Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture

Advertising's Impact on American Character and Society

Arthur Asa Berger
ADVERTISING IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

Advertising is really quite prattling. It is a $200 billion a year industry in the United States and employs a goodly number of the brightest and most creative people in American society and other societies as well (often at very high salaries, to boot). Curiously, people who work in the industry have difficulty proving that it works—especially in the long term.

ADVERTISING AS A PUZZLEMENT

One advertising executive told me that "half of the money people spend on advertising is wasted ... but we don’t know which half." Also, advertising agencies are forced to talk out of both sides of their mouths at the same time. They have to convince clients that advertising is really effective—in generating sales, holding onto or the customers a company already has, or attracting new customers. But when governmental agencies or consumer groups ask advertising agencies about what they do when it comes to advertising products such as cigarettes and alcohol, for instance, the advertising agencies argue that they have very little impact on people.

The situation seems to be that although nobody in the business world is certain how advertising works, there is a consensus that it is necessary and that campaigns are worth the enormous amount of money they often cost. Thus, for example, commercials broadcast during the 1998 Super Bowl cost approximately $1.3 million for thirty seconds, and the cost of commercials during the 2000 Super Bowl was around $2 million for a thirty-second spot.

We must always keep in mind the difference between the cost of making a television commercial and the cost of purchasing airtime to show a commercial. It might cost $500,000 to make a thirty-second commercial (figure 1.1) but purchasing the airtime might run into the millions of dollars. Naturally, advertisers want to run effective commercials, so it's...
Insights from Advertising Agencies

The psychological profile of people in advertising is that they love the drama involved in working in agencies and the excitement generated by making ads and commercials. Also, planning is about demonstrating that it's not just about logic. It's not a linear process. In the United States, businesspeople are rewarded for being extremely logical and having statistics to back themselves up. This produces dreadful advertising that often fails to make any impact. Advertising agencies are refugia for people who don’t think only in a linear fashion and who recognize that other people—consumers of advertising—don’t think that way, either.

worth spending a bit more money for a commercial that will work. Of course, advertisers and advertising agencies never know which commercials will be effective and why they are effective. Though there is often an enormous amount of data about target audiences "behind" a given commercial, all the data in the world doesn’t mean anything when it comes to making a commercial that is effective.

The Cost of a Typical Commercial

These figures represent a breakdown on the cost of a 30-second "Got Milk" commercial. They were supplied by a former student of mine who works at the advertising agency that created the commercial. A typical thirty-second spot costs between $300,000 and $400,000; this spot cost $362,000.

$81,000 Television Production
$45,000 Television Postproduction (editing)
$6,000 Music (usually much higher)
$1,000 Sound Effects Search/Narration
$11,000 Talent Fees (3 principal actors, 5 extras, including voice-over)
$1,000 Tapes and Dubs
$1,000 Legal Clearances (often much higher)
$1,000 Shipping
$16,000 Agency Travel, Casting, Callbacks, Pre-Pro Edit
$362,000 Total

If we believe what advertising agencies (and the companies they make advertisements and commercials for) tell us, we have to conclude that advertising works in strange and mysterious ways and that although nobody is sure precisely how it works, it does have an impact—though its power to shape any given individual’s behavior is (or seems to be) really quite minimal.

We each like to think we (perhaps "uniquely") can resist advertising and it has no impact on us. This notion, which I will discuss in more detail in chapter 3, makes light of the power of advertising and helps us preserve our sense of autonomy and individuality. Others are brainwashed by ads and commercialism, but not us, we think—as we find ourselves purchasing products we feel, somehow, we must have. Thus, we play into the hands of advertisers who use our illusion that we are not affected by advertising against us. As the president of a large advertising agency told me, "Evenious advertising works!"

We cannot show that a given commercial or campaign makes a given individual buy a product or service being advertised—or is the primary force in shaping that person’s behavior—but we can see that advertising has a collective impact: that is, it affects people in general. Corporations don’t spend hundreds of billions of dollars a year because they are Good Samaritans who want to make sure that radio stations and television networks are very profitable. And politicians, who spend millions of dollars on their election campaigns, aren’t Good Samaritans either.

I believe that advertising is a very powerful force, one that plays a major role in the economy (it has replaced Puritanism in motivating people to work hard so that they can earn money and be able to buy things) and, increasingly in recent years, the political sphere. Advertising has the power, I believe, to influence and, in some cases, shape people’s behavior, broadly speaking.
For example, in the 1994 campaign by forces against the Clinton health-care plan, the "Harry and Louise" commercials are credited with eroding support for the plan by approximately twenty percentage points. In these commercials, Harry and Louise criticized the Clinton plan for making major changes in the medical system and lamented the way big government would be telling them who their doctor had to be and would be depriving them of their freedom to make decisions about medical matters. I'm not suggesting that campaigns always work or that they always work the way advertisers and advertising agencies imagine they will. But if we take a broad look at human behavior in the long run, it seems quite obvious that advertising exists and has been flourishing because, somehow, it works—that is, it works a good deal of the time the way those paying for the advertising want it to work.

DEFINING ADVERTISING

This is the way the advertising industry works, most of the time:

1. Advertising agencies purchase space for print advertisements in newspapers, magazines, or other kinds of publications, or time to broadcast commercials, made for companies selling products or services. Some organizations and corporations do their own advertising, but this is not usually the case. There are other ways of advertising, such as putting ads on billboards, in bus shelters, on buses and taxicabs (figure 1.2), using the Internet, sponsoring events, and placing products in film and television shows.

2. These commercials or print advertisements are generally designed to attract the attention of people with suitable demographics and the proper psychographics—values and lifestyles—for some product or service. Advertising agencies tend to concentrate on people, roughly speaking, from 16 to 49—assuming they are the ones who buy most of the products and services advertised. Certain products are aimed at children and others at older people, but most advertising is aimed at the 18 to 49 cohort, give or take a few years on either end.

3. Advertising tries to attract the attention, create the desire for, and stimulate action that leads to the purchase of products and services advertised on the part of those reading print advertisements, listening to radio commercials, or watching and listening to television commercials. That is, advertisers hope to convince, to persuade, to motivate, and most importantly, to get people to act, to do something. This something generally involves moving from the desire for products and services to the actual purchase of the products or services.

There are, as I pointed out earlier, a number of different forms and genres of advertising. Advertising pervades the American media and our lives—from the billboards on our highways to the print ads in the publications we read, the commercials on radio and television, and the designer logos on T-shirts and other kinds of clothes we wear. Advertising is also used by charities, labor unions, and organizations of all kinds to get their messages to the public. In consumer cultures, it seems fair to say that just about everyone is advertising, which creates a major problem—clutter. There are so many messages being sent to us that sometimes, as the result of information overload, we get them all mixed up.

The box that follows (figure 1.3), which I wrote in 1978, deals with many of the issues about advertising that have occupied my attention, as you can see, for a number of years. It shows the problems one faces in trying to live according to the dictates of competing advertising campaigns.

This book focuses on print advertisements and television commercials and the role they may play in stimulating the consumption of products and services by people. Traditionally we call sales messages in print
"Don't Go Away, We'll Be Back with More Ads"
(The Chronicle Review, November, 13, 1978)

As I sit at my typewriter, considering the commercials on television this fall season, I find myself perplexed by an overwhelming urge to make a long-distance phone call and join the Navy. Who can resist a bargain like being able to call anywhere in the United States and talk with "loved ones" for only 85 cents for five minutes (as long as you place the call at the right time—don't be late, it's half of the morning)? And who doesn't want a life of "adventure and excitement" instead of just a job? I had always thought that sailors spent most of their time with maps and buckets, but that must have been the old Navy. The new one seems as technologically advanced as "Battlestar Galactica." And "Homeward Bound," the new Navy's new commercial, scripted to the tune of the old Smokey and the Bandit song, is one of the more interesting and attractive advertisements on national television. But commercial plays very cleverly on our romantic attitudes about the sea and our fascination with futuristic technology.

While "Ma Bell's" appeal to our homing instinct is equally clever and imaginative, the campaign is cloaking in its not-so-subtle attempts to make us feel guilty for failing to "keep in touch" often (monthly, weekly, daily, perhaps?) with all of our relatives and each of our old college pals.

Of course, such efforts to make us, the viewers, feel guilty for not using a given service or buying a certain product are nothing new to the world of the TV commercial. Because of their televised pitches, I know that "sooner or later" I will own General's, that my next television set probably will be a Zenith System 3, and that I simply must get my hands on a Toyota. For a man and a lady—fit hundreds and hundreds of broadcast-advertising images, implying upon one another in a cluttered mosaic of mediated desire: of beautiful young women blazoning with sexual passion generated by Old Spice, of gorgeous damselflies sensuously smooching baby oil over their childlike skins, of nondescript homemenohngers in wonderment about how to get their husbands underwear younger than white, of rugged men joyful in their new cars, of modest sides on souped-up motorcycles. I find myself drooling slightly—and who doesn't?—as colorful images of sizzling steaks, thick slabs of rare roast beef, and even humble hamburgers with secret sauce flash before me in my living room.

The commercial is probably the most important single genre carried on the television medium. In his book, Spirit: The Popular Art of American Television Commercials (1977), TV researcher Bruce Kurtz writes that the so-called average viewer witnesses more than 150 commercials a day (including promotional spots for upcoming programs) and more than 1,000 a week. That adds up to approximately an hour and a quarter per day or nine hours each week devoted to commercial-watching. Even if the commercial is not the most dominant genre, it is certainly the most intuitive, and no other kind of programming has the power to convince people to buy something while simultaneously propelling them toward the bathroom or refrigerator.

The current battle of the light beers is one in which the advertising industry has shown considerable dexterity, as well as image and inventiveness. Taking a drink that bombed when it was first marketed a number of years back as a kind of diet (read: ladies') beer and selling it to men by giving them super-masculine tough-guy role models is quite an achievement. The Miller Lite beer slogan—"Everything you've always wanted in a beer... and less!"—has a nice touch of irony about it. I also like actor James Coburn's cheeky commercial for Schitz Light. He gives an image of manly machismo to this beer and in just a few seconds projects a steel-like hardness as he side-steps up to the bar, his face grim and resolute. The other male figure in the commercial, spellbound and overcome with admiration, orders the same beer—and so, by implication, should we. There aren't many Westerns on television anymore, and fans of the genre have to be grateful to Coburn, who seems to condense an hour's worth of adventure into an enter- taining half-a-minute.

There are several other excellent, action-packed ads for light beer, featuring heavy-weight boxers and huge football players who rip open beer cans as if they were hand grenades. Thus we males are reassured that drinking a light beer will not make people think we are sissies. The massive authority of the National Football League and assorted toughs from boxing, the movie industry, and the world of accounting all guarantee our masculine identity and virility.

The guarantee seems to be working wonders on the typical male ego, for the market share of the various light brands has been growing by staggering proportions. Although there certainly are viewers of both sexes who find the macho thrust offensive, the tough-guy commercials also serve to be having what the advertising industry refers to as a "tag-along" effect on many women.
Chapter 8

Could it be that these rough-and-tumble beer commercials are so effective because they provide more provoking entertainment that doesn't usually come along with police action shows? Have I been asking myself this kind of question often since deciding to take a closer look at the genre of the TV commercial.

I also find myself faced with many dilemmas. Should I be drinking the beer of kings or the king of beers? Should I feed my dog nothing but balanced country nuggets or nutritionally balanced soft 'n' chewy morsels? Should I combat the anxiety and pain generated by all the conflicting commercials with 100 percent aspirin or with a product that has no "upsetting" aspirin? Will I ever discover what it is that Aspirin has more of than any other leading pain remedy? Or should I use Bufferin, which promises me "protection" as well as an extra dose of sodium.

Theoretically, I suppose, like the donkey caught equidistant between two stacks of hay, I should be immobilized. But life doesn't seem to work that way, and, even with the commercials that fight it out in the open with their competitors, I find myself choosing sides. And sometimes for the underdog food.

The commercials I like most reflect my "seduction" by such elements as interesting dialogue, humor, beautiful images, clever cutting, fine acting, and so forth—including psychological factors of which I may not be conscious. Among the fall season's entries, those I favor include, the Boeing 747 Japanese kite flyers, Juan Valdez picking Columbia coffee beans, Peyvier water bubbling up from God-knows-where, United Airlines' Barry Fitzgerald as an Irish priest, the inner workings of La Machine by Moulinix, the Hamlet Globetrotters' Shrewin Williams' paint extravaganza, the Berlinetta "heartbeat" ad, Tibo's vikings "going for the gold," the Make That Dessert spot of game shows, the Portico all with the bored young woman, and (on the West Coast) most Wells Fargo Bank bits of Americana.

Some of the current commercials I hate, because they are dull, unimaginative, crude, sappy, vulgar, title, obnoxious, and/or irritating are: General's she-takes-bat-because-she-loves-my-car-carriage, National's Rent-A-Car's "Green Team," Gillette Traz-O, Stove Top Stuffing. Special K, Brush Your Breath With Dentylite, That's My Dodge, Kentucky Fried Chicken's "It's so nice to feel so good about a meal," and Kenner Toys' "Baby Heart Beat." I could go on almost endlessly here.

Like other television viewers, I long resented having to watch commercials and considered them pernicious and, at times, dan-

Figure 5.3 cont.
advertising, I offer a model of advertising that deals with advertisements and commercials in terms of their cultural impact rather than their effects on individuals. Then I discuss how advertisers attempt to deflect criticism and tie this to "weak" and "strong" theories of the media offered by communication scholars. Next I discuss the techniques used in commercials, which I consider to be the most powerful form of advertising. Finally, I relate commercials to "telechore" and argue that television has become the dominant means of socialization in American culture and many other societies as well. We must always keep in mind that from a business point of view, what television does is deliver audiences to advertisers.

A PSYCHO-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE ON ADVERTISING

The model many social scientists have used in studies of the impact of advertising is a psychological one (or perhaps a social-psychological one). People are tested to see whether they recall advertisements or whether their attitudes or opinions have been changed by having been exposed to advertisements. Figure 1.4 shows the social-psychological model.

Exposure to advertisement or commercial
Recall, attitude change, opinion change

This approach, which often is quite sophisticated in terms of research design, frequently indicates that advertising has little or no effect on respondents. Or, to be more precise, none that can be detected or measured... or, in some cases, no long-term effects that can be measured.

I would like to suggest a different model, which focuses not upon attitude or opinion change but upon the effect upon the culture of advertising in general and in some cases, of a particular campaign. This model is shown in figure 1.5.

People's psyches (the unconscious)
Exposed to Advertising
Cultural behavior of people

Figure 1.5. Psycho-Cultural Model

This model focuses not on opinion or attitude change but instead on two different manners: One can broadly be defined as cultural behavior and the other as people's or perhaps the collective unconscious. Focusing on indivi-
duals or groups of individuals in test studies frequently concludes that advertising plays no significant role in decision making. An examination of advertising as a cultural phenomenon, on the other hand, suggests something quite different, a conclusion that might explain why revenues for advertising keep growing and why businesses continue to advertise.

RUNNING IT UP A FLAGPOLE TO SEE IF ANYONE SALUTES

Corporations and organization that advertise are not irrational; they do not spend money "tossing flags up flagpoles to see if anyone salutes" out of idle curiosity. (On the other hand, while companies that adver-
tise may not be irrational, they assume people are irrational. More pre-
cisely, they assume that people respond to messages that avoid ego-domi-
ned "rational" decision making, that have an effect on unconscious elements in their psyches that often shape their behavior.)

The evaluation of the power of advertising by advertising agen-
cies and by businesses that use advertising is generally an attempt to escape from regulation by governmental agencies and to escape from criticisms of being manipulative and, in some cases, amoral, by con-
sumer groups and other interested parties. Communication scholars, I might point out, have wavered in their assessments of the power of media. Thirty years ago, scholars concluded that the media were power-
ful; then they changed their minds and concluded that they are weak. (A
famous scholar said something to the effect of "Some media sometimes have some effects on some people.") Now, it seems, the notion that the media are powerful is once again gaining acceptance.
Given this situation, when the media were seen as weak, advertisers could argue that advertising was relatively trivial—a service to inform or entertain the public, but little more than that. Yet at the macro level, when we look at collective behavior, it seems that advertising does have power. It is identifying’s role as a cultural and political force that is significant. We may lack the tools in the social sciences to show how advertising affects specific individuals or small groups of people in tests, but when we look at advertising as a social and cultural phenomenon, the situation is strikingly different.

One argument that advertising people use to define criticism is the pot-banging, anti-commercial argument. Just because something happens after something doesn’t mean it was caused by it. That is, just because Y follows X does not mean that X caused Y. Thus, if John sees a beer commercial on television and then drinks a beer, it does not mean the commercial caused John to drink beer. Nobody can argue with this. But when you move to the collective level, and have lots of people drinking beer after having seen lots of beer commercials, there is good reason to believe that the beer commercials might have played some role in the behavior of the beer drinkers. That is, commercials can be addictive. For alcoholics, the commercials might be an important contributing role. While the public airwaves are said to be "in truth," so to speak (and are supposed to broadcast "in the public interest"), by television standards, the question we must ask is whether this trust is being abused.

One reason it is so difficult to establish via experimental methods is that television is so ubiquitous. It is very difficult to find a "control" group, a group of people who are not exposed to television. That is why I think the anthropological model is more useful than the social-psychological model.

COMMERCIALS AS MINI-DRAMAS
AND WORKS OF ART

Commercial—in my opinion the most interesting and powerful forms of advertising—should be works of art that have their own conventions; they might best be thought of as mini-dramas that employ all the techniques of the theater and the cinema to achieve their aims. At their best, they are language brilliantly, they are dramatic, they employ the most sophisticated techniques of lighting and editing, they have wonderful actors who use body language and facial expressions to get their messages across, and they often cost enormous amounts of money, relatively speaking, to produce—many times, the production costs (on a per-minute basis) outstrip those of the programs during which they are shown.

The power of the human voice is well-known. When it is added to strong narratives, music, sound effects, and superb writing, it is easy to see why the commercial is such an incredible medium of persuasion. Commercials (and advertisements in print and other media, to an extent) also make use of many of the following:

**Heroic and Heroines**
Young people often identify with heroes and heroines and try to emulate their behavior, their "style," or their images—if not in the real world, then in the world of consumption. Some of these heroic figures are show-business personalities—singers, dancers, comedians, actors, and athletes.

**Sexuality**
Many commercials overtly connect sex and consumption (Figure 1.6). These commercials often feature extremely beautiful women, who are seen as an integral part of the consumption experience. One hopes, in one’s unconscious, that by purchasing the product, one will get the beautiful woman (or some beautiful woman) as well—or in some cases, an attractive man. In recent years, advertising has used homoerotic appeals for gay men and lesbians.

**Humor**
At one time, advertisers were afraid of humor. Now they realize that humor sells, and many commercials are extremely funny (Figure 1.7). This humor generates what might be called a "halo effect," a feeling of well-being that becomes attached to the products being advertised.
Fun

Many commercials appeal to what might be described as the "fun ethic" of most young (and many not-so-young) people. Consumption becomes connected to having fun and enjoying life.

Success

In many commercials, we see (and it is suggested we emulate) people who use a given product or service and who are successful. One aspect of being successful is knowing what to consume—having "product knowledge," which has replaced regular knowledge in all too many people in America. They don't know history, are not well-read, have no appreciation of art, music, philosophy . . . you name it. But they have incredible product knowledge; that is, all they know is what they can buy.

Reward

Purchasing various products—such as soft drinks and automobiles—is often shown as a "reward" for people who have worked hard and who therefore "deserve" their drinks and sports utility vehicles. This appeal works at both the blue-collar and at the white-collar levels. The rewards one gets are fun, comradeship, pleasure, and sex. Especially sex. Our print advertisements and television commercials are pervaded by sex, and most Americans live in a sexually saturated media environment, where men and women are used as sex objects to sell everything from trucks to cruise ships.
Insights from Advertising Agencies

We try to make ads that evoke an emotion—humor is often useful in this respect. We brainstorm together about ideas that might be used for an ad. Usually, we come up with three or four ideas for a spot. We’re looking for the single most compelling idea to communicate.

TELCULTURE

The term “television” suggests that our culture is, to a large degree, shaped by television. Thus, television is not just a simple medium for entertainment, which merely reflects the culture in which it is found. Television does, of course, reflect culture, but the important thing to keep in mind is that it also profoundly affects culture. It does this, in part, by focusing attention on certain aspects of culture and not paying attention to others, by creating certain kinds of heroes and heroines and neglecting other kinds.

In my opinion, television is the most powerful socializing and socializing force in society. It not only entertains us but also instructs us, even when it is not trying to do so. Thus, it has assumed the roles formerly played by other actors who used to be dominant figures in the socialization process. Let me list them below.

Parents

With the changes that have taken place in the family structure and the breakdown of both the family (due to the high numbers of divorce) and parental authority in America, the role of the parents in socializing young people has greatly diminished. Many children are now raised in one-parent families or in blended families.

Peers, Ministers, Rabbits

Nowadays the clergy also has a diminished role, though some of the priesthood has discovered television and now uses it for various purposes. The use of television by the clergy, however, tends to be associated with fundamentalist sects (and, in some cases, charlatans) and not, in large measure, with mainstream religious organizations.

Professors

At one time, teachers and other academics played a significant role in socializing young people, and in many cases they still do. But this role has also been diminished. This is because teachers cannot compete with popular culture and in fact have to spend a good deal of their time doing what they can to counter the power of the media and popular culture.

Peers

It is widely known that children and adolescents are particularly susceptible to peer pressure, and at various stages in their developmental cycle, peer pressure is much more significant to young people than parental pressure. What about these peers? Who or what, may we ask, socializes peers? Where do these peers get their values and attitudes? They, too, like the opinion leaders who allegedly affect the beliefs of older generations of people, are socialized by the media.

Pop Culture

It is, of course, simplistic to claim that popular culture and the mass media are the only determinants of behavior, but it probably is correct to argue that the media play a major role (at least, an increasingly important role) in the socialization of young people. And it is television that is of major significance here—for it is television that broadcasts (and affects, as well) much of our popular culture.

The most important genre on television is, of course, the commercial. Teleculture is, in large measure, commoditized and thus plays an important role in creating and maintaining consumer culture.

CONCLUSION

Let me offer here a summary of the main points I have made and a summary of the conclusions I draw from these points.

First, advertising is a huge industry that plays an important role in the socialization of people, young and old, in American society. It provides what might be called “product knowledge,” and research evidence suggests that even young children, at 5 or 6 years of age, know a great
deal about many of the products advertised on television (and are often able to sing the jingles from commercials). Second, corporations advertise because it is effective in a number of different ways. Advertising campaigns often have as their primary goal, we are told, holding market share, but it is reasonable to suggest that these campaigns also attract new users. People who are exposed to commercial campaigns may not be able to recall the commercials they have seen or provide evidence that their opinions and attitudes have been affected, but advertising campaigns leave a certain kind of feeling with people, generate a certain kind of sensibility.

In addition, I have suggested that television commercials, in particular, are extremely complicated and powerful texts (or artworks) that work a number of different ways. I left, later in the book, some of the factors to be considered in analyzing commercials. This complexity, the fact that works of art affect people in strange and complicated ways, makes it difficult to measure their effects. But the fact that corporations continue to advertise, and often increase their advertising budgets each year, leads us to conclude that advertising does work. We have only to look around us and observe the way people behave (in supermarkets, at work, at parties) to see the power of advertising.

Finally, I have suggested that commercials are part of what I call "telecultur," which is now probably the most important enculturating and socializing force operating in society. It is naive to think of television (or any of the mass media) as simply an entertainment that does not have a profound impact upon the people who watch it. For one thing, we know that the average person watches television more than three and one-half hours per day. If television does generate "culture," as I've argued, that is a tremendous amount of time for it to enculturate people.

Television has usurped the place that used to be occupied by parents, the clergy, teachers, and other institutions as socializers of the young. We learn from all of our experiences, a phenomenon called incidental learning (though we may not be conscious of the fact that we are learning), and since television is such a large part of our experience, it must play an important role in "teaching" us about life. And commercials are the most ubiquitous genre on television and quite probably the most powerful one.

In this book you will not only learn how to analyze print advertisements and television commercials but will also learn about the impact of the advertising industry as you, on the political order, and on American society and culture. I also offer some examples of analyses I've made of interesting print advertisements and television commercials.

I hope that as a result of reading this book you will be better able to resist "valuing" when some advertising agency creates an advertisement or a radio or television commercial and "trust is up a flagpole."
2

CONSUMER CULTURES

Students who take courses in criticism, thinking about a major fallacy in thinking called the "part has no properties has fallacy. This Latin phrase, discussed earlier, means, roughly speaking, "if something is true, therefore it is fallacy." Just because someone sees a commercial for some product, such as a Norelco electric razor, and then purchases a Norelco razor, doesn't mean she or he commercial necessarily was the prime factor or the only factor leading to the purchase decision. There could be many other factors, or combinations of factors, such as the person's old razor breaking down, a terrific sale on Norelco razors, word of mouth from a friend who has one, and so on.

It is important that we don't over-simplify matters in dealing with advertising. But we also must not underestimate or neglect advertising's influence upon us as individuals and its influence upon our society and culture. Advertising now permeates American culture and has affected, in profound ways, everything from our food preferences and our body shapes to our politics.

A CULTURAL CRITIQUE OF ADVERTISING

The discussion of the impact of advertising on American personality, culture, and society that follows is best understood as an example of cultural criticism. Cultural criticism makes use of psychoanalytic theory, literary theory, Marxist theory, sociological theory, semiotic theory, and various other theories, methodologies, and disciplines that can be used as means of interpreting texts and understanding social and cultural behavior. What I offer here is my interpretation of the impact of advertising on a number of important aspects of American culture and society. My analysis will also draw upon critiques and interpretations of advertising made by other scholars in America and elsewhere. Although my focus is
on advertising in the United States, the concepts I use and techniques I explain can also be used to analyze advertising in other countries. Advertising has been of interest to scholars in many disciplines because these scholars see advertising as one of the central institutions in American society. Americans, we must keep in mind, are exposed to more advertising than people in any other society. This is because of the amount of television we watch and the amount of time we spend listening to the radio and because our media tend to be privately owned and financed by advertising. Our media institutions are mostly private,

for-profit ones; public television and public radio attract relatively small (though generally highly influential) audiences in America.

David Potter, in his classic work People of Plenty, points out that advertising not only has economic consequences, but it also shapes our values. As he writes:

The most important effects of this powerful institution are not upon the economies of our distributive system; they are upon the values of our society. If the economic effect is to make the purchaser like what he buys, the social effect is, in a parallel but broader sense, to make the individual like what he gets—to enforce already existing attitudes, to diminish the range and variety of choices, and in terms of abundance, to evaluate the unrealistic values of consumption. (1954:188)

Potter makes an important point: Advertising, as an industry, is often quite avant-garde and bold in the techniques it uses but, ironically, its impact tends to be a conservative one—to maintain, as much as possible, the status quo. One of the main things companies that advertise try to do is maintain their market share; if they can increase it, all the better. But they don’t want to lose share at any cost. And advertising must be examined not only in terms of its economic impact but also in terms of its influence on American beliefs and values.

In this chapter and the ones that follow I discuss topics such as consumer cultures and consumer “lure,” the use of sexuality to sell products and services, political advertising, and related matters.

CONSUMER CULTURES DEFINED

Consumer cultures, as I understand them, are those in which there has been a great expansion (some might say a veritable explosion) of commodity production, leading to societies full of consumer goods and services and places where these consumer goods and services can be purchased. In consumer cultures, the “game” people play is “get as much as you can.” Success is defined as being the person “who has the most toys.” This leads to a lust for consuming products—and conspicuously displaying them—as a means of demonstrating that one is a success and, ultimately, that one is worthy. And the very act of consumption has now also become authorized and sexualized, self in itself the source of a great deal of pleasure.

In Consumer Culture and Postmodernism, Mike Featherstone explains the importance of “lifestyle” in contemporary consumer societies. He writes:
Rather than reflexively adopting a lifestyle, through tradition or habit, the new heroes of consumer culture make lifestyle a life project and display their individuality and sense of style in the particularity of the ensemble of goods, clothes, pastimes, experiences, appearance and body dispositions they design together into a lifestyle. The modern individual within consumer culture is made conscious that he speaks not only with his clothes, but also with his home, furnishings, decoration, car and Stern activities which are to be cool and classified in terms of the presence and absence of taste. The preoccupation with customizing a lifestyle and its stylistic self-consciousness are not just to be found among the young and the affluent; consumer culture publicity (advertising) suggests that we all have room for self-improvement and self-expression whatever our age or class origins. (1991:86)

And, of course, it is advertising that "teaches" us about the world of consumer goods—what is fashionable and "hot" or, maybe even better for some people, "cool." Semiotics tells us that everything we do is read as a "message" and that we are always sending messages to other people—just as they are always sending messages to us. These messages are sent by our lifestyle decisions—our clothes, hairstyles, cars, homes—and other material goods (figures 2.1 and 2.2) as well as our bodies, facial expressions, and body language. For example, serving the right brand of wine shows that we are sophisticated and have good taste. The advertisements for expensive wine must also be elegant and reflect a sense of refinement (figure 2.1).

Along with the growth of the supply of material objects, there is also a growth of leisure—which must be filled with the right kind of activities, depending upon one’s social class and status. Thus, upscale (those with high incomes and an appreciation of elite culture) people also consume high-art cultural products—operas, plays, works of sculpture, paintings, and so on, while those in a lower class tend to consume more ordinary products—inexpensive clothes, drive-to vacations, and fast food, for example.

It doesn't always work exactly that way; some people with limited incomes love opera and ballet, but generally speaking, there is a connection between socioeconomic status and taste level. More elite elements in society (socioeconomically speaking, that is) take expensive vacations, drive expensive cars, and go to trendy and generally expensive restaurants, for example.

CONSUMER CULTURE AND PRIVATISM

One of the most important critiques scholars and social critics make of the consumer culture is that it is privatized; the focus is upon personal consumption, not social investment for the public good. Governments spend also, but if a governmental agency helps build up the infrastructure in some city, that spending yields jobs and increased productivity and is
really a form of investment. Personal consumption, on the other hand, is based on private desires and the satisfaction of individual wishes. It may have a marginal benefit to society because the money spent on personal consumption "drops down" to other people, but economies generally find the amount of money "dropping down" to be quite minimal.

A number of years ago, a company that manufactured eyedrops suggested that using its product was the solution to smog and polluted air. Rather than fix the quality of air for everyone, this company suggested everyone use its eyedrops instead. When you push the argument to its most extreme end, society is an abstraction and there are only individuals inhabiting the same territory, each of whom pursues (and should pursue) his or her private destiny. From this perspective, the worse things are, the more opportunities there are to sell products to people, so the market economy may have an implicit stake in social disorganization and the neglect of the public sphere.

Advertising, since it is paid for by private entities, does not generally have a social-investment message to it but instead focuses upon individuals pursuing their private passions. "The bellwether everyone else is the sub-text of many of these messages. And as American society becomes more and more split into two classes, one that is increasingly wealthy and one that is increasingly poor, the social tensions and possibilities for serious class conflict become stronger. People can retreat to good communities to avoid crime, but they end up prisoners of those communities. My point, then, is that advertising often distracts us from paying attention to the need for social investments, from a concern for the public sphere, and thus, by its very nature, tends to be politically conservative.

NEIMAN MARCUS AND "COUTHIFICATION"

There is a great deal of pressure upon people to show taste and discrimination, suitable to their place in the great chain of being (that is, to their socioeconomic status), in the products and services they consume. Neiman Marcus, for example, was useful to oil millionaires who had plenty of money but no sense of style adequate to their financial resources. What Neiman Marcus did was what I would describe as "couthification." The salespeople at Neiman Marcus made sure that nouveaux riches oil-millionaires purchased the right clothes for themselves and their families and bought the right home furnishings. (Stanley Marcus provided this insight to me when we appeared on a radio program together.)

The famous Neiman Marcus catalogs, with their absurdly expensive "his" and "hers" gifts, generated a great deal of publicity for the store and also generated a halo effect for items purchased at Neiman Marcus. Anything bought there was, Neiman Marcus suggested, by definition stylish and in good taste. For people with no taste, Neiman Marcus—and the legion of other stores like it—provided an escape from the anxiety of showing poor taste. Neiman Marcus was expensive, but it was worth it. On the radio program we were on, I suggested to Stanley Marcus that department stores, such as Neiman Marcus, reminded me of medieval cathedrals. One can find interesting parallels between the two. These similarities are reflected in table 2.1.

We can see from the parallels between department stores and cathedrals that there is something holy, something of the sacred, connected to purchasing objects—the things we buy are again, it can be surmised, that we have been blessed. And so we consume, often with religious fervor—even though we may not recognize the sacred dimension of our activities.

In his book The Waning of the Middle Ages, the historian Johan Huizinga explains how the two realms—the sacred and the secular—merged into one another. He writes:

All life was saturated with religion to such an extent that the people were in constant danger of losing sight of the distinction between things spiritual and things temporal. If, on the one hand, all the details of ordinary life may be raised to a sacred level, on the other hand, all that is holy sinks to the commonplace, by the fact of being blended with everyday life. (1924:156)
Table 2.1: Department Store as Functional Alternatives to Cathedrals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Department Store</th>
<th>Cathedral</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Modern</td>
<td>Medieval</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paradox: Heaven to Earth Now</td>
<td>Paradox: Heaven in the Future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passion: Mirth &amp; Slaughter</td>
<td>Passion: Salvation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good: Save Money</td>
<td>Prayer: Save Souls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sacred: Team Carnage</td>
<td>Sacred: Team Bible, prayer Books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerks</td>
<td>Clergy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sells: Product</td>
<td>Sells: God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possesses in Sign of Spiritual Election</td>
<td>Holiness as a Sign of Spiritual Election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big: Sales</td>
<td>Religious Holiday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sells an Expensive Product</td>
<td>Conversion as a Saints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buy: Incredible Gifts</td>
<td>Experience Mystique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fry: Tempt</td>
<td>Pye Tube</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mine:</td>
<td>Religious Music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lighting to Sell</td>
<td>Lighting as Imperative Reasoner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bid: Crowd</td>
<td>Pray</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advancing</td>
<td>Preach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cash: Register</td>
<td>Offering Pits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand: Loyalty</td>
<td>Devotion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Out lives, in contemporary consumer culture, are saturated with commodities and other forms of advertising. And, beneath these advertisements and fueling our desire to consume more and more products is, I would suggest, a sense that our actions have an unconscious and ultimately religious dimension to them; they are a mirroring of our "election" (a good Puritan term) and that we are the worthy beneficiaries of God’s grace.

NEEDS ARE FINITE, DESIRES ARE INFINITE

In America, as the quintessential consumer culture (not that many Western European, Asian, or Latin American consumer cultures are far behind us), what you can afford becomes the means of determining who you are and who people think you are. In earlier days, consumption was more or less limited to a small percentage of fabulously wealthy industrialists and entrepreneurs. America’s great genius has been to spread consumer lust to the middle classes, and for some items, to the lower classes.

One problem with consumer culture is that people become so caught up in consuming things as a means of validating themselves and proving their worth (here is a religious dimension to this, since, ultimately, as my discussion of department stores and cathedrals suggests) in consumer culture, all we often people don’t think about what they have but only concern themselves with what they don’t have. And that is in part, because advertising constantly reminds them of what they don’t have. Needs are finite but desires are infinite, and, thus, as soon as our neo-Noahs have been taken care of, we become obsessed with what we don’t have but want. Or, more precisely, we might suggest, with what advertising tells us we should want.

What advertising does, among other things, is manufacture desire and shape it, and thus create people who are insatiable and who have been-conditioned to continuously lust for more items. And the more we have the more we want. Because the things we buy—the sports utility vehicles, the expensive vacations, the trophy wives and husbands—are evidence that we believe of our intelligence, industriousness, and utility, counter to our (in man’s and God’s eyes).

MAMETIC DESIRE

The French literary theorist René Girard has a fascinating theory about why we consume things, which he explains in his book A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare. According to Girard, what we desire is what others desire; and "mimetic desire" means we imitate their desire—whether it be for material possessions or marriage partners. Girard argues that mimetic desire explains the behavior of Shakespeare’s characters who desire people essentially because other desire them.

Girard explains:

When we think of these phenomena in which mimicry is likely to play a role, we enumerate such things as dress, manners, facial expressions, speech, stage acting, artistic creation, and so forth. Consequently, we see imitation as social life as a force for generalization and bland conformity through the reproduction of a few social models.

If imitation also plays a role in desire, if it contaminates our urge to acquire and possess, this conventional view, while by and large false, misses the main point. Imitation does not merely draw people together, it pulls them apart. Paradoxically, it can do these two things simultaneously. Individuals who desire the same thing are united by something so powerful that, as long as they can share whatever they desire, they remain the best of friends; as soon as they cannot, they become the worst of enemies. (1991:3)
Insights from Advertising Agencies

Bianca Jagger would be a good person to associate with the wine we're trying to advertise, since she's one of the new aristocracy of celebrity. She's the opinion leaders and style setters thrown up by the world of pop culture, who set trends and influence a number of "hip" people.

Girard sees mimetic desire and rivalry as a fundamental source of human conflict and suggests that Shakespeare understood the role mimetic desire plays in our behavior. He continually made use of it as a motivating force for characters in his dramas.

Girard offers an example: Helen of Troy and the Trojan War. As he explains, perhaps oversimplifying a bit to make his point (1991:23):

"The only reason the Greeks want her back is because the Trojans want to keep her. The only reason the Trojans want to keep her is because the Greeks want her back." What Girard shows, here, is the awesome power of this generally unrecognized force, mimetic desire.

It is also, I believe, a motivating force in our behavior as consumers. It is mimetic desire that helps explain our consumer lust; we desire what others have desired and have purchased, especially those we look up to—such as celebrities, movie stars, and sports heroes. Our desire imitates their desire, which takes the form of our purchasing various products that they have desired and purchased... or that they tell us they desire by appearing in advertisements and commercials for these products (figure 2.3).

The point here is not only that we identify with and want to imitate these celebrities who advertise products or whose lifestyles we admire. By imitating their lifestyles and product choices, we are caught by a much stronger force, which we do not recognize—our imitating their desires. I suspect in the next chapter that we may think we act as we choose but the advertising agencies, in various ways, help shape our desires, and thus we have the illusion that we act as we choose, the choice, in a sense, has already been made for us—though we don't realize this is the case.