



TRUE CONFESSIONS: SUBLIMINAL STRATEGIES IN TEACHING ADVERTISING
AND SURPLUS VALUE TO THE NEW CONSERVATIVES

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If the function of theory is to truly inform practice then for teachers of critical studies, the most important concept to consider in devising a pedagogical strategy must be that of 'hegemony'. Before students enter universities they have already had a lifelong course, taught by the school system, the legal system and the media system (to name only a few), in the legitimation of the social order and modern society. In general terms, contemporary students are much more conservative than their predecessors of the 1960's and 1970's, and reflect the triumph of right-wing politics as represented in the elections of Brian Mulroney, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. This conservatism is strongest in the United States. The student audience is not an empty vessel waiting to be 'given the word' but is a generation that sees its interests tied up with the development of the capitalist economy. Such a recognition, I believe, is fundamental to devising appropriate pedagogical strategies that can break through this conservative veil and put critical issues at the heart of the agenda of student life.

This article is a description of the practical strategies that I have developed towards this goal. As such the discussion will be contextually concrete and pragmatic and I leave the important theoretical questions to be addressed by others in this volume. My particular focus is teaching the subject of advertising in modern society and also using advertising as a tool with which to illustrate wider critical concepts such as surplus value. I cannot claim that my attempts have been successful because my teaching experience is limited (two years) and I have yet to encounter the same student in later courses. The proof will be in the eating and I have not yet reached the dessert menu. My comments are based on teaching introductory courses to first and second year students only. Advanced undergraduate and graduate teaching would probably require alternate strategies.

My general strategy is based on a very simple perceptual point -- the mention of the name 'Marx' or 'Marxist', or the description 'communist' or 'socialist', is enough to ensure that however reasonable and logical the arguments advanced may be, students in the North American context have already dismissed them as extreme. They tend to label

the speaker as an opponent, and are, pedagogically speaking, already 'tuning out.' This should not be surprising given the definition generally advanced of these terms. I attempt therefore to evoke a critical way of thinking without recourse to the traditional body of critical literature. Instead, I hope to use the prejudices and experiences that students already hold as a base on which to construct a critical way of thinking about modern society.

THE SOCIAL ROLE OF ADVERTISING

The subject of advertising normally draws a couple of contradictory reactions from students. On the one hand is a feeling that advertising is a very persuasive part of modern life which makes people buy things they don't need, which treats consumers as fools, and which is irritating on the senses. On the other hand is a feeling that advertising is not very important because most people are sure that it doesn't effect or influence them. They know they can see through the claims of advertising although other, less educated people, might succumb to it. The sheer pervasiveness of advertising in modern society assures that students come to the subject already with some strong assumptions. The task then is to both break these assumptions and to use them as material with which to build a new understanding. I begin the course with some basic history to account for the rise of the institution of advertising and at the same time ensure that Stewart Ewen's excellent Marxist account of the origins of national advertising, *Captains of Consciousness* is being read. Ewen's book has the benefit of being written in an extremely polemical and radical style while also being fairly easy for undergraduates to read. Moreover, nowhere does Ewen identify it as a Marxist account which gets over the perceptual problem outlined above, and relies in large part on quotes from arch-capitalists such as Edward Filene to illustrate points.

From this I move on to examine the different views that have been taken on the social role of the institution of advertising. One strategy at this point is to lay out the ideological position of the defenders of the system and then to discredit that argument. While this may work intellectually, given the existing prejudices against critical thought the practical result would be that students stop taking the instructor seriously as he or she is an obvious opponent to the established system. The pedagogical problem at this stage is how to get to keep listening throughout the semester without sidelining the instructor as 'the enemy.' To overcome this problem I present a 'straw man' critique of advertising that could in turn be demolished by a very strong defence of the system. The result is that after about four weeks, it is the defenders of the advertising system that provide the framework around which the discussion of issues takes place. The aim is to provide a strong position with which conservative students can identify and which will ensure that the ideological bias of the instructor will not interfere at this early stage. Students are thus drawn into discussion of the issues on terms they find comfortable. I consider the central problem for critical teachers not to be in formu-

lating superior intellectual arguments but in assuring that they are seen as teaching students rather than indoctrinating them.

The 'straw man' critique is easy to establish since the critical discussion of advertising is woefully inadequate. It is based on the assumption that the fundamental reason for the existence of advertising is the need for the advanced capitalist economy to create demand. Demand creation is achieved by technological manipulation and the creation of or appeal to false needs. The attachment of symbols to commodities and the use of magical ways of thinking is focused on as the central problem for Marxist thinkers. Advertising is seen to play a central role in a system where all needs are satisfied through commodities, where consumption is posed as an alternative to dissatisfaction with production, and where commodities replace direct satisfaction with artificial means leading to dissatisfaction and unhappiness for the population.

It is in response to this this critique that the defence of the system is then developed. The argument reiterates the marketing view of society in which producers of good are seen to respond to the needs of consumers, and which stresses consumers as rational rather than bewildered and confused by the modern marketplace. Moreover, evidence is presented that shows that advertisers do not know how to manipulate people and that the effects of advertising are very difficult to establish empirically in terms of market movements. The keystone of this position is that advertising is a form of market information that consumers desire to make rational purchasing decisions. This line of argumentation is extended into the discussion of not merely informational advertising but also persuasive advertising by showing that there is nothing wrong with persuasion in a market setting where other sources of product information are also available. Finally, in response to the claims of critics that advertising gives false meaning to good by tying in false symbolism with the use of a product the defence draws evidence from anthropology to show how goods have always been used for symbolic and cultural functions in any human society that has so far existed. Advertising is merely the modern way to give meaning to good and as long as it does not openly deceive or lie to consumers, it is performing a beneficial social function.

This strategy has a number of benefits. First, it disposes fairly well with the critical view of advertising as manipulative and all-powerful, a view which I believe hinders our proper critical understanding of its real social role. Second, it opens up the analysis to historical and cross-cultural issues and question. Third, it shows that the influence of advertising cannot be discussed in specifics as effecting the sales of certain products but must be discussed in a general way. The defence then opens up debate about the role of advertising in the economy and in culture without giving adequate answers to it. In attempting to answer the critics, the ideologues of capitalism open the way to both historical and cross-cultural analysis -- the very foundation of the critical method. Having set up a strong position

with which students can identify (many of my students have been business and management students), the task of the remainder of the course is to establish the cornerstones of a truly critical analysis by questioning one by one the fundamental assumptions of the defence, on terms it has itself established.

The last stage of the argument for the defence of capitalist advertising goes to anthropology for support of the symbolic function of advertising. But this is a superficial excursion. Following the defence I too go to anthropology for evidence of how symbolic and cultural uses of goods are always situated within specific contexts of power and domination. The anthropological material is full of examples where goods are used as markers between different social groups, as boundary points for the operation of power. It is particularly easy to show how control of symbolic functions connected to goods is connected to systems of slavery and patriarchy, and as working for the benefit of groups who already control economic power. We thus look at all evidence, especially that concerning the **effects** of the symbolic properties of goods. This analysis is then extended into the study of modern society where the use of goods as markers of social power is highlighted. The defence position has abdicated any discussion of the **effects** of advertising, which a critical view now takes up. The anthropological excursion then can be turned into a powerful critical device linking symbolism and advertising with control of social power.

Thus we begin to establish a position that states that while advertising cannot make us buy things we do not need -- the manipulation argument, it operates as a powerful force in other ways -- that its influence is general and societal rather than specific. Advertising can also be used as a focus point for the analysis of the process of **satisfaction** in modern society. While the critique believes that capitalist production and consumption leads to dissatisfaction the defenders of the system believe that the continued purchase of goods in the marketplace is a sign that people are happy (in a subjective sense) with modern living. Of course neither position is correct and at this point one can again draw on the assumption of the students. The class is asked whether they think that, on average, their generation is "happier," "as happy," or "less happy" than people were twenty or thirty years ago. The normal response is that students think that we are as happy or less happy. On the questions of subjective happiness there is a good deal of cynicism about what modern life can deliver. These gut reactions are given support by looking at the happiness surveys that confirm students' feelings. The question is then posed as to what the role of advertising is in explaining this "paradox of affluence" -- the leveling off of happiness despite substantial increases in real wealth.

All of the above is in a sense setting the stage for examining a number of books that are the most sophisticated attempt thus far to understand satisfaction. The works of Tibor Scitovsky, *The Joyless Economy*, Fred Hirsch *Social Limits to Growth*, and William Leiss, *Limits*

of Satisfaction, are treated in depth to show the poverty of traditional economic theory to deal with the symbolic and subjective aspects of the modern market setting. Within this attempt I focus on the role that advertising plays in producing what Leiss calls "the ensemble of satisfaction and dissatisfaction." Fred Hirsch explains the "paradox of affluence" in part by the role of advertising in raising expectations among the general population that cannot be met. This leads to frustration. He also criticizes advertising's focus on individual needs rather than the social setting in which needs are played out. Hirsch then attacks advertising for providing the wrong context for the satisfaction of needs. Leiss locates advertising's role as being part of the process whereby the satisfaction of needs becomes 'ambiguous' rather than clear cut.

By this stage I would hope that both the the crude critique and the stronger defence positions (the ideological analyses) have been undermined, and the strength of a critical sociological position on the role of advertising in the study of power and satisfaction has been enhanced. Also important is the switch in focus from specific to general influence.

The remainder of the course continues this analysis of advertising's broader social role. An important subject here is the issue of gender representation in advertising. The bulk of the empirical work has been concentrated here so there is no shortage of material to use. The most advanced and insightful study of gender and media has come from Erving Goffman, **Gender Advertisements**, and I find his comparison of gender relations in ads as similar to child/parent relations a useful way to break free from the confining the ultimately fruitless discussion of occupational roles, and whether advertising provides a true or false picture of reality. Goffman's suggestion that the most negative thing we can say of ads is not that they are false, but that as 'pictures of reality' they do not seem strange to us, is an extremely useful point around which to look at gender in advertisements. Goffman's injunction for us to switch the bodily positions of males and females in ads is especially effective in showing how stereotyping works and how women are treated as children in ads. At this point I also draw a connection between advertising and pornography regarding the depiction of female sexuality.

Two other general areas are addressed at this point. The question of advertising to children is useful for highlighting some of the crude negative effects of advertising. Almost everyone agrees that the child audience is a special case. Manipulation, the creation of demand, false and unhealthy needs, and creating parent/child conflict are useful ways to discuss this area. The influence of advertising as spreading to wider areas than just the promotion of commodities is addressed through looking at the issues of advocacy advertising (selling company image and the goodness of profits) and political advertising. Again the focus is on the general impact of advertising on these broader areas of life.

Although methodological issues are also raised (semiology and content analysis) they are not central to the political project, and there is not enough space here to discuss them fully. Briefly, the methodological discussion is used to try and get students to think critically about the cultural context of ads and what exactly **products** do. I use the concept of 'fetishism' (derived from psychoanalysis and anthropology) to highlight the person/product relation in advertising.

As a kind of final rejoinder to the defence of advertising position I address the concept of 'information' as a way to come to the broadest (and most critical) appreciation of the social role that advertising plays. The information paradigm has normally only been **taken to refer to the objective and performance features of a product** -- how well it fulfills its use-value. I point out that this misses one very important type of information about a product -- how it was produced. The anthropological literature is full of examples that show how in non-market societies, the exchange of goods was literally seen as an exchange of people because embedded in goods was the 'life-force' of its producer. In fact, **embedded in goods as part of their meaning**, as an information we need to make 'rational' purchasing decisions, are the social relations of their production. Information cannot be limited to object features but must include also the social relations contained within goods.

In the last lecture, I raise the evil spectre of Marx to drive home this point. Marx starts of **Capital** by stating that the problem of capitalist society is a problem of commodities. This is not an insignificant point. Marx spent many years searching for the correct starting point of his exposition and he finally settled on the commodity because embedded in commodities as part of their true meaning, their full information, are the social relations of their production -- if we can understand the commodity then we can unravel the complex social relations of capitalism. This however is not a straight forward task, for in capitalism the process of production is hidden. There is a disjuncture between the way things appear and their real meanings. The famous section on fetishism is an elaboration of this point, of how the social relations of capitalism serves to mask their own operation. For undergraduates I normally boil this down to a proposition that in selling labour-power to capitalists, workers lose control of their activities and the use to which they are put. Capitalist social relations then involve a systematic distortion concerning information about commodities. The information that is hidden is information about commodities. The information that is hidden is important for consumers to assess the meaning of products. The question is posed whether knowledge that a product was the result of slave labour or child labour in some third-world dictatorship would effect the meaning people give to a product. This whole discussion of the nature of capitalist production is posed in systematic terms as commodities being emptied of their meaning -- as the systematic disguise of the process of production. Advertising then is located as an institution that fills commodities with meaning -- a meaning that consumers demand given the absen-

ce of real meaning. It is because one of the defining features of the human species is the need for symbolism that the general power of advertising can be explained -- advertising as a system of meaning is important to people because it provides some meaning about commodities that would otherwise be meaningless. However, advertising fulfills this need falsely because it is based on systematic distorted communication about commodities. Advertising here is placed within the generalized system of commodity production and a generalized system of ideology.

The aim of the above strategy is to encourage critical thinking about the role of advertising in the consumer society. By setting the critique as being primarily concerned with manipulation, the crude and incorrect attack on the system is discredited and additional critical views need not be connected to this. The presentation of a strong legitimating argument is important for setting the terms of the discussion on which a comprehensive critical position can be built. Advertising and social power, advertising and satisfaction, advertising and socialization, advertising and children, advertising and politics, and advertising and ideology are dimensions along which the defence can be undermined one step at a time.

ADVERTISING AND SURPLUS-VALUE

The concept of surplus value is one of the most complex ideas to grasp in social theory and one of the most difficult things to teach to undergraduates. I have to admit that I was in graduate school before fully grasping it. Teaching it as an economic concept to do with the production of commodities involves also explaining concepts such as the difference between labour power and labour, the value of labour power, etc. I attempt to teach the theory of surplus value through advertising because not only do students see it as an activity that they can understand but also because one can avoid the use of complex economic concepts. I pose the general question, "How do the commercial television networks make a profit?" Identifying advertising revenues as the key source of income and expenditures on programming as the main cost, the exact relations are traced out.

The sale of advertising time is subjected to close analysis. I suggest that the vital factor in the process is the sale of the time of the audience -- because if the audience did not watch then the media would literally have nothing to sell. It is audience activity during the time of advertising that is the central explanatory factor. It is then suggested that we view the time of advertising as the sort of 'work day' and the audience as a 'work-force.' In order to ensure that audiences watch advertising time, the networks have to attract their attention through programming. The cost of getting audiences to 'work' during advertising time then is the cost of programming. This is the value of their 'watching-power' (labour-power). The media (the capitalist) pays to get the audience to watch (work). Programmes are the 'wages' of the audience. Once the audience is at work (watching adver-

tising the time of which is sold to the advertisers) then we have to show how they produce profits for the media -- the division has to be made between necessary and surplus value.

Advertising spots are sold for a specific price by media to advertisers. I suggest that the amount of advertising that the audience has to watch to ensure that the media get back the cost of programming is 'necessary watching-time.' During this time the audience watches for 'itself' and produces value to cover 'its wages.' The remainder of the advertising time is 'surplus watching-time.' During that time the audience watches for the media because that is where the revenue goes and is the source of profits for the media. While not everyone is a worker in a factory almost everyone is in the audience for commercial television and thus this 'exploitation' is a description of their activity and thus there is more identification with the process in which collective activity is privately appropriated. Some may think that this is a roundabout and obscure way to reach one's objective but note that this strategy does not rely on a belief in the labour theory of value and has no need to make reference to Marxian economics to explain its central tenets. It also gets over the tricky problem of why economics is being taught in a communication course. Finally I suggest, gently, that this description may also apply to the world of the production of commodities. I have used this strategy in an introduction to mass media course and if multiple-choice format is an indication, then the concept of surplus-value (viewing) was largely understood.

CONCLUSION

I have dealt with some of the major issues connected with the study of advertising. This is by no means a comprehensive account. I have omitted, due to space limitations, the discussion of the influence of advertising on the non-advertising content of commercial media, as well as the influence of advertising on cultural institutions such as sports and popular music.

Some readers may think that I have gone to extreme, and perhaps underhanded, methods to achieve my goals, that I would be more effective if I dealt with the issues head on rather than the more subliminal route that I have described. I could not argue from personal experience for my strategy except to say that in my observations through my academic career, the label of 'radical', especially in a U.S. context, does more to destroy the pedagogical process than anything else. I think most of us, in general, avoid listening to views with which we strongly disagree -- discussion gives way to polemics. I believe students look at professors in a similar manner. From my perspective, the longer I can be viewed as a 'neutral observer,' the greater the chances that students are actually listening. If what I have described is an exercise in futility I hope someone can convince me of it quickly because this kind of subliminal strategy requires a great deal of work. It is much easier to propagate ideology plain and simple.

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