

ADVERTISING, THE UNEASY PERSUASION

part of the American aural and visual environment. It is impossible to ignore their wider role in providing people a general education in goods, status, values, social roles, style, and art. What can be said about this more general and frequently more troubling influence of advertising? I will explore this problem in the next chapter.

7

Advertising as Capitalist Realism

ADVERTISING, as the early agency Lord and Thomas put it, is "salesmanship in print." It is just that simple, just that complex. Understanding advertising entails understanding the difference between personal and printed or broadcast communication; the differences entailed in the "decontextualization" of thought and feeling that systems of mass communication make possible. With the invention of writing in human history, anthropologist Jack Goody observes, "Speech is no longer tied to an occasion: it becomes timeless. Nor is it attached to a person; on paper, it becomes more abstract, more depersonalized."¹ For Goody, this opens the way to science, to the growth of criticism, and to a more tolerant attitude toward one's own frame of reference. But the same forces that enable people to see themselves as individuals independent of social and traditional contexts make people susceptible to the appeals of mass media, including advertising. This is an openness or susceptibility qualitatively different from the householder's vulnerability to the direct sales pitch. Among other

ADVERTISING, THE UNEASY PERSUASION

things, it connects the consumer not only to an item for sale and a person selling it but to an invisible, yet present, audience of others attuned to the same item for sale and the same symbols used to promote it. The advertisement, like the sales talk, links a seller to a buyer. Unlike the sales talk, it connects the buyer to an assemblage of buyers through words and pictures available to all of them and tailored to no one of them. Advertising is part of the establishment and reflection of a common symbolic culture.

Advertising, whether or not it sells cars or chocolate, surrounds us and enters into us, so that when we speak we may speak in or with reference to the language of advertising and when we see we may see through schemata that advertising has made salient for us. Whether advertising is, as David Potter claimed, the distinctive institution of an affluent society,² or, as Mason Griff wrote, the "central institution of mass society,"³ can at this point be legitimately doubted. At the same time, it is a distinctive and central *symbolic* structure. And, strictly as symbol, the power of advertising may be considerable. Advertising may shape our sense of values even under conditions where it does not greatly corrupt our buying habits. I want now to take up the position of the UNESCO MacBride Commission (and many others) that advertising "tends to promote attitudes and life-styles which extol acquisition and consumption at the expense of other values."⁴

The Concept of Capitalist Realism

When a person places a classified ad or when a department store announces a January white sale, the intention is to sell goods. In the classifieds, this usually means a unique transaction—a particular house is for sale, a particular job is available, a particular used car is offered. When the given item is sold, the ad is discontinued. With the department store, the situation is less individualized. The store wants to attract customers not only to the linens department but to the store in general and not only in January but always. Still, the ad does relatively little to attract customers

Advertising as Capitalist Realism

except to announce what goods it has to sell at what price. This may be an effort to make a store-loyal customer as well as to sell the product. But the main task is to identify the product, plainly, and to announce its price, breathlessly.

National consumer goods advertising differs sharply from this model of advertising. The connection between ad and sale, so direct in classified ads, or between ad and customer contact, reasonably direct in the January white sale ad, is very remote in the national consumer-goods ad. It is indirect in both space and time. The commercial for Coca-Cola or Alka-Seltzer does not say how the customer can buy the advertised product; it does not typically announce a phone number to call or a place to shop. It takes for granted the consumer's shopping skills and it assumes the successful distribution of the product to retail stores. In time, it does not presume a quick response of customers to its efforts. It does not presume that the consumers it wants to reach will see any given showing of the ad or, seeing it, quickly respond by buying. It is a general reminder or reinforcer, not an urgent appeal to go out and buy. What the ad says or pictures, then, is obliged to be relatively placeless and relatively timeless. National consumer-goods advertising is highly abstracted and self-contained. Where particular places are shown, they are generally flattened—a car, for instance, displayed in front of the Capitol building in Washington, does not connect the car to a particular place but to a familiar image of a place, photographed from the most familiar head-on spot. What is shown is more recognizable as a postcard than as physical space. A 1980 VW ad airbrushed out the statue of Ulysses S. Grant when it shot an ad in front of the Capitol because "only a small piece of it was sticking above the car. It looked confusing, so we took it out."⁵ Particular times are almost never identified in magazine and television advertising, though timeless occasions are—the birthday party, the New Year's party, the weekend.

Similarly, the people pictured in magazine ads or television commercials are abstract people. This is not to say they are fictive characters. In a play or television series, actors generally portray particular people with particular names who, in the fictive universe they occupy, exist in a set of relations with other

fictional characters and have a range of meanings within that world. An advertisement is not like this, it does not construct a fully fictive world. The actor or model does not play a particular person but a social type or a demographic category. A television actress, for instance, will be asked to audition for commercials that call for a "twenty-six to thirty-five-year-old P&G housewife." She is not supposed to represent a twenty-six-year-old or a thirty-year-old or a thirty-five-year-old but a "twenty-six-thirty-five-year-old" housewife, the sort likely to buy Procter & Gamble products. The age range from twenty-six to thirty-five corresponds not so much to a physical type as to a presumed social type with predictable consumer patterns. It is a demographic grouping used for market research. An actress seeking a role in a television commercial is expected to have two wardrobes ready for auditions—standard and "upscale." She is to represent either the middle-American housewife or the affluent American housewife, but never a particular person.⁸

There are apparent exceptions to this rule of abstractness but they themselves are instructive. Think, for instance, of the Polaroid camera commercials (of about 1977-82) in which James Garner apparently speaks as James Garner. But does he? After all, he is not really married to Mariette Hartley, the actress who plays his wife in the commercial. They are playing a couple (indeed, they are playing a couple playing). Some kind of fiction is being created. It is a fiction that rests for success on viewers knowing a lot about James Garner. But the television audience knows little or nothing about James Garner, the person. Garner does not play himself, the person, nor does he play a particular fictive character. Instead, he plays what I would call the generalized James Garner role, the type for which James Garner is always cast—handsome, gentle, bumbling, endearing, a combination of Bret Maverick from "Maverick" and Jim Rockford from "The Rockford Files."

Similarly, Robert Young did not play himself in the Sanka coffee ads where he identified himself as Robert Young. He played the generalized Robert Young character, a combination of his role as Jim Anderson in the television series "Father Knows Best" and his title role in "Marcus Welby, M.D.," quintessentially

cheerful, moderate, mature, and full of good sense.⁷ Even in many straightforward testimonial ads, the person played is not the actor or athlete as a human being but the actor or athlete flattened into a celebrity, a person, in Daniel Boorstin's nice phrase, "known for his well-knownness."⁸

Television stars who do commercials, ostensibly in their own names, invariably present their television personalities, not their own. When American Express sought to emphasize that their traveler's checks offered travelers security, they "looked for a spokesman perceived by the public as an authority on crime." Thus the choice of Karl Malden; not because he is Karl Malden, but because he once was Lt. Mike Stone in "The Streets of San Francisco." Similarly, Bill Cosby was used in Jello Pudding commercials because he had established himself in so many programs for children and was in a position to remind mothers that children like Jello.⁹

The task of the television personalities in commercials is to appear, suggesting and pulling back into well-established characters. The viewing audience will do the rest. Thus, established fictional characters may be as successful as well-known personalities. Old Lonely, the Maytag repairman, has done commercials for two decades and so has Mr. Whipple for Charmin; Madge the Manicurist (for Palmolive dishwashing liquid), Speedy Alka-Seltzer, and the Hamm's beer bear have been on and off the air for a generation. For the unknown actor, doing a television commercial presents an odd challenge. It is a kind of anti-acting. As one actress, Linda Stratton, put it: "You have to pull back into yourself, rather than project like on the stage. It's an entirely different technique that must be learned."¹⁰

This flat, abstract world of the advertisement is part of a deliberate effort to connect specific products in people's imaginations with certain demographic groupings or needs or occasions. Sometimes, in an effort not to exclude any potential customers from identifying with the product, advertisers choose not to show any people in their ads. For a generation from the 1930s into the 1950s, Guinness stout did not show people drinking in their ads: "This policy of non-identification was deliberate. It was argued that if Guinness was a drink for everyone, to identify it with a particular

section of the market would be to limit its appeal."¹¹ In other cases, market research or good hunches or common sense identifies the specific population group most likely to consume the advertised product in quantity. Then an abstract representation of that group will be pictured in the ad.

Thus, abstraction is essential to the aesthetic and intention of contemporary national consumer-goods advertising. It does not represent reality nor does it build a fully fictive world. It exists, instead, on its own plane of reality, a plane I will call capitalist realism. By this term, I mean to label a set of aesthetic conventions, but I mean also to link them to the political economy whose values they celebrate and promote.

This is a different intention from that of Erving Goffman who notes some of the same features of advertisements and refers to them as "commercial realism."¹² For Goffman, commercial realism is "the standard transformation employed in contemporary ads," the particular kind of public portraiture advertising uses. Goffman suggests that commercial realism differs in two respects from the way people present themselves in actual life. In real life, according to Goffman, human activity is highly ritualized. People act out and live in social ideals, presenting to the world stereotyped pictures of themselves. In advertising, this is even more true; advertising is "hyper-ritualization." Second, advertising is edited. In both life and advertising, people present social ideals. But, in life, people are "stuck with a considerable amount of dull footage." People cannot edit their behavior enough to provide a purely ritualized social ideal. In commercial realism, editing is thorough and the social ideal is thereby portrayed as completely as possible.¹³ Goffman's position is helpful but it is limited to characterizing the conventions of commercial art rather than trying also to link them to their cultural role in advanced capitalist societies. Of course, that may not be a task one can ultimately master, but I think it is worth attempting.

I can make what I mean by capitalist realism more clear by comparing it to socialist realism, the term from which, obviously, I have derived it. Socialist realism is official, state-sanctioned and state-governed art as practiced in the Soviet Union. As the First Soviet Writers' Congress defined it in 1934, socialist realism is an

art obliged to present a "correct historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development" and to do so in a form that will educate "the working masses in the spirit of socialism."¹⁴ In practice, this means that artists and writers must meet certain aesthetic and moral demands. In theory, these demands are all in the service of a kind of realism. Socialist realist art must be faithful to life—but in certain prescribed ways:

1. Art should picture reality in simplified and typified ways so that it communicates effectively to the masses.
2. Art should picture life, but not as it is so much as life as it should become, life worth emulating.
3. Art should picture reality not in its individuality but only as it reveals larger social significance.
4. Art should picture reality as progress toward the future and so represent social struggles positively. It should carry an air of optimism.
5. Art should focus on contemporary life, creating pleasing images of new social phenomena, revealing and endorsing new features of society and thus aiding the masses in assimilating them.¹⁵

Without getting into a study of Soviet art, it should be apparent that the parallels are strong between what socialist realism is designed to do and what advertising in capitalist society intends to do, at least, national advertising for consumer goods. One could easily say that advertising tries to present a "correct historically concrete representation of reality in its capitalist development." What I will suggest in the next few pages is that American advertising, like socialist realist art, simplifies and typifies. It does not claim to picture reality as it is but reality as it should be—life and lives worth emulating. It is always photography or drama or discourse with a message—rarely picturing individuals, it shows people only as incarnations of larger social categories. It always assumes that there is progress. It is thoroughly optimistic, providing for any troubles that it identifies a solution in a particular product or style of life. It focuses, of course, on the new, and if it shows some signs of respect for tradition, this is only to help in the assimilation of some new commercial creation.

I do not want to suggest that magazine and television advertisements are always "realistic" in any conventional sense. Often

commercials seek realism, but sometimes the aesthetic mode is surrealism, especially in ads for products, like perfume, closely connected in the culture to dream, fantasy, and desire. Sometimes the ad is in the mode of comedy or farce. The Federal Express television commercials with a Federal Express employee talking at a superhumanly rapid clip offer an example of this sort. Television commercials may picture ordinary citizens playing themselves—a self-consciously realistic style, or they may have well-known actors in consumer roles, or they may have little-known actors playing consumers, or they may do without actors altogether and use animation. Most of these forms are well enough established to generate parodies of them in other commercials. Not all of these forms employ the usual conventions of dramatic realism, but all of them tend toward the kind of abstractness I have outlined. They are set out of time and out of space. In most cases, real or surreal, sentimental or comic, straight or camp, they present simplified social scenes that show the world "as it should be," they picture people as representatives of larger social categories, and they seek an accommodation with whatever is new or newly marketable.

At present, efforts at a kind of realism or even super-realism dominate the making of advertisements, even in ads that are not, in dramatic form, realistic. For instance, there is a vogue for actors who do not look like actors. Karl Malden (for American Express Co.) and Robert Morley (for British Airways) are actors with character rather than beauty, "real-people actors." Robert Meury, copy chief at Backer & Spielvogel says, "We've been using celebrities in our Miller Lite spots from the start. But never just any celebrity—and never just any context. We make sure our stars are guys you'd enjoy having a beer with. And the locations we film in are always real bars. We even let our celebrities have a hand in the copy—the more involvement the better. After all, it isn't a performance we're after; we just want our spots to feel real." Joe Sedelmaier, one of the most successful and original directors of commercials, on location in Los Angeles to cast a commercial for the Del Taco fast food chain, complained, "It is impossible to cast in L.A. Everyone looks plastic."¹⁶ The whole American Express campaign, "Don't leave home without it,"

plays with the idea of celebrity, featuring famous people who are not *visually* well known. This inverts the conventions of celebrity advertising and induces the viewer to participate in the ad as in a guessing game.

The choice of "real" actors and real settings is matched by a move toward graininess rather than slickness in the film itself. There is also a move toward a kind of "documentary" style in television commercials that major advertisers, including Xerox Corp., Miles Laboratories Inc. (Alka-Seltzer), The Stroh Brewery Co., and General Motors Corp., favor. This "open camera" approach relies less on storyboard preparation of a commercial, more on what may happen spontaneously when the film is rolling. In 1983 Whitehall Laboratories (Anacin) initiated a kind of super- or hyper-realism in its television advertising.¹⁷

Of course, "real" is a cultural construct. The makers of commercials do not want what is real but what will seem real on film. Artificial rain is better than "God's rain" because it shows up better on film or tape. Seeking sites for the filming of the "Reach Out and Touch Someone" commercials, N. W. Ayer's staff sought not just actual homes but homes that would look real. By that, they meant homes that would look *stereotypical*, homes that would be consistent with a type they sought to picture as representative. Nothing in the commercial should distract the viewer. Nothing should lead the audience to criticize, to say, "That doesn't look real." So each piece of furniture had to be consistent with the overall image of the house even if, in fact, few houses are like the one depicted. In commercial production, there is a passionate, obsessive attention to making every detail look "right."¹⁸

If anything, advertising looks more real than it should. As Barbara Rosenblum writes in her study of professional photography, advertising photography uses "crisp focus" to create "a dense and busily detailed surface. Light is used in conjunction with focus to create a hypertactile effect. Things look real; in fact, almost too real." The surface is "overaccented," she says, and this "keeps the viewer's interest up front, in the foreground or middleground."¹⁹ The rich, cinematic, often crowded detail in magazine ads and television commercials is most unlike the sim-

ple, bold wall posters of China or the Soviet Union and very unlike America's own social realist art of the thirties. The aesthetic sensibility is very different. The emotional intensity is very different, too; socialist realism is emotionally overextended, tugging toward inspiration, while capitalist realism is either cool, relishing understatement because it relies on common understanding with its audience, or sentimental, appealing openly to basic human feelings it is certain are already in place. There is no drawing out or up. The effort is to do with art what a former Foote, Cone & Belding creative chief urged his employees to do in writing copy for the consumer: "Talk to him in a way that gets him nodding in agreement before you try to sell him something."²⁰ The similarity between advertising and socialist realism is that both forms subordinate everything to a message that romanticizes the present or the potential of the present. If the visual aesthetic of socialist realism is designed to dignify the simplicity of human labor in the service of the state, the aesthetic of capitalist realism—without a masterplan of purposes—glorifies the pleasures and freedoms of consumer choice in defense of the virtues of private life and material ambitions.

Is Advertising State Art?

Advertising is not an official, state art.²¹ There is no rulebook from an ad writers' congress. The government provides no positive guidance for advertising. It does provide some limitations on what advertisers may say. The Federal Trade Commission regulates advertising, avowedly in the interest of promoting full and fair information in the marketplace. The courts have some authority over advertising, too, though the tendency in recent decisions has been to deny it, extending First Amendment protection to "commercial speech." The government registers and protects patents and trademarks and thus encourages new product innovation and, by extension, the advertising that accompanies it. The government provides direct and indirect subsidies of advertising,

not least of all by being a major advertiser itself in military recruiting and other areas.²² What is official about advertising, if anything, is not that it is to a limited degree government regulated or government subsidized but that the government tacitly gives approval and support, along with the rest of society, to *unofficial* expression.

It would be playing with words to speak of advertising as "official" art. But to do so offers some interesting clarification. For instance, in the conflict over the 1980 Moscow Olympics in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, commentators of all political stripes deplored the fact that the Soviets intended to use the Olympics for "propaganda" purposes, to promote the communist way of life. Of course, Moscow intended exactly that. But how different is this from the way Americans used the 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid? What is the sum of advertising for Minolta Corp., General Foods Corp. (Maxwell House), Texas Instruments Inc., Levi Strauss & Co., and the American Broadcasting Company if not efforts to advance the "American" or "capitalist" way of life?²³

But only occasionally do advertisements invoke a sense of the nation as a whole, as in Olympics sponsorship or in a slogan like, "America is turning Seven-Up." Only occasionally do commercials make direct reference to American political ideals—Franklin Roosevelt brought the New Deal, John Kennedy the New Frontier, and Procter & Gamble brings to menstruating women "New Freedom." Reference to the nation as a whole is probably more common in American advertising than in European advertising. A British advertising executive, David Bernstein, has observed that American ads talk more about "America" than British ads speak of "Britain." In slogans like, "America shops for values at Sears" or "Helping insure the American way of life," advertising directly assimilates to its marketing goal the promotion of patriotic sentiment.²⁴ Still, most ads do not explicitly draw attention to the American polity but focus on homely toothpastes, cat foods, laundry detergents, and canned beers. If these ads are not strictly "official," can it be said nonetheless that they are advertisements for "capitalism" or the "American way of life"?

Taken collectively, these ads do articulate some of the opera-

tive values of American capitalism. As Soviet art idealizes the producer, American art idealizes the consumer; their tractor in the fields is matched by our home entertainment center in the den. Our advertising is clearly different from the univocal, centrally organized, and tightly controlled Soviet propaganda efforts. But it, too, is socially sanctioned and omnipresent. To engage in an elaborate analysis of advertising content is not my intention here. It seems clear enough that advertisements often point to middle-class material comfort as an enviable condition. It is also clear that advertisements reproduce and even sometimes exaggerate long-standing social inequalities. Black people are still largely invisible in advertising. Women are depicted as subordinate to men, childlike in both their charm and their dependence. All ideals and values are called into the service of and subordinated to the purchase of goods and the attainment of a materially satisfying style of life.²⁵

One study nicely reveals a larger theme. Brigitte Jordan and Kathleen Bryant examined five hundred magazine advertisements in which couples were pictured. They drew their samples from popular magazines, women's magazines, men's magazines, and general circulation periodicals. They found, as one would expect, that the couples are almost always portrayed as happy, often happy in their intimacy. Couples are shown having fun, being affectionate, expressing sexuality, or demonstrating commitment to each other. There are no old, poor, sick, or unattractive couples in the ads. However the couples are pictured, they are invariably attentive to each other. As Jordan and Bryant argue, couples in life often are doing different things, even when they are together; there is regularly "mutual inattentiveness in the company of each other." Not so, in advertising. The authors found only six ads out of five hundred in which the couples were not shown in "explicit mutual reference."²⁶

This suggests, again, that typification and idealization are the modes by which advertisements are produced. There is no intention of capturing life as it "really" is, but there is every intention of portraying social ideals, representing as normative those relatively rare moments of special-ness, bliss, or dreamlike satisfaction. What kind of satisfaction is pictured may vary widely—it

may be sexual, it may be familial, it may be the expression of social values like the long-term commitment of a husband and wife to each other. It may be the values of male friendship at a bar or on a fishing trip, the intimacy of parent and child relations expressed in a telephone call or in a mother-daughter conversation that revolves around a commercial product. One Coca-Cola commercial I saw screened at a convention of advertisers showed a boy running in a field. It cut to the farmyard where two attractive people, obviously mother and father, were standing by the barn. They open the barn doors and the camera goes back to the boy running faster. Back to the barn, a pony is brought out. The happy faces of the parents—sharing, by the way, a Coke. The boy, surprise and joy on his face, coming closer. The parents, smiling at each other, drinking a Coke, perhaps tears in their eyes. The boy, joyous, hugging the pony. The proud parents. The boy, looking lovingly at his Mom and Dad. The parents, looking at each other. At the boy. And that was all. It was beautifully done. It brought the hint of tears to my own eyes and it evoked great enthusiasm in the auditorium. The advertisement does not so much invent social values or ideals of its own as it borrows, usurps, or exploits what advertisers take to be prevailing social values. It then reminds us of beautiful moments in our own lives or it pictures magical moments we would like to experience.

There is little one would want to call "capitalist" in these moments. Indeed, if capitalism is a system promoting private ownership, these ads are oddly anticapitalist or noncapitalist, honoring traditions of social solidarity like family, kinship, and friendship that at least in principle are in conflict with the logic of the market. What is capitalist is that these values are put to work to sell goods, invoked in the service of the marketplace. And what is also distinctively capitalist is that the satisfactions portrayed are invariably private, even if they are familial or social; they do not invoke public or collective values. They offer a public portraiture of ideals and values consistent with the promotion of a social order in which people are encouraged to think of themselves and their private worlds. Think of how hollow public service announcements generally sound. They, too, invoke values that matter to people. But they do not have the all-important

frame that encompasses product advertising; they do not end in a sales pitch. Advertisements normally are complete only if there is, explicitly or implicitly, a call to the viewer or reader to take a small, do-able action well within his or her experience. The public service announcements ask for a sacrifice or gift, if they ask for anything. People are capable of sacrifice and of giving, but the television announcement that asks for sacrifice seems incongruous.²⁷

The Functions of a Pervasive Art Form

If advertising is not an official or state art, it is nonetheless clearly art. The development of painting, photography, and prints in the fine arts has been intimately intertwined with the development of commercial art for a century. While few American writers have joined Malcolm Cowley in exclaiming that literature "should borrow a little punch and confidence from American business,"²⁸ artists and photographers from Toulouse-Lautrec on have frequently done commercial art or been influenced by it. The difference between fashion photography and photography as art is subtle, if it exists at all, and certainly the techniques and innovations in fashion photography influence photography as fine art as often as the other way around. In recent years, television commercial techniques have influenced film and commercial directors have become makers of feature films.²⁹

Needless to say, most advertising is dull and conventional, as creative workers in the business are the first to point out. But there is no question that advertising shapes aesthetic tastes, and at least occasionally educates the eye in ways serious artists can applaud. Critics quick to attack the "desires" advertising promotes are apt not to notice, or having noticed, to reject, the visual tastes advertising shapes. One can gaze, as literary historian Leo Spitzer observed, "with disinterested enjoyment" at an advertisement whose claims for its product do not seem the least bit credible. Advertising "may offer a fulfillment of the

aesthetic desires of modern humanity."³⁰ In a study of children's attitudes toward television commercials, Thomas Robertson and John Rossiter found a sharp decline in the extent to which children trust commercials, from first grade to third grade to fifth. But when asked if they *liked* commercials, the decline was less severe.³¹ Even cultivated and critical adults, if honest, will acknowledge very often a certain "liking" or aesthetic appeal in ads they may in other respects find offensive.

It is important to acknowledge, then, that advertising is art—and is often more successful aesthetically than commercially. (In a 1981 survey of what television commercials people find the "most outstanding," a third of the people who selected Kodak ads praised James Garner and Mariette Hartley for their roles. In fact, Garner and Hartley appeared in Polaroid commercials—aesthetically successful without leaving as strong a commercial impression as the sponsor might have wished.)³² We collect it. Old candy and coffee tins, old Coke signs, old tourist brochures, these are our antiques, our collected unconscious. But if advertising is art, the question remains: What does art do? What does art that is intended to do something do? What does art do, especially art as pervasive and penetrating as advertising in the contemporary United States?

As obvious as this question seems to be, its formulation is not yet satisfactory. Does advertising turn people into consumers? Does it create needs and desires? Or does it rest for its minimal plausibility on exactly the world its critics (and some of its proponents) claim it is creating? Take, for instance, James Duesenberry's theory of consumer behavior, which he derives from the simple assumptions that (1) people see goods around them superior to what they own and (2) that people believe high-quality goods are desirable and important. Surely advertising reinforces the belief that high-quality goods are desirable and important and surely it leads people to see representations of superior goods around them but it does not seem reasonable to imagine that advertising had much to do with creating these conditions in the first place. Duesenberry takes the belief in the worth of superior goods to lie deep in American culture:

ADVERTISING, THE UNEASY PERSUASION

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.³³

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?

Social critics have argued that the greatest danger of advertising may be that it creates belief in the larger sense. It has been a common coin of advertising critics that advertising is a kind of religion. This goes back at least to James Rorty who wrote of the

Advertising as Capitalist Realism

religious power of advertising, holding that "advertising . . . becomes a body of doctrine."³⁴ Ann Douglas has written that advertising is "the only faith of a secularized consumer society."³⁵ 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."³⁶

Others have observed that many leading advertisers were the children of ministers or grew up in strict, religious households.³⁷ 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.³⁸

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

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 brand. 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.⁴¹

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 raddio 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

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.³⁹

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."⁴⁰

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

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."⁴²

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."⁴³ 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.⁴⁴

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') . . ."⁴⁵ 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."⁴⁶

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-

ADVERTISING, THE UNEASY PERSUASION

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*.⁴⁷ 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."⁴⁸ 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."⁴⁹

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

Advertising as Capitalist Realism

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

ADVERTISING, THE UNEASY PERSUASION

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

Advertising as Capitalist Realism

our longing for meaning."⁵⁰ 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.