ADVERTISING THE AMERICAN DREAM

MAKING WAY FOR MODERNITY, 1920–1940

ROLAND MARCHAND

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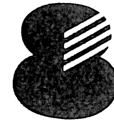
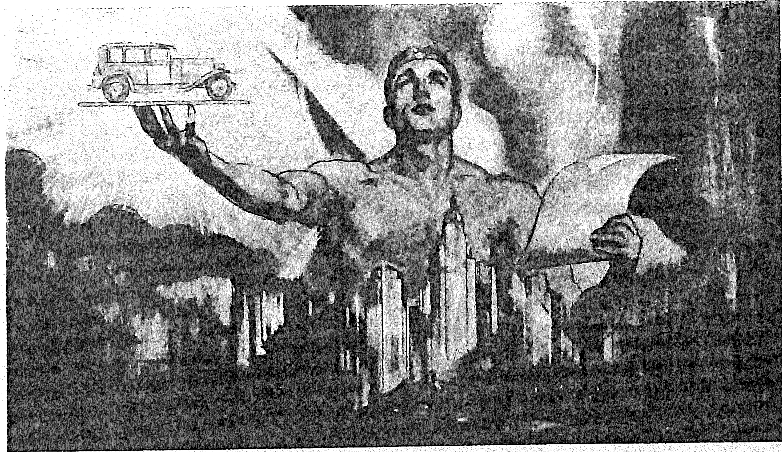


VISUAL CLICHÉS: FANTASIES AND ICONS

All of us have seen portrayals of certain scenes so many times that each new version evokes a flash of recognition. These visual clichés include such disparate images as the madonna and child, the dog tugging at the mailman's trousers, or the pop singer embracing a microphone. If the vast majority of traditional folk tales tend to fall into certain categories of "tale types," and if much of popular literature, as John Cawelti argues, follows certain basic formulas, then popular visual imagery may also be susceptible of analysis through identification and interpretation of its persistent patterns or clichés.[1]

The individual mind stores a variety of mental images as well as data in other forms. Exactly what role visual images play in conceptualization remains undetermined, but psychologists characterize visual imagery as "the predominant modality" for the kind of "thinking" involved in reverie and fantasy. Jerome Singer not only describes the creation of "pictures in the mind's eye" as integral to daydreaming but asserts that daydreaming and fantasizing represent part of the thinking upon which behavior is based. Daydreams, he argues, represent rehearsals and "trial actions" for practical future activity.[2] To the extent that individual daydreams are shaped by an available vocabulary of familiar images, the clichés of popular art of an era, particularly if they are dramatically and repeatedly paraded before the public eye, may induce individuals to recapitulate in their own fantasies some aspects of the shared daydreams of the society. By the 1920s in the United States, advertising had become a prolific producer of visual images with normative overtones, a contributor to the society's shared daydreams.

The "great parables" described in the previous chapter relied heavily on textual argument. Although occasionally enhanced by visual images, they rarely conveyed their moral lessons through illustrations alone. But as the technology for reproducing illustrations expanded, and as the use of color mounted, advertisers increasingly favored pictures over text. Psychologists had regularly advised that pictures could best stimulate the basic emotions. Alfred Poffenberger championed



8.1, 8.2. Mere words could hardly evoke the aura of divine approval and the entitlement to popular adulation created by these visual images. Pictures conveyed messages about the product's stature and association, and even unconscious messages about family roles, without inviting debate.

the illustration in his 1925 edition of *Psychology in Advertising* and urged advertisers to "short circuit" the consumer's mind through vivid, pictorial appeals to fundamental emotions. "When the advertisement stimulates thought," he noted, "it stirs conflict and competition, instead of releasing a ready-made and predictable response."[3] Arguments invited counterarguments, and assertions might provoke skepticism. But pictures deflected criticism; they inspired belief. Moreover, they could convey several messages simultaneously. As Raymond Firth observes: "The symbol plucks all of the strings of the human heart at once; speech is compelled to take up a single thought at a time."[4]

The moral messages of the great parables were sufficiently conventional to be set forward frankly and literally in the text. The potential superiority of the "visual statement" became evident in cases where the advertiser's message would have sounded exaggerated or presumptuous if put into words, or where the advertiser sought to play upon such "inappropriate" emotions as religious awe or a thirst for power. For instance, a copywriter might well have hesitated to advertise a product as just the thing for the man who lusted after power over others. But an illustration with a man standing in a commanding position, perhaps overlooking an impressive urban vista, might convey the same message. Line after line of wordy sentimentality might never touch the reader's heartstrings with the impact of a single misty picture of the family at home. The agency president Earnest Calkins put it bluntly: "A picture . . . can say things that no advertiser could say in words and retain his self-respect."[5] Even at the height of the testi-

monial craze, no advertiser would have dared to present his product under the headline "God endorses." But a well-placed, radiant beam of light from a mysterious heavenly source might create a virtual halo around the advertised object without provoking the reader into outrage at the advertiser's presumption.

Thus, at a time when the advertising pages were heaping thousands of words of praise on automobiles, and when many agency leaders worried aloud about the undermining of public confidence by this flood of verbal superlatives, *Printers' Ink* noted that the Hupp Motor Car Company had transformed its car into a gleaming jewel simply by holding it aloft in an outstretched hand. Buick created a similar aura in a tableau in which an idealized worker-craftsman ascended over city and factory like a modern Apollo, upholding the luminous vehicle for popular worship while displaying a document that ambiguously suggested both manufacturing specifications and a poem of adulation (Fig. 8.1). The United States Rubber Company, without daring to argue that the automobile industry warranted a reverential patriotism, still managed to convey this message by depicting a family watching a parade of ever-improved automobiles go past in the sky against a resplendent background of clouds. The man in the scene gave a military salute while his son raised his arm in tribute (Fig. 8.2).[6]

These particular scenes were not repeated. But other scenes reappeared so often and in such predictable forms in the 1920s and 1930s that they came to qualify as clichés of advertising illustration. Some of these clichés were drawn from other popular media; several were the original contributions of advertising to the

public's fund of familiar images. Whatever their previous dissemination, these clichéd images now occupied the advertising pages frequently enough to enter into the nation's visual vocabulary and assume a place within what Clifford Geertz calls "the social history of the imagination." Like materialized daydreams, they sometimes explored fantasies in time and space. Like religious icons, they often purported to symbolize some revealed truth or suggest the presence of a transcendent force. Almost always they conveyed the sense of some ineffable quality in the product or its users that lay beyond the power of mere words to explain.[7]

Fantasies of Domain: The Office Window and the Family Circle

I. *Master of All He Surveys*

No advertising tableaux of the 1920s assumed so stereotyped a pattern as those of the typical man—Mr. Consumer—at work. In hundreds of scenes of manufacturing, delivery, and personal service, workers appeared in a variety of settings with many different props. But the man with whom the reader was expected to identify presented no such confusing diversity of semblances. Again and again, he reappeared in a setting so predictable that it became one of advertising's contributions to the nation's store of visual clichés. In his invariable role as a white-collar businessman, Mr. Consumer—the typical American husband, father, breadwinner, and man-on-the-make—did his work in an office. Almost as uniformly, his office contained a large window with a majestic view. His minimal but sufficient props included a telephone, the inevitable window, and a pristinely uncluttered desk.

Advertising strategies for particular products might suggest the presence of other men in the office to indicate an executive conference or a meeting with a salesman. Practical considerations might also require the addition of such props as a newspaper, an ashtray, or a photograph of the businessman's wife and child. But the window and the telephone were nearly always gratuitous embellishments. Rarely were they needed as props for the specific message. Rather, their presence stemmed almost entirely from the illustrator's sense of what was fitting to the image of the American man at work. Moreover, advertising strategy rarely determined the extent and content of the view through the office window. Yet, despite their freedom in choice of content, illustrators and agency art directors followed strikingly uniform patterns in depicting office-window vistas in their man-at-the-office tableaux. What assumptions underlay these visual clichés?

Both the telephone and the window-with-a-view symbolized prestige and power. Their combined presence adequately distinguished the executive, even the junior executive, from the mere salesman. The telephone placed the protagonist among those men in the firm whose rank entitled them to an individual extension. The telephone itself, as AT & T ads constantly emphasized, symbolized control, the ability to "multiply" one's personality and issue commands at a distance.[8] It

BROADER HORIZONS

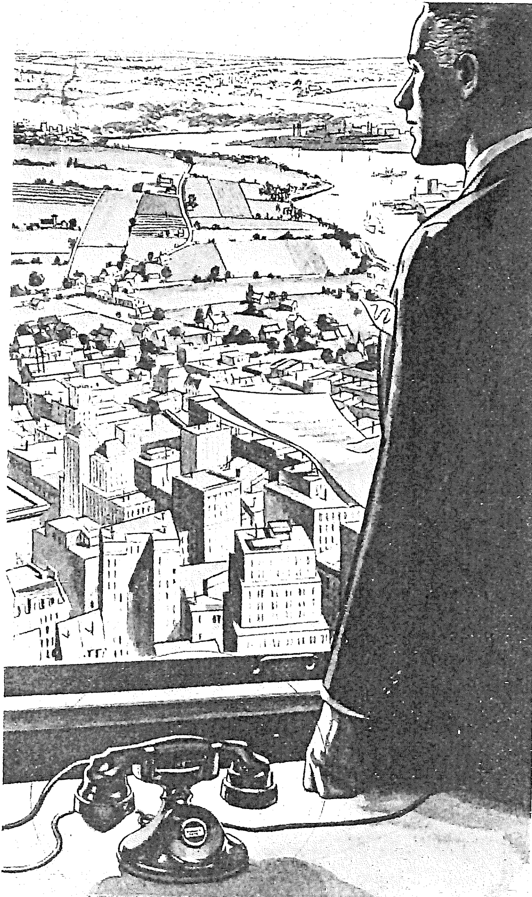
MANY business men are discovering that their activities need no longer be limited to former boundaries. They are reaching out by telephone into new fields . . . developing new markets . . . finding new and unsuspected ways to make and save money.

Are you interested in increasing sales? By alternating telephone calls with personal visits, you can reach many more people, at lower cost. You can scout out new customers who formerly were beyond your reach. And you can give your old customers that prompt and satisfactory service which so often means repeat business.

Are you a merchant? The next time a customer asks for an article not in stock, telephone for it. This is direct evidence to him of your personal interest in his patronage.

Are you making purchases? By telephoning, you frequently can get better prices, or better delivery dates.

Wherever your own particular interest lies, the chances are you can extend your activities . . . broaden your horizon . . . with the help of Long Distance.

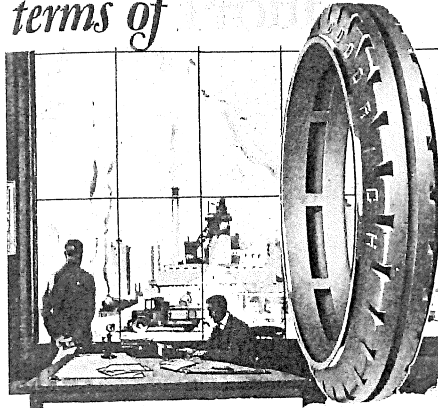


TYPICAL STATION-TO-STATION RATES

From	*To*	*Day-time*	*7 P.M.*	*8:30 P.M.*
New Haven	Boston	$ .70	$ .60	$ .40
Chicago	Grand Rapids	.75	.65	.45
St. Louis	Omaha	1.65	1.30	.95
Philadelphia	Jacksonville	3.00	2.15	1.65
San Francisco	Washington, D.C.	8.50	6.75	5.00

8.3. As "the master of all he surveys," that epitome of the American man, the business executive, commanded an unobstructed view.

also identified its user as "up-to-date," a participant in a network that transmitted the newest information. The window was even more symbolically significant. To command a view not only suggested high status within the firm (secretaries and mere salesmen almost never appeared next to large windows with views, except when they came into the boss's office); it also conjured up that ineffable sense of domain gained from looking out and down over broad expanses. Office-window illustrations inspired the welling up of a feeling best epitomized by the phrase, "master of all he surveys" (Fig. 8.3).

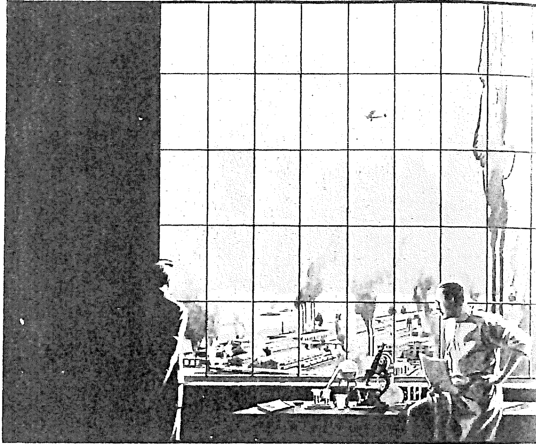


8.4. This office-window scene from a Goodrich truck tires ad differed from most window-on-the-factory vignettes only in compensating for its very modest downward angle with a window of imposing size.

In exploring the assumptions behind the illustrators' "free choice" of these props, I do not mean to imply that windows and telephones were imaginative embellishments of office scenes, unrelated to a contemporary reality. Undoubtedly, most business executives of the era enjoyed these prerogatives. But the persistence with which illustrators adopted an angle of vision which insured that these props would be prominently visible, the care they gave to putting the window exactly in the reader's line of vision, and the impressive scope and clarity of the view they provided through the window—all these suggest that their motive was not primarily fidelity to reality.

In these tableaux, the window shades were almost never drawn nor the blinds pulled shut. The window never appeared on the "wrong wall" of the office, where the reader could only glimpse its presence. The panorama view through the window was always expansive and usually from a considerable height. It was never obstructed by another skyscraper across the street or only a block away. Even the window panes regularly exceeded the size of those normally used in buildings of the era. This insured the business executive, and incidentally the ad reader, an unobstructed view. Occasionally the walls of the office would disappear altogether to provide the ultimate in expansive views for the businessman. The illustrator of ad executive Earnest Calkins' *Business the Civilizer* merely extended this imagery to its logical conclusion in 1928. Displaying an imagination as yet unmatched by architects of the era, he placed the advertising executive, as the archetypal modern businessman, in an office in which walls had given way entirely to a large-paned, ceiling-to-floor, wrap-around window.[9]

The content of the "view from the top" followed patterns almost as rigorously stereotyped as those of the office interior. Two basic motifs predominated. At first, in the early and mid-1920s, the most dominant was the view of the factory.



8.5. When corporation president joined research scientist, as in this illustration for a Celotex Company ad, beakers and microscopes temporarily supplanted the telephone. The agency lost no favor with its client by giving him so commanding a window on his domain.

By the beginning of the 1930s, this formula gave way to the other most common office-window motif—a view of the skyscrapered cityscape.[10] The decline of the first motif seemed to reflect, belatedly, a shift in business structure. The perception that real power resided in the central corporate offices located in metropolitan skyscrapers finally eclipsed the nostalgic image of the window-on-the-factory that was becoming anachronistic even during its period of greatest popularity.

The office window that looked out on the factory was identified explicitly or implicitly as the boss's office. As the visual representation of a lingering, slightly archaic, conception of business management, it implied a single factory with the business office located in an adjacent, somewhat taller building from which the boss could paternalistically oversee all the operations of his business. These tableaux, with the factory seen from a downward angle, suggested power over a very personal domain. They implied a direct, personal management in which the boss might still know by name the workers over whom he maintained his elevated surveillance. They also suggested an on-site managerial competence that could instantaneously judge production conditions by the smoke from any given factory chimney (Fig. 8.4).[11]

Although the text of the ad might deal with office supplies, advertising, or even personal goods or career advancement, the visual image clearly denoted the production-oriented businessman. In some cases, illustrators may have consciously or unconsciously intended to connote the majesty of the client himself. Certainly the immense window that an ad agency provided the president of the Dahlberg Corporation in a *Saturday Evening Post* ad seemed compatible with the agency's desire to flatter a client whom it viewed as seeking to compensate for his short physical stature with egomaniacal posturing (Fig. 8.5).[12] Other window-on-the-factory ads may have represented an agency's first step in luring the client

away from old-fashioned scenes of "the founder" and "the factory." Above all, this visual cliché associated the businessman with control over an independent and autonomous domain. It established the standpoint from which the factory should be seen—the frame established by the window of the nearby, elevated executive office. No tableau that I have encountered in this era adopted an inverted point of view and showed the executive office window as seen from the factory grounds.

In reality, location of the main corporate offices at the factory site and personal supervision of production by the highest executives had already ceased to characterize most large corporations by the 1920s. Gradually, this clichéd scene of the window-on-the-factory must have come to seem archaic, even to artists who lacked the direct experience to make immediate corrections to traditional stereotypes of the business executive at work. By the mid-1920s, a picture of a skyscraper (along with an airplane and a dirigible) had become the artist's shorthand for the concept "modern." Since many corporate offices had moved to urban locations in recognition of the ascendant role of finance, advertising, legal expertise, and centralized communications in their operations, the steady drift toward the skyscraper as the locus of the typical office-with-window scene followed close upon trends in corporate structure.

Here, too, the ads gilded reality. Not all offices could occupy the topmost floors, but those in the advertising tableaux almost invariably gained this vantage. No rival skyscraper obstructed the view from these offices—although several such towers usually arose a dozen or more blocks away in order to provide an impressive cityscape.[13] The new businessman of the skyscraper office no longer looked out upon a scene of production under his control; neither did he look out upon scenes of consumption. It would have required an awkward angle of vision to encompass the streets below, and shoppers would have been too tiny to be distinct from such a distance. Instead, his window usually disclosed the tops of other skyscrapers and an occasional airplane. The view offered substitute satisfactions for a loss of individual autonomy in an age of business bureaucratization. The "company man," submerged in a large corporate hierarchy, could gaze out of his skyscraper window for compensatory visions of personal mastery. Once in a while, he might look past the fringes of the city to the landscape beyond. The horizon was broader than before; the domain more extensive but less under personal control. It suggested less a surveillance of present details than dreams of wider opportunities. In accordance with the enlarged role of planning and scientific research in business operations, the content and scope of the office view now suggested a window on the future (Fig. 8.6).[14]

Perhaps the infrequent exceptions to these two prominent office-window motifs best clarify the implications of these fantasies of domain. One exception was the business office with no view. Scenes of common office space—scenes of newspaper press rooms, typing and secretarial pools, or the desks of the sales force—do not really qualify here. But occasionally a tableau did appear of a single business office with no view. A few of these were photographs. Perhaps it was difficult to arrange the idealized, clichéd scene for the camera. Real office windows were not normally so large as illustrators liked to draw them; the vistas they afforded were unimpressive or hard to capture with clarity on film. Only with great ingenuity could a photographer capture executive, desk, window, and

Men who live for tomorrow

FOR certain scientists of the Gulf Refining Company, the present does not exist. Their eyes are on the future—for their duty is to forecast tomorrow's motoring needs.

These men must bring to their tasks a gift for scientific prophecy and a genius for perseverance. Theirs is a task in which science must live happily mated with imagination.

Will changing engine design call for a radically different motor fuel? These men must develop and perfect it. Will tomorrow's streamlined cars call for an oil able to resist airplane speeds? These men must make such oil a fact.

Already the results of their foresight have been notable. For out of the Gulf Research Laboratories came the Alchlor process of refining motor oil—probably the most significant single achievement in the history of lubrication.

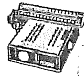
From these laboratories came Gulf's process for retarding gasoline deterioration. From them, too, came a process which cut the cost ten times over of an essential industrial chemical.

Gulf products *could* be kept abreast of the times without the Gulf Research Laboratories. But in any contest for leadership, the laurels must go to the organization that walks with eyes fixed ahead.

©1931, GULF REFINING CO., PITTSBURGH, PA.

GULF REFINING COMPANY

8.6. This "window-on-the-future" tableau fused business executive (with telephone at the ready) with company scientist. No window panes blurred his communion with the modernity of the airplane and the cubistic city.



8.7, 8.8. Incompetents and failures had no right to windows on vast domains. They turned their backs on blocked views or gazed disconsolately at telephones they lacked the energy to use.

external vista with proper lighting. More significantly, in the majority of nonphotographic office scenes without views, the advertising text dealt with failure. In a Byers Pipe ad entitled "Couldn't the Engineer Foresee This," the executive confronted a man in overalls in an office with only a blank wall visible. In "Born Tired," Postum closed the curtains on a caffeine-drugged failure, and in "Wives must share this responsibility," Post's Bran Flakes washed out any window or view for the businessman who let down "on the very threshold of success," giving him no view of factory or city outside. The Monroe Calculating Company did provide its businessmen with a window in "A lot to pay for a needless mistake," but it denied them any vista by placing another building just beyond the window. The pattern seems clear. Failures did not look out over present or future domains (Figs. 8.7, 8.8).[15]

Another exception was the depiction of a woman working at a desk next to a window with a cityscape vista. I have discovered only two of these; secretaries normally gained such a view only when they were present in an executive's office taking dictation.[16] Of course, it is not surprising that women, who rarely occupied executive positions, did not enjoy such prerogatives. The secretary or file clerk did not need to exercise a magisterial surveillance over the factory. But the exclusion of women from the opportunity to stand or sit by office windows helped reinforce the notion of an exclusive male prerogative to view broad horizons, to experience a sense of control over large domains, to feel like masters of all they surveyed. (Figs. 8.9, 8.10).

Advertising tableaux rarely provided women with the opportunity to view *any* vista from on high, to gain a point of vantage from which to see into the future. When women did dream of the future, their vision normally appeared in a

8.9, 8.10. Even those rare ads that celebrated women in business did not provide them with expansive and ego-enhancing office-window vistas.

thought-cloud above them. In movies, they occasionally looked out of second-story windows—usually only to spy their lover or husband with another woman in the garden below. In advertisements explicitly evoking a concern about the future, they gained the opportunity to stand hand-in-hand with their husbands, or under their sheltering arms, as the family stared out from a hill or uprising into the far distance. But in the advertising tableaux, women never gained the opportunity to look down with that magisterial sense of domain, control, and prospects for the future that the "typical" man obtained from his office window (Fig. 8.11). That difference reaffirmed which of the sexes was truly instrumental in making the world modern, whatever style choices women might make as consumers.

In one occasional variant of the "master of all he surveys" motif, advertising artists developed a visually provocative substitute for the office window. Once again, it excluded failures and women. In this visual cliché, a businessman, or more often several executives, loomed commandingly over a portion of the world miniaturized on a globe, map, or scale model. With giant hands and fingers they pointed to marketing targets, moved replicas of factories from place to place, or placed thumbtacks on cities or railroads. Sometimes they simply gazed intently at the various business options designated on a globe below them. At other times they reached out with huge hands over a scale model with a curvature at the top to indicate a broad segment of the world's surface.[17] Except for telephone operators, no women in the tableaux ever brought vast areas under similar symbolic control.

The telephone operator, of course, exercised such control only as the instrument of others. A 1929 AT & T advertisement spotlighted those whose power she represented. Six men, one with a telephone, surveyed a map on a conference table.

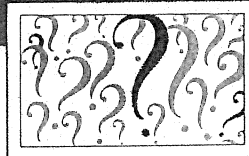
TO all members of women's organizations in America:

THE advertisement below is one of a series now being widely published throughout the country. All thoughtful women realize that a cleaner world would be a better place in which to live; and to them such a campaign for cleanliness cannot fail to be of interest.

Furthermore these messages should prove a powerful reinforcement to the educational work being done by the Cleanliness Institute, in cooperation with social service organizations, departments of health, and schools, and through group leaders everywhere.

The Offices of Cleanliness Institute are located at 45 East 17th Street, New York City.

What do the neighbors think of *her* children?



To every mother her own are the ideal children. But what do the neighbors think? Do *they* smile at happy, grimy faces acquired in wholesome play? For people have a way of associating unclean clothes and faces with other questionable characteristics.

Fortunately, however, there's soap and water.

"Bright, shining faces" and freshly laundered clothes seem to make children welcome anywhere . . . and, in addition, to speak volumes concerning their *parents'* personal habits as well.

There's CHARACTER — in SOAP & WATER

PUBLISHED BY THE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN SOAP AND GLYCERINE PRODUCERS, INC., TO AID THE WORK OF *CLEANLINESS INSTITUTE*

8.11. This housewife gained a window view only to recognize her guilt in the eyes of her neighbors (and her husband, judging by his glance) for her *children's grimy faces.*

Planning high-speed business

An Advertisement of the
American Telephone and Telegraph Company

MORE than 95% of the telephone calls from one town to another in the Bell System are now on a high-speed basis. This holds whether the call is between neighboring cities or half way across the continent.

Even if it is a long call, the operator in many cases now asks you to hold the telephone while the call is put through.

Calls from one town to another used to be handled by one operator taking your order and giving it to another group of operators to put through. You now give your call direct to the operators who put it through—and put it through fast while you are on the line. The average time for handling all toll and long distance calls in the Bell System was further materially reduced in 1928.

A high-speed service to all parts of the country—calls from one town to another as swift, clear and easy as local calls—that is the aim of the Bell System.

This is one of the many improvements in methods and appliances which are constantly being introduced to give high-speed telephone service. Better and better telephone service at the lowest cost is ever the goal of the Bell System.

"THE TELEPHONE BOOKS ARE THE DIRECTORY OF THE NATION"

8.12. Maps, graphs, globes, telephones, and office-window vistas of factories and skyscrapers all played a role in the imagery of a business command post. A woman's "command post" appears in Figs. 6.1 and 8.11.

Two pointed to specific objectives. A globe stood next to the table and maps and graphs covered the walls. Behind them, a window opened on a vista that included a factory chimney with smoke and a skyscraper (Fig. 8.12).[18] Such tableaux ranked with classic images of the enthronement of new elites. Anne Hollander has noted how artists employed the "immense expressive visual power" of draped cloth to convey the dignity and authority of rulers. And Herbert Collins has described how the new "sitting businessmen," the Dutch burghers of the paintings of Hans Holbein and others, were "enthroned" as a new social class through their portraits in impressive chairs, surrounded by the account books, coins, seals, and pens that suggested a world "susceptible to measurement and human manipulation."[19] In comparable fashion, advertising tableaux of the 1920s and 1930s offered powerful new visual images of man, as businessman, upraised to mastery. Telephones, huge fingers pointing to globes, maps, and scale models, and, above all, vistas through lofty office windows, provided the insignia that superseded the rich drapery and bulging ledgers of the past.

II. *Equality and Inequality in Soft Focus*

If the view from the office window defined the dominant fantasy of man's domain in the world of work, another visual cliché—the family circle—expressed the special qualities of the domain that he shared with his wife and children at home. During the nineteenth century, as a number of historians have pointed out, the notions of work and home had become dichotomized. The home came to represent a sheltered haven to which men escaped to find surcease from the harsh world of competition, ambition, and cold calculation. More than ever, the concept of the family circle, with its nuances of closure and intimate bonding, suggested a protective clustering—like the circling of the settlers' wagons—in defense of qualities utterly distinct from those that prevailed outside.[20]

This haven, in which men could experience sympathy and tenderness and refresh themselves to sally forth into the harsh "real" world outside, was understood to be another of man's domains in the sense of his ultimate authority. But the home had also come to be defined as woman's special domain. It was she who oversaw it throughout the day and imbued it with her singular qualities of softness, emotional warmth, and sacrificial love. She made the home an environment conducive to the molding of good character. Intellectual currents of the early twentieth century suggested that she and the children should exercise a larger degree of equality, at least within this domain and perhaps beyond.[21] In advertising tableaux of the family circle, these conflicting claims to governance, predominant influence, and democratic equality were subtly reconciled in visual images. The proposed reconciliations might have seemed far less congenial had they been reduced to explicit verbal formulations.

Like the fantasy of the office window, the fantasy of the family circle was conveyed almost entirely through visual imagery. Only rarely did the accompanying text attempt to further explain the meaning of the tableau. Nuances of medium, style, artistic technique, and composition often contributed as much to the meaning of a given image of the family circle as did explicit content. For instance, advertising illustrations emphasized the polarities between work and home as much through tonal qualities and atmospheric shading as they did through the depiction of the central figures.

The contrast in content was usually explicit enough. Instead of alertly surveying his domain or goading his ambition by gazing through the office window, the father, at home in the family circle, relaxed in a big chair with his wife perched beside him and his arm around his small son or daughter. But the contrast in atmosphere between home and work was even more dramatic. Instead of confronting the reader in the sharp-edged clarity of outline he had displayed in the austerity of his office, the father now appeared slightly blurred, surrounded by a sentimental haze similar in tonal quality to soft focus in a photograph.

Thus, "soft focus" defined the family circle tableau almost as readily as its specific content. Nostalgic in mood (by contrast, representations of the future in the 1920s and 1930s appeared in sparkling clarity with harsh lines and geometrical patterns), the soft-focus atmosphere suggested harmony and tenderness. It was as

8.13. A trade journal ad for Foldwell coated papers promised advertisers the emotional impact of soft-focus scenes like this.

though the artist, recognizing the moral ambience of the scene he was invading, deliberately averted the probing, judgmental gaze with which he viewed other vistas. Instead, he washed an affectionate, rosy mist over the scene. It was the family circle, rather than the home itself, that laid claim to the soft-focus treatment. Illustrations of the wife alone, or the wife and her friends in the home, rarely acquired the family-circle haze. They often depicted her efficiency as a consumer and home manager. Such tableaux, while often colorful, were more often glossy than misty. The addition of a child, connoting family, increased the likelihood of a soft-focus treatment. The addition of the father completed the circle, more or less assuring that the scene would fall into one of the sentimentalized categories of leave-taking, homecoming, the sharing of a meal, or evening leisure in the living room. On these occasions, and particularly in the evening scene, soft focus became common (Fig. 8.13).[22]

Of course advertisers did not limit the soft focus to family-circle tableaux. In other contexts it often represented an effort to imbue some other phenomenon with the emotional and moral qualities of the family circle. One series of tableaux employed the warm, misty atmosphere of the soft focus to contrast the personalized intimacy of the locally owned, independent grocery store with the cold impersonality of the externally controlled chain store.[23] Procter and Gamble introduced a blurry, soft-focus-with-highlights style for outdoor scenes of mothers, washerwomen, and children during happy washdays. When Arco-Petro Boilers demonstrated how to make the basement into a family "fun room," this formerly

A Child... and yet a Woman

8.14, 8.15, 8.16. These three variations in the spatial organization of family-circle tableaux found a common unity in the warm, misty quality so typical of such scenes.

cold and harsh setting suddenly acquired a soft, hazy, family-circle atmosphere.[24]

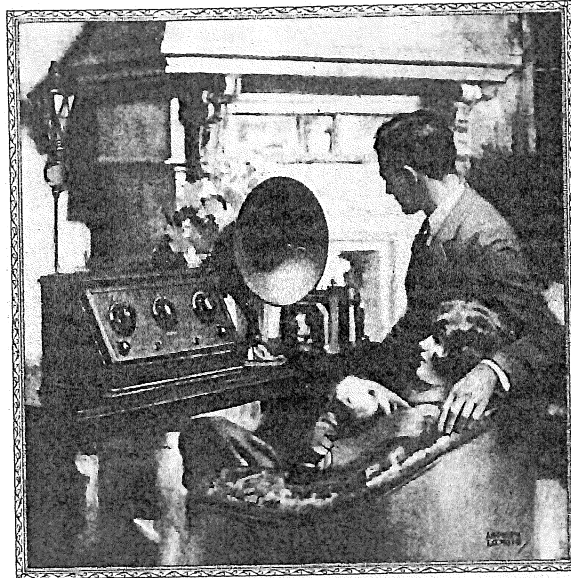
Although its atmosphere served other uses, the visual cliché of the family circle found its touchstone in the evening scene in the living room. All members of the family appeared in relatively close physical proximity. Father and mother were both present. And while it is difficult to explain exactly how this notion was conveyed, the reader felt assured that all their children were also present. So thoroughly were readers conditioned to accept such scenes as representing the completed family circle that no suspicion was likely to arise that another child might be upstairs or away from home. No toys rested on a section of the floor unoccupied by a child. No unfinished project or opened magazine lay on a table unattended by one of the visible family members. Never did picture or text suggest that other children had gone elsewhere in the house to amuse themselves or that mother and father might be worried about children who had not returned home on time. This was the family unified and intact.

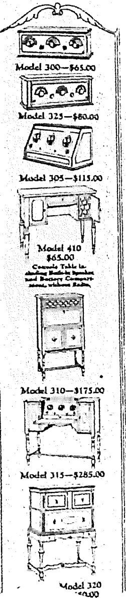
Three variant groupings of family members dominated the family-circle tableaux: (1) father seated with mother and children clustered around him (Fig. 8.14); (2) both mother and father seated in oblique apposition to one another with the children completing a rough circle as they played on the floor (Fig. 8.15); (3) mother and father seated apart, each accompanied by a child (Fig. 8.16). In the latter case, the reader completed the "circle," which was often, more precisely, a kind of triangle. Merchandising strategy sometimes dictated a fourth formula in which the product—a radio, phonograph, room heater, or clock—joined the family circle as the focus of attention, the family forming a complementary semicircle with their backs partly toward the reader. Occasionally the artist made the imagery of the closed circle more explicit by superimposing swirling, concentric lines, a circular border, or an arc of light.[25]

Thus the visual clichés of the family circle stressed harmony, cohesion, and unity. This did not *necessarily* imply paternal domination. In fact, one variant of the family-circle tableau, the family conference, often advocated, by example, a policy of family democracy. Teenage and pre-teen children sometimes joined the conference, their inclusion depending on whether the advertiser, often a magazine publisher, wished to emphasize the influence of younger readers on family decisions. Sometimes these ads portrayed the politics of the family conference as consumer decisions by ballot, based on the presumption of one person, one vote. Father, apparently, had no alternative when outvoted but to submit to the majority decision.[26]

Although the father relinquished any clear claim to sovereignty in consumer decisions, he appeared to do so voluntarily—perhaps even with a bit of condescension. In the more common tableaux of the family circle during evening leisure, he usually retained his stature as the most important and *au courant* family member. Visual clichés of the family circle reconciled newer notions of family democracy with more traditional images of family governance. They placed the wife and children in less blatantly dependent and deferential postures than they occupied in mid-nineteenth century depictions of the family circle, yet they subtly reaffirmed the father's dominant role.

At least two visual indexes to dominance within the family can be detected in the family-circle tableaux. One of these is possession of the evening newspaper. The prerogative of first or major claim to the newspaper belonged to the family member most informed about important current matters, with whatever modicum of power such knowledge implied. The newspaper reader boasted the best preparation to act on behalf of the family on matters linking it to the outside world. Of the sixty-nine family-circle tableaux I have noted that depict newspaper





8.17. In this illustration for a Stewart-Warner ad, the radio completed the family "circle." The woman, more attuned to culture, sat pensively while the man, responsible for mechanical adjustments, assumed the woman's common "perched" position.

reading, thirty-three portray the husband holding exclusive possession of the paper while the wife does handwork, reads a book, tells the children a story, or otherwise busies herself with domestic tasks. Only twice does the wife have sole possession. In twenty-six other instances, the husband sits in a chair with the paper open and his wife looks on while sitting on the arm of the chair or standing behind. Only three times does the wife sit reading the paper while her husband looks on, and in only five cases do both possess separate sections of the paper equally, despite the fact that several of these tableaux stress family readership of a particular newspaper. Wives often read books—both in family-circle scenes and in tableaux of women relieved from drudgery. But book reading suggested the "escapism" of novels or the absorption in "culture" appropriate to the woman's responsibility for refinement. Possession of the newspaper defined the member of the family with priority to the right to know.[27]

The typical position of the wife in tableaux in which the newspaper is shared suggests a second significant index to the subtle nuances of dominance and subordination that modified ostensible parity within the family circle. Two positions within the living room scene carry clear implications of subordination because they are frequently occupied by young children. These are the floor and the arm of a chair or sofa. With rare exceptions, neither the wife nor the husband sits or kneels on the floor. Such is not the case with the less humble, but nevertheless subordinate, chair-arm perch so often occupied by children. Out of eighty-eight family-circle tableaux in which only a single chair or sofa seat is occupied, the

8.18. Contrasts in tone, color, and focus distinguished father's cold, hard-edged domain of work from mother's circle of soft-focus warmth in this ad for A&P stores. Note how the window is treated in each vignette.

husband claims the right to the seat in sixty-five. In fifty-one of these instances, the wife perches accommodatingly on the arm of the chair or sofa, usually balancing herself by putting her arm lightly around her husband's shoulders. In fourteen instances, she stands behind him, diffidently bending or looking over his shoulder.[28] Interestingly, in nineteen of the twenty-eight contrary examples, in which the man balances on the arm of his wife's chair or stands nearby, the tableau advertised either a radio or a phonograph. Apparently, in the presence of culturally uplifting music, the woman more often gained the right of reposed concentration while the (more technologically inclined) man stood prepared to change the records or adjust the radio dials (Fig. 8.17).[29]

As in the case of the office window, the specific props and configurations of the visual cliché of the family circle derived primarily from the illustrator's free choice. Specific product strategies might require that a radio or a furnace be present, but these rarely determined the details of spatial arrangement or the nature of other props. In visually conveying the message "family circle," advertising artists drew upon a folk legacy of conventional images. Occasionally they modified these slightly to enhance the image of equality within the family and thus express the advertisers' partiality to a broader consumer democracy.

Despite the striking contrasts between the sharp, metallic tone of the office-window tableau and the soft-focus ambiance of the family circle, both constituted fantasies of domain (Fig. 8.18). The narrow domain of the family circle was almost invariably one of harmony. To the woman, the visual cliché of the family

8.19. In the visual language of advertising, the future was usually defined as a source of light, as in this illustration from an ad for the pharmaceutical firm of Parke, Davis and Company.

circle served as a reminder of her responsibility to ensure a setting of tranquil, tidy orderliness for the reunification of the family at day's end. To the man, it suggested that he should not survey this domain with the aggrandizing eye of ambition that he cast through the office window, but rather with a benevolent and forbearing regard, one that assumed but did not flaunt his authority.

The visual cliché of the family circle served to reconcile the past and the present, authority and democracy. It defined domain as security rather than as opportunity. Above all, it connoted stability. The products of modern technology, including radios and phonographs, were comfortably accommodated within the hallowed circle. Whatever pressures and complexities modernity might bring, these images implied, the family at home would preserve an undaunted harmony and security. In an age of anxieties about family relationships and centrifugal social forces, this visual cliché was no social mirror; rather, it was a reassuring pictorial convention.