

# FRAMING ADVERTISING: CULTURAL ANALYSIS AND THE INCRIMINATION OF VISUAL TEXTS

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In this chapter I shall explore how, and also speculate why, advertising has been framed - that is to say set up, incriminated - in a number of (broadly marxist) cultural studies critiques and constructed as the iconographic signifier of multinational capitalism, and therefore in some ethical sense, beyond redemption. This kind of political conclusion, which assumes a particular relationship of the advertising image to the economic organisation of society, is frequently based on what appears to be a dissociated critical approach, that is to say textual analysis, often of single ads. As a method it presupposes that the truth not only of the ad itself but also of its history and relationships - of the cultural practices involved in its authorship and the diverse ways in which it is read and understood - can somehow be revealed by peeling back sufficient layers of visual meaning. Yet paradoxically, this kind of approach often excludes the material processes of production and consumption from the field of knowledge. My intention is to explore these conceptual issues in the context of current debates between cultural theorists and political economists, and finally to reflect a little on the nature of our cultural fascination with the advertising form.

## The state of the debate

As is well known, one of the most crucial theoretical issues on the left and in cultural studies has been the relationship of the symbolic to the material and economic order. The advent and extensive if contradictory influence of postmodernist theories with their insistence on the attenuation of these relationships and the impossibility of grand narratives of economic determination has led in recent years to an increasing, and sometimes exclusive, intellectual focus on signification and the symbolic. This tendency has in turn incurred tough criticism from a number of cultural critics who, as Martyn Lee has put it in a recent article in Media, Culture and Society, want to counter the fashionable academic uptake of postmodernism with its 'flights of fancy in the stratosphere of consumer culture' and return to 'theoretical fundamentals', that is to say the productive sphere (Lee 1994:526).<sup>1</sup> In his article Lee makes it clear that he and others with whom he aligns himself, are particularly targeting studies of consumption (which, erroneously, they seem to assume deal only with texts and the symbolic<sup>2</sup>). This is the context in which he urges what he calls 'a serious reconsideration of production' and a 'recoupling of production and consumption' in order to return to a 'critical Marxist political economy'.

Jim McGuigan is another of this group of back-to-basics cultural critics who in his book Cultural Populism (1992) attacks what he calls the 'new revisionist tendency' or 'cultural revisionism' in analyses of consumption and also argues forcefully for a return to a 'political economy of culture which insists upon a determinate relationship between the production and consumption of symbolic forms' (McGuigan 1992:5).<sup>3</sup> This is also, in broad

terms, the standpoint of Fredric Jameson who in his influential essay on postmodernism and the market criticises the tendency within cultural studies to produce textual analyses of advertising and other representations without talking about 'real markets' (Jameson 1993:264). In short what is assumed by these authors and this general theoretical position (and inevitably I simplify) is that an analysis of production will reveal a correspondence, or at least a clear articulation, between the economic organisation of society - in this instance multinational capitalism - and the cultural and symbolic, or as Jameson has put it, between the logic of the market place and the cultural dominant; it will provide the theoretical substance for a revival of a marxist politics.

How do these assumptions about the presumed ubiquity of depoliticised postmodernist approaches in critical work on consumption and the symbolic measure up when we look at recent studies of advertising? Is it really the case that production and the economic are ignored or overwhelmed by 'postmodernist stratospheric' speculation about the meanings inscribed in texts? If production is taken into account, what kind of production and, importantly, of what? How far does the consumption of ads figure in these studies?

Most theoretical work on advertising has until recently been embedded in what Lee (1993) has usefully called a Fordist (or mechanistically modernist) way of conceptualising the economy, state power and the subject. This conceptual Fordism is rooted in intellectual preoccupations about mass society, dominant ideology and manipulation, and includes among its main thinkers marxists of the Frankfurt School like Adorno and Horkheimer (1973) and Marcuse (1964) (for their condemnation of mass culture and the 'cultural industry'), Louis Althusser (particularly in his structuralist mode) (1971), and specifically in relation to advertising, the journalist Vance Packard (1957). What all these have in common (according to Lee) is a theoretical position which presupposes an economic and political order of such power that:

it seemed that everyday culture and social identity could now be manufactured at the whim of big business and the state apparatus...that social consciousness itself could be produced almost as effortlessly as the assembly lines were producing automobiles or bars of soap.(Lee 1993:98)

In this totalising and deterministic schema no intellectual justification seems to exist for disaggregating the different moments in the production and consumption of advertising. They are part of a monolithic force which the helpless consumer/spectator/subject is incapable of resisting. Here I want to explore how far this kind of conceptual model still operates as a base-line in studies of advertising in the 1990s.

Judith Williamson's classic and still highly influential study of 1978, although not included by Lee in his category of Fordist thinkers presumably because of the significant ways in which it breaks with this tradition by, in principle, opening up the possible textual readings available to the reader,<sup>4</sup> nevertheless at the same time continues to conceptualise consciousness and the primacy of the economic in conventionally Fordist terms. According to Williamson (1978:13) consumers are persuaded to buy goods against their real class interests because they are unable to escape the false meanings invoked by advertising. 'Real' production refers to the production of commodities; the producers and production processes of the advertisements themselves are perfunctorily dismissed:

Advertising has a life of its own...Obviously people invent and produce adverts, but apart from the fact that they are unknown and faceless, the ad in any case does not claim to speak for them, it is not their speech. (Williamson 1978:14)

In her focus on textual signification and her insistence that authorship has no relevance for our understanding of advertising, Williamson identifies herself as part of a broader poststructuralist momentum which over the following fifteen years was to merge with postmodernism<sup>5</sup> and lay the groundwork for much of the subsequent critical work on advertising.

### **Recent work: incrimination continues**

What is interesting about this most recent work is how far it continues to fall into the broadly marxist/Fordist conceptual genre, despite the appropriation of a postmodernist style. Thus at first glance, it would seem a good target for the accusation of 'cultural revisionism' because of its preoccupation with the deconstruction of signification and its failure to consider the market. Yet at the same time it makes Fordist assumptions about the relationship of the economic to the symbolic and about the malleability of the consumer. I will argue that paradoxically these internal contradictions have occurred just because of the theoretical neglect of the production and consumption of advertisements as products in themselves.

In order to demonstrate this conceptual slipperiness, this movement between Fordist and postmodernist theorisation, I want to look briefly at three recent books. The first is Thomas Richards' Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle 1851-1914 which was published by Verso in 1991 and is concerned to establish the consolidation of capitalism's 'semiotic hold' over England (1991:3). For Richards advertising is largely to blame for this and indeed for the spread of capitalism and the rise of commodity culture more generally (a claim of course contested by historians of consumer culture, see Brewer and Porter 1994). Advertising as a system of representation is not separable from capitalism, and is therefore unable to escape moral and political condemnation. Richards' book is suffused throughout with nostalgia for an idealised imaginary precapitalist past in which, it is claimed, commodities played no part in cultural discourse. Advertisers as agents - that is to say the people who make ads - are ambiguously constituted in the book: they are both present and absent. Thus on page 7 Richards claims advertisers 'dug their pincers deep into the flesh of late Victorian consumers...and sucked consumers, especially women, into the vortex of a master-slave dialectic'. In this melodramatic account advertisers are constructed as monstrous as well as material; a couple of pages later however, they are much less embodied. Here Richards argues that advertisers must be considered, 'not as subjects constituting discourse but as discourse inscribing subjects, not as a locus of authorship and authority', and that this will be his method (1991:12-13); (and indeed in a footnote he goes on to berate Michael Schudson (1993) - whose book on advertising remains one of the best in my opinion - for his concern with the trivia of what goes on in the boardrooms of agencies). So we see here, in Thomas Richards' book, a piece of work that is poststructuralist/postmodernist in its epistemological claims and discursive approach yet deeply Fordist in its totalising presuppositions about the relationship of spectacle to capitalism and about the gullibility of the consumer.

And it is worth noting briefly that here, as elsewhere in this genre of literature on advertising and consumption, the consumer who is gullible and easily duped by the machinations of the advertisers is usually explicitly female. Feminists have also played a part in the construction of this kind of theoretical perspective in which women are produced as victims, but since the early eighties, particularly within cultural studies, the focus has increasingly been on the ways in which (women) consumers, spectators and readers of texts are, on the contrary, often active and discriminating.<sup>6</sup> This latter perspective remains unaddressed by the critics of advertising and consumption that are being reviewed here.

Indeed it may well be that their reassertion of the importance of political economy is in some contradictory sense a part of a wider denial of the intellectual work of feminists over the last two decades. Regrettably there is no room to develop these ideas here, but I have argued elsewhere (Nava 1995) that concern about the passive consumer may well have been generated in the first instance as a response to anxieties about the feminisation of consumption and the imagined pleasure and power offered to women by excursions to the shops and cinema in the early decades of the twentieth century - to the increasing activity of women - and that this concern has made a significant contribution to the formation of an intellectual climate, and Fordist theories, in which the consumer and mass culture are disdained .

The second book I want to look at in the context of my argument about how advertising has been conceptualised is Robert Goldman's Reading Ads Socially (1992). This book (highly praised by Douglas Kellner) consists almost entirely of breathtakingly stratospheric textual analyses of specific ads and groups of ads, yet the theoretical framework (at least at the beginning of the book) is unequivocally Fordist/Althusserian: 'Advertising is a key social and economic institution in producing and reproducing the material and ideological supremacy of commodity relations', Goldman states. The task he has set himself is to understand 'the grammar of meaning in ads' in order 'to grasp their deeper ideological significance' (1992:2). But his polemical conclusions appear to precede the readings he produces; his decodings confirm over and over again his neo-marxist thesis about 'the political economy of commodity sign production' (1992:9) and the knowingness and intentionality of the advertisers. Although he gestures to the contribution spectators can make to the meanings that are produced, there are no 'real' unruly readers here who might produce different conflicting meanings; nor are there 'real' producers of advertisements. And like Richards, the readers he thinks are most targeted and he is most concerned to protect, are women. In the final two pages of the book, almost as an afterthought, he addresses the question of production (and like Lee et al, complains that production has been backgrounded in textual analysis: 'postmodernism ...fails to go beyond the 'texts' into the relations and practices that condition and inscribe the texts' he argues, 1992:228). But it is the production of the commodity that he briefly examines - the conditions of production of Reeboks themselves - not the production of the images which advertise Reeboks and which he so angrily and tirelessly deconstructs. About two thirds of the way through the book Goldman starts to address the issues raised by theories of postmodernism in his development of the idea of the more ironic knowing ads that 'wink' at the spectator. This new position though is a deeply dystopian Jameson-type postmodernism. There is no interpretive openness here, no 'infinite intertextual play of signifiers'. Metanarratives are not abandoned. Ambiguity in ads, argues Goldman, is no more than a masquerade - it is deliberate, part of the conspiracy: 'a function of market imperatives to seek commodity difference'(1992:212). Yet the market he lays claim to remains elusive, out of frame. Despite the theoretical-political conclusions and the passionately critical polemic, there has been no 're-coupling of production and consumption'.

The singling out of advertising by these two authors, their simultaneous contempt and fascination and their conviction that advertising, of all instances of visual communication in contemporary consumer culture, is somehow uniquely powerful and culpable in the perpetration of desire and production of commodity signs, is, as I have already pointed out, still surprisingly widespread. Armand Mattelart's Advertising International (1991) is one more example of a book published over the last few years which starts off from more or less the same political premise, but which has as its object of study the international operations of

the advertising industry, not the production of meaning in images. What is interesting here is that, despite the gloss on the back cover about the domination of international conglomerates and the attempt to demonstrate that the universalisation and commodification of culture has been caused by advertising, Mattelart is constantly brought up against the impossibility of his own totalising argument by the research that he himself has done. Thus his book also contradictorily (and usefully) reports on the failure of advertising campaigns and on the scepticism of much of the industry and its disseminating media about the effectivity of advertising; Mattelart quotes William Lever (of the Lever Brothers agency) in this respect: 'Half the money I spend on advertising is wasted. The trouble is I don't know which half' (Mattelart 1991:213).

So paradoxically investigations into the process of the production of ads and the recommended 'recoupling of production and consumption' in relation to ads - urged on us by the critics of 'cultural revisionism' and produced in this instance by Mattelart against the thrust of his own argument - actually seems to suggest a far more complex and haphazard situation than the back-to-theoretical-fundamentals thesis would seem to predict. To what extent is this confirmed by other research? And what are the theoretical implications?

### **The production of ads**

In order to understand the relationship of advertising imagery and campaigns to commodity production and political economy we must have some sense of the assumptions and operations of advertising and publicity as cultural industry. My argument in this section will be that the picture of the advertising industry which emerges with remarkable consistency from its own accounts, its trade magazines, interviews with workers at all levels and also from a few rare academic studies, is one of far more extensive demoralisation, fragmentation and suspension of belief than the 'Fordist' interpretive communities can accommodate within their theoretical paradigms.<sup>7</sup>

Over the last decade the advertising industry (not only in Britain) has increasingly suffered a crisis of confidence. Exacerbated by the recession of the early 1990s, this has precipitated a re-evaluation by both clients and agencies of the effectivity of advertising as a way of promoting sales. The formal and informal investigations which have been carried out by companies and their clients under the pressure of the new financial constraints have demonstrated remarkably little correlation between sales and the amount of money spent on advertising (Brignull 1992; Mattelart 1991). Indeed, as growing numbers in the industry are ready to concede, advertising is as much about promoting the corporate image of a company (or institution) to its rivals, clients and employees as it is about selling commodities to the consumer. In this sense it would be more appropriate to compare advertising operations to the status enhancement function of corporate buildings (for instance the acclaimed Lloyds building in London), company or institutional logos, employment policies and executive payment levels, and accordingly to assess them by a much wider range of design and commercial-administrative criteria.

One of the most important objects of concern for critics of advertising since the nineteen fifties has been market research, commonly assumed (without much supporting evidence) to be able magically to yield information which will enhance the production of commodity signs and sales. Yet scholarly research into its history, epistemology and methods - into market research as a regime of knowledge - is negligible and where it exists tends not break from the theoretical orthodoxies I have outlined.<sup>8</sup> In fact, a brief examination of current market research practices in the advertising industry reveals that much of it is by

academic standards surprisingly disreputable - a point not inconsistent with the industry's low estimation of its predictive value. It is often to be done to convince clients that agencies are worth investing in and may form part of a package which includes the creation of the adverts themselves. Sometimes a research report is promoted as a product in itself, despite its minimal value in relation to sales, and sold to other agencies in order to enhance their commercial credibility with prospective clients. An instance of this is the McCann-Erickson Youth Study of 1988, a massive and much-publicised longitudinal survey produced by one of the largest multinational advertising agencies in the world, which compared nineteen seventies findings with new research and claimed that 15-19 year olds in Britain constituted a distinct generation, the New Wave Young, who were markedly different in their values from the previous generation. In order to promote the research a number of expensive conferences were organised (Nava 1988) at which the senior vice president of the agency (billed as a graduate of the London School of Economics presumably to persuade prospective clients of her academic respectability) delivered a paper and issued smartly designed press-packs to all delegates so that they might have a taste of the much longer study. However the 20-page summary (no date or page numbers) indicated an astonishingly unrigorous piece of work with contradictions in every section. The conclusions drawn by the researchers often bore no relation to their own data. For example under the heading 'Morals and Values', the summary report claimed that Britain was now a 'post-permissive society' in which 'sex outside marriage is seen as wrong'. Yet it also announced on the same double-page spread that '10% fewer girls today than ten years ago think it is wrong' and 20% more girls 'might do it'.<sup>9</sup> Another unconvincing interpretation of the data is offered in relation to ideas about sexual equality. According to the report's own figures, 62% of young women in 1988, compared with 38% ten years earlier, believed that 'women should fight for total equality', yet this is construed to mean that 'It is no longer necessary to ape men, because young women have developed a separate value system.' It is hard to imagine what kind of purpose research like this has outside the commercial negotiations between clients and agencies. Even if it were able to represent the 'values' of young people with some accuracy it tells us nothing about how these values should be incorporated into textual strategies of representation in advertising or how young people with these different values interpret ads; nor what the relationship is of advertising to sales and the market.

It should not be assumed that, because of their location in the industry, all advertising workers take studies of this kind seriously. Many market researchers, like their colleagues in universities, have lost confidence in narratives of scientific truth and are becoming cynical about the value of their work and the possibility of correct or even useful answers; nonetheless in the face of the current job situation, they are prepared to abide by professional conventions. In comparison, the creative sector in advertising agencies has always been more openly sceptical. At the same conference the creative director responsible for the British Telecom ads publicly ridiculed not only the event and the concept of a New Wave Young but research in general. The limit of his own investigation, he told the audience provocatively, was a chat with his niece and nephew to find out which ads they liked the best. (Displaying commendable family loyalty, they reported that his were their favourites.) A media contractor from another major agency confirmed this perspective when he expressed an off-the-record view that the confidence of the industry in research and advertising was extremely low and there was now increasing agreement that media coverage of products was the most effective way of promoting sales. Research in this context functioned as a ritual which legitimised the existence of the agencies and facilitated the production of ads.

Market research was also held in low esteem by workers in the creative department of the London branch of the multinational agency Saatchi and Saatchi who said in interview that they thought it 'just a fucking joke...a load of client-serving bollocks paying lip service to objectivity,' (Fretten 1992:27).<sup>10</sup> Some advertising professionals articulate their scepticism and worries about the industry more formally, in writing and at conferences (Lury 1984), and even in narrative form within the ads themselves. An ad produced in 1989 by the agency of which Adam Lury is a partner showed a couple making love on a sofa with a television flickering in the background; the accompanying slogan said: 'Current advertising research says these people are watching your ad. Who's really getting screwed?'

This ad, addressed to clients and promoting the agency which made it, was unusual in making a direct connection between the issue of research and the content of ads. But although much cited for its insubordination and wit, its market effectivity was probably minimal - in fact Thames Television withdrew its £5,000,000 account from the firm (Mattelart 1989:153). Links between research departments and 'creatives' are these days likely to be far more tenuous than represented in this ad, partly because of the increasing fragmentation and 'flexibility' of the industry and the associated growth of small independent companies competing for creative briefs. But even prior to the present restructuring of the industry (which occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s partly as a consequence of the pressure to reduce costs), creative departments operated relatively independently within the larger companies and were staffed by graduates from art and film courses. This tendency has been consolidated over the last few years, with the near collapse of the British movie industry and the growth of temporary contractual relationships between large TV commissioning departments and small production companies which take on work from advertising agencies, or sometimes directly for the client, or for television, as it becomes available.

So, the organisation of production and, now more than ever, the cultural intermediaries and aspiring movie-makers - the producers of ads - are blurring the demarcation between advertising and other cultural forms. Creative decisions are based on experience and intuition, not on anything as grand as a 'science' of commodity signs. Visual codes used in ads operate across cultural forms. In general the approach of small production companies to the making of ads is not significantly different from the approach to the making of corporate videos, party political broadcasts, pop promos or AIDS information films.<sup>11</sup> In this, as in the production of other kinds of film and video, the concern is to win the recognition of peers and the public and to ensure more work. There is nothing particularly new about these objectives. Ads have for a long time been assessed according to criteria that bear no relation to marketing. The ultimate accolades in the world of advertising are, as in other areas of art, performance and cultural production, the prizes and recognition awarded by peers - by juries drawn from the creative sectors of the industry. The criteria in play are likewise those of other areas of cultural production such as technique, aesthetics, inventiveness, humour, narrative, even politics. The 1995 Campaign gold award for the best campaign of press advertising went to the Commission for Racial Equality series produced by Saatchi and Saatchi (art director Ajab Samrai Singh) (Campaign 28.6.1995) (see fig 1). As Lury has put it, 'awards juries do not incorporate market-place effectiveness into their judgements in any form whatsoever' (original emphasis, Lury 1994:92; see also Nava and Nava 1990).

This picture of the imperatives of cultural practice involved in the production process of the ad thus seriously contests the notion of a determining metanarrative of sales. It also challenges the assumed specificity of the form. The critiques mounted by Lee, Goldman,

Richards and McGuigan et al seem to presuppose that as a consequence of the unique relationship between advertising and commodities, advertising imagery can easily be distinguished at a formal level from all other cultural representations. Yet what we see is that the ways in which meanings are encoded in visual texts operate much more widely, across a range of discursive economies. Indeed the ability to decode ads at all relies on a familiarity with references produced and consumed elsewhere, on an effacement of boundaries between ads and other forms.

### **Consumption**

It will probably not come as a surprise to hear that those who stress the importance of production and markets and the recoupling of production and consumption have not done much work on consumption themselves. For instance, Goldman's elegant and provocative textual decodings are intended to reveal the ideological language through which ads are able to 'hail' the spectator. However whether spectators are indeed hailed, that is to say whether they identify with and are persuaded by the ads, or indeed, more mundanely, even begin to understand the complex meanings that Goldman claims the ads contain, is not addressed. But Goldman is not alone in overlooking this aspect of what ads mean to people. The fact is that very little ethnographic work has been done anywhere which might confirm or not the interpretations and projected readings of authors like Goldman and Richards.<sup>12</sup>

The theoretical disjuncture between analysing symbolic meaning on the one hand and exploring the interpretations of 'real' audiences on the other, is not confined to studies of advertising. For instance, within feminist theoretical work on film, the tendency to focus almost exclusively on (often psychoanalytic) readings of texts has existed in tension with a feminist cultural studies approach which focuses on how popular texts are made sense of and consumed. (Jackie Stacey's work on Hollywood cinema and female spectatorship, 1994, has been extremely useful in unravelling and reconciling these two perspectives.) Part of the project of this paper has been to highlight the lack of connection between symbolic analyses of ads and ethnographies of readers/consumers.

The advertising industry has of course carried out its own market research on how people respond to ads, but access to this data is limited and, as I have already pointed out, a critical reading of market research methods and epistemology has yet to be done. In the mean time there are fragments of research from media studies, cultural studies and anthropology that give some insight into the consumption of ads, and none supports the Fordist theorists. Ethnographic work on television viewing demonstrates the impossibility of understanding or measuring how people respond to what they look at, or indeed of establishing whether people going about their business in their own homes look very attentively at all (as the ad described above, of the couple on the sofa, graphically represented to us) (Ang 1992). New domestic technologies like videos and remote controls, mean that watching television is now more selective and sporadic than ever before, and ads, unless particularly pleasurable, are fast-forwarded at maximum speed by bored and sceptical viewers (Ang 1992; Nava and Nava 1990). What evidence we do have indicates that ads, like other texts, are in any case polysemic. That is to say, when people do watch ads, their aesthetic responses and their interpretations of what the ads are trying to say and whom they are addressing are not at all consistent or uniform. The multinational ad agencies themselves are well aware of the diversity of cultural responses; there is no tendency towards globalisation in the production and transmission of the ads themselves. Corporations are forced by cultural difference to have local offices and producers. Campaign, the British advertising trade magazine, reports regularly on different national, cultural and aesthetic codes about food and alcohol

consumption, clothes and hats, hairstyles and hair colours (red heads in France are for some reason presumed to smell more, so advertisers are warned against using them for fragrance ads, *Campaign* 13.5.94). Studies done in Trinidad by Daniel Miller have shown that readings within cultural and social groups are also idiosyncratic and contradictory. And of course if we then take into account knowledge of other texts, fashion, individual preference, psychic formation and all the other factors which make for diverse readings, what emerges is much greater interpretive openness than the textual analyses allow.

But it is not just how people interpret what ads are trying to say that is significant. It is also whether they are 'hailed' by them, whether they see themselves in the ad, whether the ad makes any impact. In fact the very pervasiveness of ads - the experience of being continually bombarded by signs - can operate against the creation of pleasure and desire. Cynicism and boredom about ads are widespread and part of a more general neurasthenia of postmodern culture. In fact the battle of the advertisers to overcome this boredom is what has led to the creation of so many witty, sophisticated, intertextually referenced and visually appealing ads. This has in turn produced more discriminating and skillful consumers, who (as research into the consumption of ads by young people has shown, Nava and Nava 1990) will consume the 'best' ads as cultural products in themselves, as they do video clips, movies and magazine images. And they will deploy the critical interpretive expertise, honed in the reading of ads, across a range of cultural forms. Lash and Urry describe this complex modern formation as heightened 'cognitive and aesthetic reflexivity', part of the new cultural competencies generated by the information society (1994).

This kind of analysis confirms once more that ads cannot be detached from what Wernick (1991) has so fruitfully conceptualised as 'promotional culture'. This refers to the complex of communications embracing not only commodities in the conventional sense but also politics, educational institutions and the self. Promotion, argues Wernick, is a 'rhetorical form diffused throughout our culture' (Wernick 1991:vii).<sup>13</sup>

### **Conclusion?**

It is paradoxical therefore that an examination of the production and consumption of ads, instead of leading us back to marxist fundamentals, as Lee, Clarke and McGuigan et al would hope, confirms the move into postmodernism.<sup>14</sup> Ads belong to the scopic regimes of late twentieth century life, to regimes of representation and regimes of consumption and looking that extend beyond the immediate iconography of capitalism, that are heterogeneous, differentiated, fragmented, yet part of the ubiquity of the visual and the pervasiveness of new forms of communication and cultural promotion. They cannot be collapsed into the production of commodities or interpreted as a key signifier of multinational capitalism. They do not constitute a unique cultural form.

So if this is the case why is it then, that advertising seems to elicit so much moralistic disapproval?<sup>15</sup> Why is it so frequently singled out as the bad object of the critic's gaze, even today, when the intellectual climate is ethically and politically so uncertain, and the pleasures of popular consumption so much more widely acknowledged? Why is advertising so much more incriminated than, say, cinema, magazines or corporate architecture? Why, additionally are some critics so provoked by the idea of commercial exchange, by the association of imagery and buying?<sup>16</sup> These are large questions and my observations here are brief and tentative. Nevertheless both questions and reflections are worth offering in order to interrogate the complex processes involved in the development of intellectual work and in the uptake of theoretical positions. One fruitful way of beginning to think about these issues is

suggested by the work of Roger Silverstone on television (1994). So far the link between advertising and television has barely been touched on, yet the antipathy and desire evoked by advertising images cannot be disentangled from the complex modern history of our relationship to television. Silverstone, in an innovative and fascinating chapter (ch 1) has argued that in the late twentieth century this item of domestic furniture and transmitter of stories operates as a kind of transitional object, comparable in (Winnicottian) psychoanalytical terms, to the breast and teddy bear, in that it functions as a kind of protective-defensive ritual to provide security and ward off social anxieties. Moreover, like other transitional objects, it is able to withstand attempts to destroy it; it can be turned off and on at will. Could it be the case that the ambivalent yet often surprisingly intense responses to advertising, the construction of the ad as a very bad yet quite seductive object with extensive socio-psychological powers, is in some sense a displacement from a much more fundamental infant relationship to television?

There is one last associated speculation which I think offers some insight into the fascination exercised by advertising. This emerges from the complex and contested history of the visual. Despite the pervasiveness of imagery in late twentieth century culture and the ocularcentrism (Jenks 1995) of modern western thought, the pleasures of looking have often felt peculiarly illicit, and indeed, iconophobia - the prohibition or dislike of certain kinds of images - has been widespread and continues to be so: for instance visual representations of 'explicit' sexuality are still a greater cause for concern than the literary. So to return to the production of intellectual work, we cannot assume that the critic's eye is more disengaged at the unconscious level than that of the ordinary consumer of ads. His or hers (ours) is as full of ambivalence, of lust, greed and guilt, as anyone else's. What the analytical gaze offers - the gaze of cultural studies - is permission to look and make judgements. It legitimises the voyeur's scopic investigation (Denzin 1995). It authorises the pleasures of looking while at the same time granting the satisfaction of repudiating and yet containing the culturally transgressive. In this way, by fixing advertising and attributing to it the injuries of our dependence on commodity capitalism, advertising texts are intellectually framed.

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## **Caption**

Fig 1: The Commission for Racial Equality advertisements produced by Saatchi and Saatchi which won the 1995 Campaign press advertising gold award for the best campaign (Campaign 28.6.1995).

## **Notes**

1. Lee refers specifically to Clarke (1991) but see also Frith and Savage (1993), McGuigan (1992) and Lee's book (1993). See also the colluquy between Garnham (1995) and Grossberg (1995) drawn to my attention after completing this article.

2. Cultural Studies and feminist analyses of consumption have frequently focused on the conceptualisation and experience of consumers/readers/spectators and on how texts are understood; see eg Winship (1981); Carter (1984); Radway (1986); McRobbie (1991); Nava (1992); Stacey (1994).
3. McGuigan includes among his targets Nava and Nava (1990).
4. In fact this kind of textual analysis fluctuates uneasily between proposing 'correct readings' and 'infinitely open readings'. But that is the substance of another argument.
5. This is not the place to unravel the interrelationship of postmodernism and poststructuralism. See Huyssen's argument for keeping them apart (1988).
6. For references see Endnote 2.
7. See Mica Nava (1988) 'Targeting the Young: What do the Marketeers Think?' an unpublished report of a two-day conference on 'The New Wave Young' organised for advertising agencies and their clients in April 1988; the points made in this section are also based on interviews and informal conversations with advertising professionals. Most important among the academic sources confirming this position are Schudson (1986) and Leiss, Klein and Jhally (1990). See also Adam Lury (a director of Howell Henry Chaldecott Lury) (1994).
8. A notable exception, which has just been brought to my attention, is Miller and Rose (forthcoming).
9. Apart from the patent inconsistencies in its own arguments, the report was also remarkably weak in its prediction of trends since today, eight years later, it appears that 70% to 80% of those same young people live with their sexual partners either without being married or before marriage.
10. McGuigan, in keeping with the logic of his political economy position, argues that it is part of the ideological stance of advertisers is to trivialise the significance of their work (1992:121).
11. A good example of ads which confound conceptual boundaries are those in the 1995 campaign against the proposed resumption of nuclear tests in the South Pacific by the French government.
12. Though see O'Donohoe and Schröder in this volume.
13. One of the best sections of the book is on the promotional university and the 'professorial CV' as literary construct; academics cannot fail to squirm at the itemisation of tactics used to enhance professional status. However the first part of book falls into many of same traps as Goldman in its projection of meanings, though is less moralistic and conspiratorial.
14. For the specificities of this debate see the helpful accounts of eg Huyssen (1988); Hutcheon (1993); Boyne and Rattansi (1990).
15. Schudson has also posed this question and explained it, in the Afterword of the revised edition of his book, in terms of the north American philosophical and political tradition (1993).
16. The critical neglect of consumption is addressed in Nava 1995.