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This is a transcript from a video production by Parallax Pictures. Dave Tims sourced the video a few years ago. It is very insightful and thoughtful analysis by a number of experts. Last year I transcribed the text – painstaking, but worth it!

“A democratic civilization will save itself only if it makes the language of the image into a stimulus for critical reflection – not an invitation for hypnosis.” Umberto Eco

Experts interviewed were:

Jean Kilbourne (media critic, creator of “Killing Us Softly”)

Stuart Ewen (sociologist, author of “All Consuming Images”)

Sut Jhally (sociologist, author of “The Codes of Advertising”)

Bernard McGrane (sociologist, creator of “The Ad and the IQ”)

Richard Pollay (Faculty of Commerce and Business Admin, UBC)

JK Advertising is one of the most powerful forms of education ever. This is mainly because it's not considered education.

SJ The most powerful propaganda system is that which doesn't allow itself to be recognized as propaganda. Advertising is that type of system.

It appears to lay out the assumptions of how the world works and make it appear that is how the world is.

It encourages people to engage in cycles of disposal – creating our ecological crisis.

JK Advertising sells products but it also sells a great more – it sells values, it sells images, concepts of love, reality, sexuality and success. Because the individual ads are stupid and trivial, people assume that the whole phenomenon is stupid and trivial.

SE In order to understand advertising you can't just look at individual ads by themselves.

SJ Advertising isn't just about goods – it's about a whole set of different values

JK Almost everyone in America feels personally exempt from the influence of advertising. Wherever I go I always hear “I don't pay attention to ads, I just tune them out.”

BM This is one of advertising's most brilliant accomplishments – to get us to believe that we're not affected by ads.

JK In many ways this is what gives advertising it's power – the belief that it is beneath them.

SE People's experience of advertising is not one ad at a time – but it begins to constitute a totality – an environment.

BM Because it's pervasive, it's taken for granted – we don't see it very well because we're surrounded by it

in multiple media all the time from the time we're born til the time we die.

SJ It's so much around us that we don't even think about it.

SE This totality repeats certain kinds of messages again and again.

JK The average American is exposed to over 1500 ads every day, Now we don't pay attention to all those ads, but the effect of advertising is cumulative and is mostly unconscious.

BM It's like breathing the air. You don't notice the pollution.

RP We don't know who discovered water but it's unlikely to have been a fish. Environments are hard to perceive when you're caught up in them.

SJ We have to get the fish to think about the water. And that means de-naturalising the water so that we see that the world was not always like this. It was constructed this way.

SE The question is not "Does this ad work?" but "what is the impact of this advertising-infused environment? In what ways does it begin to shape our understandings of the world, understandings of power etc?"

JK In addition to selling individual products, advertising, above all, teaches us to be consumers. It teaches us that happiness can be bought, that there are instant answers to life's complex problems, and that products can meet our deepest human needs.

SJ If you want to understand modern society, advertising is the best place to look.

SE When we talk about where advertising comes from, it's a hard question to answer because something like it has been around for a long time. Shop signs in a medieval village were a form of advertising. But when did advertising move from being merely a way of informing people about the existence of goods and services to become a tool of socialization? From the mid to late nineteenth century onward, advertising increasingly became a common part of people's everyday visual experience. Most of that advertising was informational – it gave people a picture of the product, it told them what the product would do etc. These early adverts assumed that people are essentially rational beings who when presented with certain types of information will draw certain types of conclusions.

By the 1920's ads are talking less and less about the products and more and more about the lives (and more and more about the emotional and social lives) of consumers. A number of things had happened along the way. Firstly, by the 1920's the ability to mass produce goods has reached such a point that you can not just assume that there will be a market out there for your goods but you need to create markets for those goods.

BM Somewhere around the 50's we reached the point where the problem was not too little cheese produced but rather not enough cheese consumed. So it became the job of the advertisers to produce consumers.

SE And now all of a sudden advertising is trying to make people increasingly uncomfortable in their own skins, uncomfortable with their own lives.

BM So the function of advertising became the production of discontent in human beings. One of the sub-texts of all advertising is "You're not okay the way you are. Things are bad. You need help. You need salvation." In that sense, advertising is designed to generate endless self criticism, all sorts of anxieties, and then to offer the entire world of consumer goods as your salvation. That's where salvation rests. Anything and everything that you can buy.

JK For example, if advertisers want to sell a cream that is supposed to make women look younger, they are also going to want to "sell" anxiety about ageing. That's going to be a necessary part of what they sell in order to get women to use these worthless creams.

BM In contrast, one message you'll never hear in advertising is "You're okay. You don't need anything. Just be yourself."

JK If one is constantly feeling that the next time if you just have the right car or look a certain way, or lost 10 pounds that this will bring happiness, it does an enormous amount of harm.

BM I have an exercise where I get my students to look in the mirror for 15 minutes. They find that when they do this, instead of seeing themselves for what they are, they're absolutely haunted by what they're not. They're endlessly comparing themselves to the advertisements they've been surrounded with their whole lives. It's the opposite of therapy designed to help people achieve a peace with themselves. Advertising is designed to generate an inner sense of conflict with ourselves.

SE One piece of the philosophical system about advertising is this idea that people are continually competing with everyone around them to be noticed, to be admired, to be seen to be successful.

BM The structure of the advertisement is such that it needs to grasp attention. It needs to promote itself so that we think we need to be like that – we have to capture people's attention, we have to be interesting, we have to be fascinating, to be creative.

SE As young people go out looking for jobs, personality becomes this increasingly important job category and therefore ones needs to turn oneself into a product to be sold.

BM And the other consequence of that in terms of identity formation is that we get imprinted with this phenomenon.

JK We are learning far more from advertising than we are from school. Advertising affects our self-image quite deeply – certainly for women. Emphasis on physical perfection. While there's always been an ideal of beauty, there's never before been the kind of mass technology which has made it possible for this image to be reproduced and thrust into our faces hundreds of times a day, everywhere you go. We're so surrounded by this image, that's defining what is beautiful that women have been conditioned to feel like they're failures if they don't look like this. And men have been conditioned to feel the same if they don't have a woman on their arms who looks like this.

Another difference with this mass-marketed ideal as opposed to the ancient ideal, is that the purpose of this ideal is to sell products – it's the only purpose. There's no other deeper value. And the result is that women end up feeling incomplete and insecure. Of course, it's impossible to achieve this look, but nonetheless, one must try! And there are tremendous penalties for women who don't try. There's a lot of contempt and hostility towards women who opt out of this beauty contest.

SE Significance of the first world war in the challenge of persuading people. By the 20's people involved in the persuading of people no longer view people as rational but have increasingly bought into the studies of psycho-analytical thought and Pavlovian psychology. They assume now that the real motivating forces – that can persuade people to anything – whether to go to war or buy a hamburger – is to appeal to them on levels of which they are unconscious.

JK I think it's true when people say they tune advertising out. Most people do – they don't pay conscious attention to advertising. The mistake that they make is they think they're not influenced by advertising. In fact, people are extremely influenced when they most zoned out, and when they're watching or driving past a billboard in a trance. They may think they haven't seen it, but in actual fact they have.

SE A bedrock of assumptions of specialists is that people are incapable of thinking. It's harder to persuade them while they're thinking, so let's not speak to them while they're thinking.

RP The bulk of today's advertising doesn't make explicit assertions about things that are true or false, in fact truth is often irrelevant. It just creates an image or aura – a portrayal or lifestyle or contentment around the product. The best example of that might be the Marlboro campaign which builds this whole mythology of independence, autonomy and self reliance using the mythology of the cowboy and says

absolutely nothing about the cigarette. It makes no true or false claim about the quality of the cigarette or the health consequences of the cigarette.

SE Precisely at this moment, when the concept of human nature is moving from a rational to an irrational assumption about people, the paradigm of journalism as a tool of communication is giving way to the paradigm of advertising as the way to communicate to people. Another shift here is the word gives way to the image.

RP We don't process images the same way we process words. If I say something to you, in order for you to file it in your memory, you match it up with what you already know and you determine whether it is true or not – you engage in a kind of counter-argument or cognitive processing. But seeing is believing. The picture is an experience. It's not treated or processed in the same way. We still have this cultural pre-disposition to believe what we see. The photo does not lie. The words might lie but the photo is a truthful representation.

SE There is an increased assumption that if you really want to move people, don't use words, use images. Symbols and images have a force of persuasion which is undeniable.

SJ Symbolism is absolutely key to how human beings live. That search for meaning – that's what human beings essentially are. The way to look at advertising is that this is the process into which advertising now comes. So advertising is not creating this process – it's just using a deeply human process of needing symbolic meaning. The advertisers understand this process much better than the critics do. They understand what motivates people, they understand what consumers are all about. That's what they're experts about. That's what they spend billions of dollars on research and a whole century of experience as to how to appeal to consumers. They know the power of symbolism and they know they're just manipulating it. It's a human capacity that they can use for their own ends.

SE If you're a leader who wants people to follow, then you need to discover those symbols that make people react.

SJ Symbolism is always tied up with power (social and cultural power)

SE Symbols are these things which have an enormous amount of impact, but have been separated from ideas, they don't encourage thought.

SJ You always have to look at who decides the symbolism, who is in control of that process.

SE If you can grab people by their emotions/feelings you can get them to follow. That's one of the reasons why I think the relationship between Pavlovian psychology and twentieth century America is something that needs much more exploration. Because there's a lot of talk about the influence of Freudian psycho – analysis but what has been often left out of the analysis is that the ultimate psychology that runs through our society is Pavlovian. Just as Pavlov's dogs were trained to salivate at the ringing of a bell and then they would be fed, and then after a while all you had to do was ring a bell and they thought food and they salivated, that's the way in which communication strategies operate in the States from the 20's on – you start creating stimuli which are designed to make people salivate.

JK One of the worst things that advertising does is that it turns people into objects. Women's bodies become things – they become objects. We're so used to this that it's invisible to us, and yet it has very serious consequences. For instance, the first step toward justifying violence toward women is to think of them as objects – as less than human. These images affect us. Inevitably we value humans less if we're surrounded by objectified representations of them.

SJ The messages about commodities now permeates all of our spaces. Advertising is the dream life of the culture. It reflects what people really want. Cause when you ask people what they really want, people don't usually respond by saying a BMW or a big house, they respond by saying "I want a good social life; I want a good family life; I want a good romantic life; I want to have leisure time that I'm in control of; I want a work life I'm in control of; I want individual autonomy." Unfortunately products can't give those things.

They're not material answers, they're social answers. The marketplace in some sense cannot provide what people say they really want.

JK The advertising world is constantly promising fulfillment and things that would give us that. But it can't possibly deliver.

SJ Advertisers are very smart. They know that they can't give us what we want but they take that image of what we want and link it up with their products. It's not about manipulation, it's not about forced consciousness. It's about getting into the dream life of people.

SE Advertising is all about injecting value into objects whose utility isn't quite enough to get people to buy them.

BM When we do go out and buy a product, this has had such a powerful seepage into our collective unconsciousness that we're not just buying a product anymore. We're purchasing entrance into this magical world.

SJ It's a very strange world when you look at it. Using the right product will instantly transform you. Advertising reflects a kind of supernatural world. What's the basis of that? After all, people aren't totally stupid. They know it's not really going to do that. But there must be an element that buying the right thing will in some sense make their world better. And the basis of that is a belief in technology – that if we can create so many things in so many ways that these objects are in some sense so powerful that they will somehow magically transform our lives. So we have the melding of the supernatural beliefs and technological beliefs – beliefs in science, beliefs in advancement way beyond anything technology and science can deliver. So we believe in technology and science but at the same time we have this belief in the magical properties of goods. They come together in advertising.

Consuming culture

SE Today the realm of commercialism is something that has no borders.

SJ Advertising is the most powerful socializing force in our society. It's there in all the social spaces that we live in – in every part of our culture and more and more of our cultural space is taken over by the discourse of advertisers. Its sheer presence in terms of speaking to us everywhere means that it has to have a presence.

SE Whenever and wherever someone is awake and looking somewhere, that space is a potential medium to sell things.

Integrated communication

RP A TV ad you see is not just a promotional event or PR – its all of those things pulled together – now we talk about an integrated communication.

SE There is this frantic attempt to reach people in ways that are not going to be overwhelmed by other people's messages.

RP The target audience should receive similar messages from a multiplicity of sources.

SJ The power of advertising comes from the monopoly of the cultural space within which we think about ourselves, in which we figure out who we are and how the society operates. That's ultimate power, because all the alternative visions are blocked from that.

RP One of the interesting aspects of this concept of integrated communications is that its very faithful to the propaganda propagated by Goebels

SJ There are huge amounts of money and creativity expended on advertising. These are not just incidental messages. They are designed to communicate to us in a deep way. When you put together all those factors – intense messages with a lot of creativity, and a monopoly of the cultural spaces in which we live, you have a cultural power of the very first order.

Premeditated waste

SE Advertising cloaks power and human destruction behind beautiful faces and aesthetic experiences and as a result the very things that may endanger human society are often portrayed as intense sensual experiences. There's a whole industry in fact, which is involved in translating the process of consumption into an erotic spectacle.

RP One of the most telling consequences of advertising is the ecological and environmental consequences.

SE Part of what advertising does – in other words, what the messages are embedded in advertising as a whole, is the very principle of consumption. In other words, making beautiful and desirable the using up of resources.

SE Consumer culture is predicated on premeditated waste. The health of a consumer economy is intimately connected to the sickness of the environmental structure.

RP There are as many cars in America as there are people. A shocking statistic.

American excess

SE We live in a culture where where things come from and where they go is to a large extent invisible to people. To a large extent, the process of consumption is represented to us, again and again, as something to desire, as something beautiful and sexy, that will bring you success.

BM In that sense, the number one enemy against ecological awareness is advertising and consumerism.

RP As long as we have an institution whose professional purpose is to promote consumption, we're never likely to engage in the kind of reduction of consumption that is probably necessary in order to come to grips with our ecological fate.

SJ One of the most powerful things you can do with advertising is to de-contextualise it. When you take it out of the context of media and put it in another context you suddenly realise how strange these things are.

SE A way of life predicated on a great deal of consumption is intimately related to a way of life which is defined by scarcity in other parts of the world.

SJ Not everyone can have access to this incredibly attractive world that advertising displays.

SE In order for some parts of the world to be endless parking lots it's essential for other parts of the world to be essentially suppliers of raw materials.

SJ The Gulf War happened because, to use George Bush's words, "Our national interests depend on a stable and secure Gulf. We're also talking about maintaining access to oil resources. Why? Because our freedom and the freedom of other countries who value freedom would suffer if control of the world's oil reserves were concentrated in the hands of that one man, Saddam Hussein." What he meant by that was 'we need the oil'. Not everyone lives the way we do. We have to conduct this war to protect our way of life. We need the resources of the world to continue the lifestyle we have.

The more powerful these images are, the more powerfully people identify with the consumer way of life, the more they will be prepared to put up with actions like the Gulf War. The more they will be able to divorce themselves from the Third World, and those people who simply appear as competitors for these scarce resources. It's the only way you can explain why people were able to put up with the massacres of the Gulf War. People weren't outraged. They didn't see them as real human beings.

Media and democracy

SJ Americans have a very strange notion of freedom. They seem to think that if you're free from government then you're free. This overlooks the fact that there can be other opponents of freedom – like corporations who have immense power within our cultural space and that censor other voices. I think we

have to think not only what the government shouldn't do but what any other large-scale organizations should not be allowed to do, which is monopolise the means of communication, the means of cultural production – which is what corporations do at the present time.

SE Democracy is about an engaged public interacting with one another – a situation where all voices are heard and respected. And the only way that can happen is if the means of communication are stopped being held by 5 transnational corporations and start becoming something which is the common property of people, which is a birthright. But you can bet your ...that those ideas and ways of seeing things that don't fit a corporatised view of life don't make it through the gate.

RJ We can't have a democracy unless we protect information, access to information and the distribution of it.

Alternative voices

The answer is not more censorship. It's more access for free speech. We have to start challenging the monopoly.

SE We need to become visionaries. When we do we'll discover that commercial culture is not about satisfaction. It's about dissatisfaction. Satisfaction is not necessarily related to the disposing of resources.

BM I don't think the point is to smash the advertising system. I think it's to disengage from the advertising system. Get the advertising out of oneself. And to do that you have ask seriously, "Where does advertising end and myself begin? How much has it already affected me?"

SE At one point the values of consumerism were not ones that were internalized by all people. But now commercial culture and consumer society appear to be the only option there is. They appear to be reality.

SJ The problem is, from the viewpoint of advertisers, there is no problem with it. For society it is a problem that it is in the interest of a few people in society (the advertisers) who dominate the vistas and landscapes of how we think about ourselves and how we think about desire.

SE It's not a question of viewing this austerity and denial, but really questioning whether sustenance and fun can only be the outcome of a commercial transaction.

September 12, 2006 | Filed Under [Resources](#)

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Comments

2 Responses to "The ad and the ego"

1. brent on May 28th, 2010 7:34 am

Thanks for this!

Also:

Study Guide for "The Ad and the Ego":

http://robwilliamsmedia.com/downloads/robwilliams_adego.pdf

BJ

2. M. E. Kenney on November 9th, 2010 4:56 pm

Thanks so much for this. I love using this documentary with my students, and this will help me do a better job! –liz

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