

Summary of "The ad and the ego"



Pilgrim's summary of the video (a bit older but still on target) featuring Jean Kilbourne, Stuart Ewen, Sut Jhally, Bernard McGrane, Richard Pollay and Herb Chao Gunther and others

"A democratic civilization will save itself only if it makes the language of the image into a stimulus for cultural reflection, not an invitation for hypnosis." -- Umberto Eco

The video uses scholars who have studied advertising in America and how it has changed, especially since the late 19th Century. Among the assertions are that many Americans believe they are personally exempt from the influence of ads. However, they are pervasive (we see over 1,500 per day).[Actually, now it is about double that number]

They shape understanding and have a central organizing principle of creating profit. Ads mold our ideas and our ideals, our likes and dislikes. In effect, advertising is a system of education.

Functions of advertising:

In the beginning ads told of the existence of goods and services -- they gave information about products (and assumed people at whom they were aimed were rational beings capable of weighing the advantages).

By the 1920s advertisers were talking less of the products and more of the emotional and social lives of the prospective consumers. They began to create demand in a society where production had outstripped demand.

Soon ads became more -- a tool of socialization.

[This ties to Pilgrim's lecture material on the 3 historical functions of advertising.]

McGrane says that by the 1950s America had become a material utopia. A main function of ads became the production of discontent in people.

The subtext became you're not ok. Ads generated anxieties and doubts and offered solutions in the form of consumer goods.

According to Kilbourne, these messages do an enormous amount of harm.

McGrane said they served as the opposite of therapy and generated an inner sense of conflict. Ewen asserts we are continually competing with those around us to be noticed, admired, successful.

Ads grasp attention and promote the self and think we must be like that, be creative, be colorful, etc. We begin to think of ourselves as a product to be sold (as in a job market). Children spend more time with ads than with school and for women the emphasis is on physical perfection.

Kilbourne asserts that never before was there mass technology to thrust the imagery of perfection, which is impossible to achieve, into our lives thousands of times a day -- and the only point is to sell products -- because we can't achieve the look.

Jhally says that our worship of science and technology have contributed to this problem.

Ewen said **in WWI, PROPAGANDA trades were used to sell the war, and the war became a laboratory of HOW TO PERSUADE -- how to MOVE MASSES.**

It became the assumption that the way people are persuaded is to appeal to them on unconscious levels. The bedrock of assumptions changed from assuming that people are rational to assuming that they are irrational and not thinking -- to use irrational appeals.

Kilbourne says most people don't pay conscious attention but think they are not influenced when they are - which is wrong.

Ewen says the approach became let's not speak to them while they're talking. Pollay says the bulk of ads don't make explicit claims of truth or falsity but instead create an image and link the product to it. In effect, Ewen says, **ads moved from assuming people are rationalism -- and began appealing to them in ways that people are not conscious of.**

In a way, journalism as tool of communication gave way to the paradigm of advertising as a primary tool of communication. At the same time THE WORD GAVE WAY TO THE IMAGE AS A WAY OF PERSUADING PEOPLE. From the 1920s on, it became the dominant assumption THAT IF YOU WANT TO PERSUADE PEOPLE -- to vote a certain way or buy a product -- YOU DO IT BY USING IMAGES.

Pollay says we don't process images like we do words and still have a predisposition to believe what we see. Ewen adds that there has come an increased assumption that to move people, we must use images, not words. Symbols and images are forces of persuasion that are undeniable.

Pollay says that symbolism is the key to how we live for we always search for meaning.

Jhally says ads don't create the process but instead use the deeply human process of needing symbolic meaning. Advertisers know this and spend billions on **SYMBOLISM. The use of images is always tied up with SOCIAL & CULTURAL POWER.-- AND SAYS WE NEED TO ASK WHO IS IN CONTROL OF THIS CULTURAL PROCESS -- WHO DECIDES ON THE SYMBOLS USED.**

Ewen argues that if you can grasp people by feelings or emotions, you will get them to follow.

He argues that the ultimate psychology is PAVLOVIAN -- ads now use communication strategies that create stimuli which make people respond in a manner similar to how Pavlov's dog's were trained to salivate at the mere ringing of a bell -- and this connection needs more study.

Kilbourne says ads also turn people into objects (and make viewers salivate at them) with serious consequences. The images affect us in that **WE VALUE PEOPLE LESS IF THEY ARE SEEN AS OBJECTS --** she also argues that the effects of ads are cumulative and affect people slowly over time (Cultivation Theory is implied).

Jhally says the message of ads permeate all our social spaces and talk about these things in relation to other things. People really want good social lives, good family life, good relationships, etc. and advertisers know this and take images linked to these wants and link them to products, thus getting into the dream lives of people.

Ewen says it's about injecting values. Jhally says in ads, the right products transform us instantly and reflect a supernatural world. A sort of **DOUBLE THINK** emerges. People believe them at some level.

Because advertising is all around us and because it fits together with public relations messages and entertainment messages, it has become the most powerful socializing force in history, Jhally asserts.

Symbols are tied to social and cultural power, and, thus, symbols and images have a force of persuasion that is undeniable.

Advertisers now prefer an INTEGRATED COMMUNICATIONS MIX, which means having similar images from a multiplicity of sources, Pollay says. This integrated approach is used to sell policy, as well as goods or services. **Integrated Communications Mix** was used by the Nazis to create powerful messages coming from several sources -- and it the potential to result in a cultural power of the first order. [Ideally, the message would come from ads in various media -- and in news stories (provided by PR people) in various media.]

Jhally asserts that ultimate power is being able to manipulate the cultural space in which we think about ourselves.

Ewen says that the power over culture results in media ignoring processes that endanger the truth about human culture and, in effect, transforms consciousness.

The IMPORTANT UNSPOKEN MESSAGE OF ADVERTISING embedded is one of making beautiful the using up of resources, thus making consumption beautiful.

CONSUMER CULTURE IS THUS PREDICATED ON PREMEDITATED WASTE. The very health of the economy is connected to the siphoning off of resources

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Gunther uses the China example and how the dream of having 1.2 billion more people with cars will destroy the planet. Ewen says in our culture where things come from and go to is invisible, consumption is represented as desirable, sexy and bringing success.

Pollay adds that when an industry's number one purpose is to promote consumption and never links it to fact that reduction is necessary to change our ecological future, finding the proper path to travel is more difficult.

Ewen says a way of life predicated on capitalism is related to ways of life related to scarcity in other parts of the world.

The Gulf War and its purpose of giving the consumer nations more resources is used as support for this argument.

Jhally says the more powerful the images are, the more people will accept actions of imperialism. Kilbourne asserted this acceptance can be seen during the first Gulf War when the many civilian killed were called "collateral damage" by the military, and Americans were not bothered.

Guther says the American communications system is highly advanced, yet we get ads and commercial buying and selling projected into our consciousness.

Jhally asserts that there are other opponents of freedom to worry about, not just government -- opponents such as corporations. Corporations have power -- and should NOT be able to dictate communications. People should be able to think about what corporations should and should not be able to do. People need to be taught this.

ADVICE FROM THE EXPERTS:

Ewen says,

1. DEMOCRACY IS ABOUT AN ENGAGED PUBLIC AND THE ONLY WAY THAT CAN HAPPEN IS THAT THE MEANS OF COMMUNICATION MUST STOP BEING CONTROLLED BY A FEW CORPORATIONS AND A FEW PEOPLE

Kilbourne says,

2. WE NEED ACCESS TO INFORMATION -- AND NEED TO CIRCUMVENT THE MAINSTREAM MASS MEDIA. THE ANSWER IS MORE FREE SPEECH FROM MORE AVENUES OF EXPRESSION NOT DEPENDENT ON ADVERTISING.

Jhally says:

3. People must GET NEW VOICES OUT THERE AND CHALLENGE THE MONOPOLY. THEY NEED TO ATTACK IT ON AS MANY LEVELS AS POSSIBLE.

Ewen says:

4. PEOPLE NEED TO BE VISIONARIES AND ONLY WHEN ALTERNATIVE MEDIA BECOME AN AVENUE WHERE THAT VISION IS GIVEN BREATHING ROOM CAN PEOPLE DISCOVER THAT COMMERCIAL CULTURE NOT SATISFYING, BUT DISSATISFYING INSTEAD.

McGrane says,

5. WE MUST DISENGAGE FROM THE ADVERTISING -- TAKE IT OUT OF OURSELVES and to begin to achieve that, WE MUST ASK WHERE DOES ADVERTISING END AND OURSELVES BEGIN.

SOLUTIONS:

- 1. alternative sources of information and more of it -- not censorship**
- 2. challenge the monopoly (through organizations & collective action)**
- 3. disengaging from advertisements in our personal lives**

Also:

Ewen says,

People must remember that at one point values of consumerism and commercialism were NOT internalized by Americans. Now they appear to be reality.

Jhally says,

We must remember corporate ads dominate the landscape of how we think about ourselves.

Ewen says, We need to question whether our happiness can be controlled only by a commercial transaction.

Kilbourne says,

We need to remember that what makes a difference in our lives is the quality of our relationships.

Jhally says,

Ads use our dreams, desires, and emotions to sell us what we don't really want -- as if they can make us happy.

They CANNOT.

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