SEX IN ADVERTISING

Perspectives on the Erotic Appeal

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Subliminal Sexuality: The Fountainhead for America's Obsession

Wilson Bryan Key

"The great majority of mankind is satisfied with appearances, as though they were realities, and are often most influenced by things that seem true by those that are."
—Niccolò Machiavelli, 1520

HOW SUBLIMINALS REMAIN SUBLIMINAL

My experiences with subliminal perception over the past 25 years, since publication of Subliminal Seduction and my subsequent four books on the subject, were often bizarre though frequently quite humorous. A refined sense of humor is a basic necessity in dealing with the subliminal dimension. This is a subject area few readers know about, but more significantly most simply do not wish to know about. Subliminal manipulation abounds in the media world around us. Even presidential candidate George W. Bush used subliminal techniques in his campaign commercials ("rat"), then lied profusely in his speech to admit it. His ad director, Alex Castellanos, is considered an expert in subliminal techniques. When a tachistoscopic display was discovered splintered into a Bush ad, it made news for several days, and then disappeared into the limbo of scandals that abound in many U.S. elections.

Media will generally avoid the subliminal issue, if possible, to protect their advertisers whose art and copy are saturated with the hidden persuaders. In media, one never bites the hand that feeds. The average citizen lives usually in denial (a perceptual defense) about the subject. Few appear capable of consciously accepting their vulnerability to media manipulation. Even fewer can admit to themselves having been gulled or persuaded.

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ally illiterate as they stumble through it blindly believing they think for themselves. Almost everyone believes they can easily discriminate between fantasies and reality, and are untouchable by billions of dollars of media pumped into their brain annually. Americans desperately wish to believe they think for themselves—the fundamental assumption necessary to justify their materialism. The few driven by proprietary commercial research—purchasing and consumption behaviors. The vast amount of secret proprietary research produced by ad men marketing organizations on the subliminal is difficult to obtain. Should the issue ever surface in court, however, any competent attorney would have a field day discovering.

Norman Denson, in his two books Subliminal Persuasion: The Nature of a Controversy and Preconscious Processing, ponderously documents an exhaustive quantity of published academic experimental research supporting the effects of subliminal stimulus upon behavior. Like so many simplistic experimental psychologists, however, separating himself from the real world, he never once suspected commercial applications of his scientific evidence—which would have been readily apparent on billboards outside his London office. Anthony Ehrenzweig’s The Hidden Order of Art: A Study in the Psychology of Artistic Imagination superbly hypothesizes subliminal perception as the basis for creativity in music, art, poetry, and literature. There is much nourishment here for deep, multi-dimensional, and serious thought.

Further research on whether subliminals effectively change behavior still occasionally appears in academic journals—not amount to re-examining the wheel as a useful technological device. The more serious question persistently avoided is what socio-cultural effects developed after half a century or more of an environment saturated with commercial direct subliminal influence—which is incapable of detecting, understanding, or even acknowledging—forces which control their destiny. There are few psychological, social, and medical pathologies in the United States, which do not have roots in advertising.

A recent estimate held that 10-20% of mainstream U.S. advertising contained sexual information. The estimate considered only conscious, consciously available descriptors of behavior, nudity, models, or promises of sexual fulfillment and intimacy. As long as one considers only the obvious, the estimate—though quite conservative—appears reasonable. Include the subliminal dimension of communication, however, and the input of information into the brain (without conscious awareness) of sexual material casually approaches 80-90% of commercial media. In this all pervasive ocean of sexualized people, products, ideas, and information, few consumers even suspect an enormous, bizarre, invisible environment has been created to milk them out of their money, allegiances, and power. Curiously, the exploited and manipulated become the staunchest defenders of the forces that victimize them.

Media industries have been outspoken about what ads have done for us. As consumers, we should be more curious about what they are doing to us. But, magicians can never reveal to audiences how illusions are created. Sophisticated use of both subliminal and the two inseparable communication techniques provide power to make of the world virtually anything desirable. Driven by unscionable greed, today’s media environment appears to have resided in something closer to a garbage can. A dangerous paradox allows media to camouflage what has happened. It is impossible to separate observers from what they are observing. Objectivity, or the fantasy of it, is a basic myth in most social systems. Individuals take their media for granted, trust it most of all the time, and stumble through life oblivious to what may really be going on around them. Few writers or seriously considered what occurs when media fantasies become far more realistic than realities. The fantasies become the dominant forces in our lives, ranging from our preferences toward an underdog doleful to our selection of a president of the United States.

Some years ago, I worked on a fictional movie script, which depicted a foreign conspiracy to control a major U.S. ad agency. The movie, Agency, starred Lee Majors and Robert Mitchum. The United States happened to be corrupted via subliminal media manipulation. Sexual and social restraints were to be abolished. During a story conference, one of the more thoughtful producers questioned, “What would happen in the real world if someone actually did what our story line proposes? Would it be possible to corrupt an entire nation?”

Having written five books on subliminal media manipulation, I paused and thought carefully before answering. Finally replied, “Walk over to the window and look out into the street. It has already happened. But we did it to ourselves.”

The motion picture industry has been deeply into subliminal perception for decades. Subliminals have been discretely woven into a broad range of Donkey Productions.

In Who Killed Roger Rabbit, the animated sexualized female character exposes her genitals subliminally. In
The Little Prince erect pines decorate backgrounds as playful towers. Animation provides directors with complete control of every square centimeter of a frame. Tachistoscopic high-speed flashing displays are frequently inserted in animated children’s programs such as *Alf*. William Friedkin used subliminal audio and video extensively in *The Exorcist*—an early subliminal tour de force. Later in *Cruising*—a film about the gay leather bar in New York—Friedkin loaded the film with subliminal sexual pornography in both audio and visuals. He bragged that in his movie *Jade*, a strongly sexualized epic at the cognitive level, he utilized heavier subliminal content than he had ever before put into a film. *Jade* was itself pornographic dealing with prostitution, sexual promiscuity, and a rich variety of sexual deviations at cognitive levels, enhanced for the unconscious with subliminal pornographic stimuli. Nonetheless, *Jade* was not formally considered a pornographic production.

Since becoming involved with subliminal communication roughly 25 years ago, I have been astonished—and often amused—at the delicate dances performed by so-called scholars in their avoidance and denial of the subject. It is easy to rationalize why ad hustlers and their academic sympathizers ignore the subject in their relentless pursuit of the fast buck. But, many presumably solid citizens approach the subliminal issue with awe, even fear, and an awkward hesitation, emotions usually reserved for an IRS audit or the threat of a herpes infection.

**THE SKEPTICAL INQUIRER**

I was interviewed roughly 25 years ago by a distinguished editor of a prestigious academic communication journal. The interview preceded publication of my first book *Subliminal Seduction*, which over the years reached 2.5 million copies in print, including translations. Similar interviews were frequently repeated over the next quarter century. I was overwhelmed when this distinguished editor called me personally. I had submitted an article on subliminal advertising. I was, at the time, an unknown author, newly published in academic journals, serving as an assistant professor at a state university—not very impressive credentials.

“We found your piece on subliminal unusual and quite interesting,” he said. I held my breath. Maybe this was my chance to enter the halls of academic scholarship. This might even get me tenure. He continued, “We wondered, however, why you avoided footnotes and validations for your conclusions.”

“I don’t understand your question,” I replied in surprise. “I thought my facts and conclusions were simple, obvious, direct, and sustainable to anyone looking at the illustrations. I merely described what I perceived. Can you explain what you mean?” I chose my words carefully, straining to project a warm, congenial tone in my voice. But, the opportunity for social criticism was irresistible. “I assumed your readers would be visually literate,” I added.

“You used a *Kramer Collegiate* ad (see Fig. 11.1) to support your thesis. You alleged the hand and bottle were painted, not a simple photograph of the...
\[\text{KEY}\]

objects. How do you know this allegiation is true? I detected a subtle lightening in his pronunciation as he articulated the word "alleged."

"Did you call the editor of Playboy magazine to confirm your hypothesis," he asked. "Yes, of course," I replied. "I also called the ad agency that designed the ad."

"Did they confirm your analysis," he demanded.

"Not exactly," I answered. "They simply shouted obscenities at me."

"Sir," I tried to reply calmly, to the point, and with what I hoped would be perceived as humility and restraint, "Please compare your left hand with the hand portrayed in the ad. There are major discrepancies between the knuckle's distance from the handle's baseline and your distance from the knob to the wrist. They are totally disproportionate to what appears in an actual hand."

"Yes, that is curious, I must admit," he replied. "But, he continued, "How can you be certain some individuals might not have a left hand comparable to that in the ad?"

"Sorry," I replied apologetically. "I looked over all our campus and did not find a man's left hand that came close. By the way," I could not help but add, "the hand in the ad has no fingers. You may have missed this vital detail."

His response was immediate. "The fingers could have been hidden in the dark shadows behind the bottle," he said with a victorious note in his voice. I wondered for a moment whether to compliment his critical perceptual skills, but decided to avoid an argument and look at other details in the hand.

"If you study the palm and the wrist and compare them with your left hand, they are complete distortions of the real thing," I said. "You might even conclude the wrist and palm look far more like male testicles. The thumb has been painted to appear far more like an erect penis of somewhat prodigious proportions."

He inhaled sharply. "Do you have any empirical evidence that the hand in the ad is not an actual hand? Who can validate your questionable conclusions? You have made a serious allegation toward a respected product and the publication in which they advertise. You must provide some sort of proof," he said adamantly. His hostility was now on the surface.

I considered asking simply that he compare his own left hand with a penis, but felt it might appear an insult. I still half-hoped I might talk him into publishing my article.

"Did you notice the knife blade on the cork about to slip?" I inquired.

"Such a slip would result in a disaster for the man trying to open the Kanon bottle."

"My God! You have an incredible imagination," he replied. "In your piece you wrote some psychological nonsense about castration fear. What is your evidence?" he demanded.
your perceptual restraints. This process may be compared to audio perception. When you go to bed at night with music on the radio, the sound appears to grow louder and louder. Your perception of volume becomes more sensitive as you relax. The radio only appears to grow louder.

There appears a perceptual quality in the chocolate cake picture that has been called synesthesia, simply a sensory crossover effect where through visual stimuli, you can taste and smell the rich chocolate in the cake. These are projective possibilities. Possibly the most important synesthesia effect, however, is tactile—the perceptual projection of touch. Tactile is our most vital sensory capacity. "Moister" is of course tactile. A fundamental ingredient in any meaningful art experience is the synesthesia effect, a subliminal perception. Merely glancing at certain textures—lakes, satin, silk—can be sexually arousing for many individuals. In good music, synesthesia effects are important. Barnett's Belvoir depicts a slow sensuous orgasmic buildup. Beethoven composed the Ninth Symphony, considered by many the single most magnificent musical composition ever, without ever hearing the music. He was totally deaf when he composed the masterpiece. He experienced the complex harmonies visually through the written notes on paper. Many composers develop this ability as they progress through their careers.

Concentrating on the chocolate cake mix ad, on the surface the most blatant type of banality, might even appear absurd until you realize production costs on this single ad could have ranged from $70,000 to $100,000. The cake ad was painted, of course. It is not real cake. It actually appears far tastier and more desirable than real cake. And, the publication budget for this two-page masterpiece approached $10 million in Reader's Digest and scores of women's magazines. Art, especially in this case, must be highly functional. To justify its investment, the ad must sell at least $55 million in Betty Crocker's cake mix—a major transaction in our economic system. When a reader perceives the ad, he or she rarely devotes more than an instant to the perception. It most likely would not surface cognitively. Fewer than 5% of readers who perceived the ad actually read the copy. If the Betty Crocker ad is to change the lives of the millions of readers who perceived it for a few seconds by inducing their purchase of the cake mix, it must work inside the brain instantaneously. The ad would unlikely elicit a cognitive response and, as one of the 1,200 sales inducements perceived daily by average Americans, would not be consciously recalled. Individuals do not perceive an ad, then rush down to the nearest Safeway and scoop up every available box of the product. It may be days, weeks, or even months before they are in a situation where they could purchase the mix. The ad is worthless unless it can evoke a delayed response.

In conventional cognitive windows, advertising—irrespective of how brilliant the art work—appears a waste of money, time, and effort. But, if you know that perception is instantaneous—at both conscious and unconscious levels—a few seconds of exposure is really a very long time. Less than 10% of such a perception is cognitive, the remainder subliminal unless you have been specifically trained. And, if you knew that perception also total, that meanings and every detail are retained in unconscious memory indefinitely, perhaps for a lifetime. Finally, if you knew that around 1914 a Viennese physician, Otto Poertler, discovered that unconscious memories can be hypnotically programmed to stimulate delayed action responses days, weeks, or even months after their initial perception. If you knew all of this, you might begin to understand the cake ad could constitute a major life event after a momentary perception.

As your relaxed eye and mind wander across the picture, you may not notice several discrepancies in the design. The fork is a salad fork, usually small, much too small to support a large, moist slice of chocolate cake. Artists often insert dissonance, things illogical or unreasonable, in their work. Dissonance draws creative attention. Under hypnosis, individuals easily perceive dissonant detail. As your eyes lazily wander the design, you might notice the among the crumbs—such as 5, E, and X, not necessarily in that order. "Icing on the cake" is a traditional American metaphor that describes not only the sweetest, richest portion of a pastry, but also a special reward.
added to a promise of indulgence. When your eye wanders along the top of the cake, the rich succulent flavor and odor assaults your subliminal senses. True, you can tell the icing is sticky as well as moist (tactile responses), but no chocolate enthusiast could ignore the lush pile of chocolate icing above the heel of the slice. Remember, virtually every individual in the Western world has eaten Betty Crocker. The mixes are internationally renown.

At first glance, the pile of icing on the heel of the cake appears dissonant. Logically, it should appear as thin as the top icing. The baker, or artist, may have had icing left over and dropped a large glob on the heel. Considering that this artwork cost more than $50,000 and will involve an investment in media of several million dollars, such dissonant detail is unexplainable by conventional wisdoms. At this point, inspect the detail in Fig. 11.3. The chocolate icing has been sculpted to appear as a tumescent female genital. The painted details are anatomically correct—major and minor labia and clitoris. The artist has certainly researched the subject exhaustively. Chocolate, of course, provides the genital with black ethnic characteristic. As the headline perhaps redundantly announces—"Menstruum Moister!"

The Betty Crocker ad demonstrates the incredible power of human repression to hide important information from our cognitive processes. Millions of consumers, both men and women, perceived the ad. None consciously dealt with the subject matter that they concealed (repressed) from themselves. It was not the artist who concealed the exposed genital, but the individual viewers of the ad. Yet, no one—as the artist and executives who produced the ad accurately predicted—consciously recognized the genital. Unconsciously, of course, such powerful information could remain in their unconscious memory indefinitely.

I included Betty Crocker's Moister in my book The Age of Manipulation. The ad was directed at female consumers, as the Kenner ad was directed at young males. How might think the gender of the genitalia should have been reversed. But, subliminal manipulation appears most successful when the content is taboo. Most social taboos in all cultures involve either sex or death—the two universal polarities of human life. Homosexuality in America, as the Clinton administration discovered when they confronted a homophobic U.S. culture, evokes fiercer phobic reactions, quite unlike those in other world cultures.

My files contain hundreds of subliminal genital ads. If your sexual fantasies appear strange from time to time, there could be good reasons. It appears quite possible U.S. sexual phobias have been nourished by media's taboo subliminal content. Unfortunately, at the moment, it appears impossible to penetrate the complex cause-and-effect relationships between media and socio-psychological phenomena. Someone should be looking into this. Unfortunately they are not.

FIG. 11.3. Close up of sexualized Betty Crocker icing.
work to establish the SEX identification. The letters on automobile trunks, for example, include Honda SE 1, Mazda Z7V, Dodge 600 ES, Datsun ZX, Datsun 200 SX, Mercury 777, Mercedes SE 4, and Toyota SE 5.

YOUTH AND VIRILITY THROUGH "SEX"ES

The omnipotent "SEX"es in media lay the groundwork for our society's major obsession. The Tim magazine portrait of George W. Bush is a well-exposed, somewhat comparable Bushcover portrait used essentially the same technique touched and restructured. Bush, of course, was heavily combed for the portion of the left side of his face was darkened, shadowing a face usually Shadowing either makes the portrait more sinister, more dramatic, or both. Bush, the dark central opening of the eyes, have been slightly enlarged, suggesting subliminally that the subject is tense, alert, or stimulated. Bush is portrayed in the cover's superbly young, boyish. His grit square centimeter of the portrait has been expertly retouched. The portrait has very little to do with the subject's reality. It actually conceals reality. Very small, but can be viewed comfortably with magnification. More objectively. Discovering SEXES can be difficult for some individuals. Once the eyes to roam effortlessly and unimpeded across the page. When thelightly embedded on the surface (see Fig. 11.5).

Virtually all celebrity photographs, and certainly those on magazine them with an airbrush, but they can be embedded in a number of ways such professional portraits can cost thousands of dollars. Once an individual becomes released, the disadvantages of "SEX"es can become quite engrossing, if you have nothing more exciting to do at the mor-temporal and vertical lines, and diagonals. It is most unlikely such design the "SEX"es could be projections—the mind is making them up. I used to cloud formations. You would be astonished at the filthy language and
somes reportedly going on in the clouds. These are projections, not unlike responses to the famed Rorschach inkblots. All humans project, all of the time. To separate the "SEX"es from projections, I use several rules. The letters must be in the same typeface, equidistant letters, and other individuals must readily identify them. Fantasy projections are usually recognizable because they will be perceived differently by other individuals, or not at all. The question, of course, is highly sophisticated. How does one discriminate between fantasies and realities? Are "SEX"es really there, purposefully depicted by someone? Or, is the observer making them up, merely fantasizing. In a technologically advanced society such as ours, media can make
fantasies for more appealing, sexually desirable, and of course, more expensive than reality could ever become.

The airing of subliminals is prohibited in the United States and outlawed in several other nations. The Federal Communications Commission and Federal Trade Commission have ruled subliminals are contrary to the public interest because they are clearly intended to be deceptive and are therefore restricted. Courts have ruled subliminals are subject to First Amendment protection. The techniques are also prohibited in voluntary professional advertising and broadcasting codes. Most recently, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) ruled to prohibit subliminals in alcoholic beverages advertising—spirits, beer, and wine. I wrote a large portion of the ATF ruling. So much for opposing sin and favoring motherhood. Like so many laws in the United States, they are selectively enforced. Clever people spend their lives and energies working to circumvent the law. Seemingly inexpressible commercial artists continue to design new, creative, subliminal techniques and strategies. Few in the general public are even aware they are the victims in an immoral game. U.S. politicians would never critically oppose an ad media’s major income source.

Over the years, I have testified before U.S. Senate and Canadian House of Commons committees. They were always polite, amused, appeared fascinated, and even sometimes shocked. But, nothing changed and the various legal prohibitions continued to be ignored. ATF used subliminal techniques in their attack upon the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas. The subliminals were actually engineered by Green Beret Delta Force officers, working under ATF supervision, who embedded hidden voices in Gregorian Chants and in the death screams of animals being sacrificed which they amplified into the compound with powerful outdoor speakers. These officers referred to the audio techniques as a weapons system.

And finally, George W. Bush used subliminal embeds in his election campaign commercials. In the famed “RATS” commercial for Bush, the word “RATS” was placed into the commercial. The technoscopied display appeared for roughly 1/50th of a second superimposed over the word “bureaucrats” which appeared cognitively on screen. The embed was discovered by Fox TV News which ran the story, but no one picked up on it. The ad ran 4,000 times during a two-week period at a cost of $4 million. The subliminal was aimed at discrediting Democratic bureaucrats and their medical proposals.

A retired Boeing technical writer, Gary Greenup in Seattle, again discovered the flashing insert. He called the Seattle TV media, which brushed him off. Generally, media will run a subliminal story if they must, but ignore the issue on behalf of their advertisers—most of whom use subliminal tricks. Greenup then called the Democratic National Committee who sent staff members to interview him. Afternoon, the “RATS” campaign commercial was in the hands of The New York Times. George W. Bush and his ad director, Alex Castellanos, had their cover story ready. Castellanos is widely known as an expert on subliminal advertising. Bush called the notion of subliminals “bizarre and weird,” making problem, “One frame out of 90 hardly in my judgment makes a conspiracy: I am convinced this is not intentional. You don’t need to play, you know, cute politics,” he piously added.

Alex Castellanos, The Republican’s ad director, said he flashed the letters “RATS”—the tail end of bureaucrats—so the ad appeared more visually interesting, and it was just a coincidence it came out “RATS.” It’s a visual drumbeat, he said. “People get bored watching TV. You are trying to get them interested and involved.”

Castellanos insisted the use of the word was “purely accidental. We don’t play that way. I am not that clever.” The embeds were directed to denounce Gore’s prescription drug plan which “Bureaucrats decide.” Castellanos earlier had used subliminal racist themes during a campaign for Jesse Helms in North Carolina against a black opponent.

To anyone interested in studying subliminal techniques, my suggestion is usually to study good art and music. Artists have been using subliminals for centuries, as have the great composers. The Biggie Smalls, as cited in my book Age of Manipulation, dates to 1260-70. I also cited works using Younger, DaVinci, Titian, Rembrandt, and Picasso in The Clone Plate Oog.

So, finally, one might reasonably wonder why—with so many people in the United States—the subject of subliminals is denied, ignored, circumvented, discouraged, and even forbidden? I convicted a file of letters over the years from high school and college teachers who had been threatened with sanctions or censured for using my books and subliminal communication has become the new subversive threat to media control of U.S. culture.

Marshall McLuhan once commented that “George Orwell’s 1984 actually happened around 1930. We just did not notice anything had changed.” Big Brother had convinced intellectuals to oligies, anthropology, art, and linguistics. Behaviorism, the psychological theory that dismisses the unconscious, studies only obvious cognitive behaviors. What you see, hear, smell, taste, or feel is what you get. Behaviorism remains a monumental anti-intellectual, farcical triviality, but the major perspective prevalent in academic America.
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