes a world of difference and helps construct and maintain different worlds.