Re-Decoding Advertisements

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In his book, Advertising International, Armand Mattelart argues that:

Advertising is no longer what it was, and nor is criticism. The list of critical writings on advertising is not very long. Since the end of the 1970s, the room they occupy on the shelves of libraries and bookshops has even shrunk, like old leather. (p. 200)

His marking of the late 1970s as the zenith before the nadir of recent advertising criticism is no doubt influenced by the 1978 publication of Judith Williamson’s Decoding Advertisements, still the best example of critical scholarship on the semiotics of advertising. Although the early to mid-1980s may have lacked many key critical attacks on advertising, Mattelart might have to reassess his conclusion because the above words were originally written in French in 1989.

In the 1990s, advertising scholarship has exploded. Scarcely a month goes by without some academic press promoting a new book on advertising, many of them written from a critical perspective. Reasons for the renewed interest in

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advertising criticism vary. First, critical scholarship of mass media in general is perhaps more cultivated than in the late 1970s and early 1980s. (Critical Studies in Mass Communication, after all, is little more than a decade old, having been launched in 1984.) Advertising, a form of discourse most obviously embedded in capitalism, is especially illuminated by critical approaches.

A more significant reason for the increase in advertising criticism is the upheaval that the advertising industry experienced in the 1980s, and the resulting effects in the 1990s of these changes. Reagan- and Thatcher-esque deregulation not only encouraged the growth of mega-ad organizations like the WPP Group, corporate owner of both Ogilvy & Mather and J. Walter Thompson, but also the acceptance of advertising dollars from (and influence by) financially stripped public institutions like public television. Such laissez-faire changes, of course, benefited the powers that be in advertising. Other changes, though, were not as welcomed by the advertising status quo. New media technologies made advertisers nervous. The fragmentation of the broadcast audience initiated by cable, and the ability of the audience to escape ads at least temporarily through remote controls (ZAP!), VCRs (ZIP!), and advertising-free media such as pay cable and video games, both of which seduce away prime markets, were bothersome. Similarly, the concern over the audience being overwhelmed by advertising (through "clutter") or cynical about advertising (through the development of third- and fourth-generation television-bred children) was reflected weekly in endless articles in trade journals such as Advertising Age. Successful businesses or industries, like Wal-Mart and in-store brands, thumbed their promotional noses at traditional advertising and marked the 1980s as a watershed decade for advertising.

These changes have encouraged the advertising industry to become much more sophisticated in its attempts at symbolic manipulation and much more expansive in its locus of concern. Advertisers themselves have spent billions to keep viewers from zapping and zipping, or from being bored by the same old techniques. Advertising organizations have expanded their activities and the social locations in which they promote their products. Scholars have not been blind to these dynamics. Most of the books reviewed here at least touch upon the above contextual changes in advertising like the regulatory Zeitgeist (Mattelart, Preston); the increased sophistication of advertising symbolism (Danna, Goldman); and the expansion of the advertising form and influence into different arenas of society (Danna, Mattelart).

I would argue that advertising scholarship is among the most diverse in media studies, which, in turn, reflects the diversity of corporate promotional activity. Advertising, unlike most other segments of the mass media, involves the three Fs: facts, fetishes, and funding, and each F has its own scholarly paradigms. Advertising's flirtation with the factual, for example, encourages scholarship that judges the rationality of advertising and how consumers can use advertising as a source of product information. Fetishism refers to the celebration of the commodity form in advertising, as well as to its image orientation, ripe pickings for ideological analysis. Finally, because advertising is the major source of funding for our mass media systems, many scholars focus on how advertising
influences, perhaps even occasionally controls, the media systems themselves.

Starting with scholarship dealing with the facts of advertising, Ivan L. Preston's book, *The Tangled Web They Weave*, is an example of what Malcolm Sillars (1991) describes as "accurate criticism," or a form of message analysis that asks, "Is this message truthful, and why or why not?" Although accurate criticism is the most established form of ad criticism (circa the 1890s, at least, with *The Ladies' Home Journal*'s muckraking attacks on patent medicine ads), many ideological critics describe with disdain accurate criticism as naively liberal and missing the larger power significance of advertising images. However, if we keep in mind its limitations, as Preston does, the systematic exploration of the truthfulness of ads that claim to persuade consumers through rational appeals adds another important piece to the advertising scholarship puzzle.

The book describes the current regulatory philosophy of deception in ads and theorizes about problems with this philosophy. Preston then creates a typology of the different ways in which advertising is deceitful and argues that regulators, advertisers, and consumers can correct, or at least cope with, falsity in advertising. Chapters are very short (52 of them in all) and are of two types. Some chapters are a general discussion of a legal or logical principle, like the exploration of how "branding" leads to misleading ads, because one brand (Aim toothpaste, for example) has to try its symbolic hardest to distinguish itself from competing brands (like Colgate) that materially are the same. Other chapters are case studies of famous instances in which advertisers have been caught with their hand in the fallacious cookie jar. One chapter, for example, deals with the infamous Volvo case, in which the roof of a Volvo was artificially reinforced to keep a Monster Truck from crushing it as it had other cars in the demonstration. Other chapters of interest involve infomercials, the image of the consumer assumed by advertising regulators, and the manipulation of survey techniques and results by advertisers.

Preston ultimately makes a strong case for the increased regulation of advertising's factual claims. Arguing that other national governments regulate advertising more actively than the United States, he highlighted a court case in Finland that found a McDonald's "feel good" ad to be deceptive because the ad "falsely leads people to believe that a Big Mac can replace friends and ease loneliness" (p. 154). U. S. courts would indeed be crowded if they were to apply such a philosophy to American advertising.

The casual and witty writing style and the case-study chapters make this book a potential supplementary text for basic undergraduate courses on advertising, communication law, argumentation, and rhetoric.

Despite the 1994 publication date of Preston's book, it really is a throwback to earlier advertising criticism. Most advertising criticism these days focuses on the ideological (including the creation of fetishes, commodity and otherwise). How does advertising legitimize or question (or encourage audiences to question) dominant values, institutions, and power relationships of society? One of the best recent answers to this question is Robert Goldman's *Reading Ads Socially*, essentially a sequel, and a worthy one, to Judith Williamson's 1978 foun-
Goldman’s main focus is on how advertising in the 1980s has adjusted to the savvy ad watcher, or those media literate consumers who are wise to advertising’s traditionally sexist portrayals or structural characteristics.

Five basic sections comprise Goldman’s book. The first section adroitly explains the elements and assumptions of Marxist semiological analysis, using perfume ads as the main example. Explaining the basic framing of elements of image ads is the focus in the second section. This section revolves around an interesting discussion of the symbolic import of what Goldman calls “the mortise,” or the portion of the ad that actually shows the product. Normally such an element might be considered symbolically uninteresting, but Goldman’s analysis shows how advertisers manipulate the mortise and other framing elements to steer possible audience interpretations to the preferred meanings. The third section deals with “legitimation ads,” or advertisements that attempt to celebrate the larger image of a corporation, often through strategic linkage with other dominant institutions like the family. Advertising’s adjustments to viewers of the 1980s drive the last two sections. Goldman turns his analysis in the fourth section to how advertising has successfully co-opted feminist references, and the last section deals with ads that attempt to appeal to media-smart viewers by either completely rejecting traditional advertising conventions, like the sexy Calvin Klein non-ads, or play off such conventions, like Levi’s 501 Jeans commercials that used video outtakes.

Goldman’s analysis of individual ads is rich in detail and at times provocatively outrageous, reminiscent of the work of my favorite advertising critic, Mark Crispin Miller. At one point, for example, Goldman interprets an ad for L’Egg’s pantyhose, with the slogan, “Being in control never felt so good,” and featuring an image of a businesswoman with a flat-as-a-board stomach. Goldman argues that one implied meaning of the ad is that the pantyhose-induced flat tummy “leaves the impression of not having been, or perhaps not intending to be, a childbearer. She appears ‘in control’ of her biology and, by extension, no problem to her employer because of maternity” (p. 110).

The most significant contribution of the book is its arguments about advertising’s relationship to polysemy and structured interpretation. Goldman argues that despite the celebration of multiple meanings and resistant readings in cultural studies scholarship, advertising often manages to stay ahead of such empowerment strategies by either framing the symbols of the ad in such a way as to cut down on undesirable (for the advertiser) interpretations, or even by co-opting polysemy. The last half of the book, especially, argues that advertisers understand many viewers’ proclivity toward resistant readings, and do their best to exploit that tendency. By being strategically ambiguous or polysemic, new wave advertising hopes to actually draw the attention of the critical viewer (constructing resistant readings, after all, is hard work that requires mental focus), to associate the idea of the resistant viewer with the product, and essentially to devalue the empowering activity “as another marketing ploy” (p. 171). Goldman’s book is an interesting cautionary tome for researchers focusing on the ideological powers of the active audience.
Less successful are two other books dealing with symbols and power in advertising, Kern-Foxworth's *Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus* and Danna's edited collection, *Advertising and Popular Culture*. These two books are variations on ideological analysis: the former a focus on the stereotype and the latter out of the American popular culture studies tradition.

Kern-Foxworth surveys the history of African-American stereotypes in advertising from the beginnings of the American colonies, before advertising became "massified," to the present. The first chapter, focusing on slave advertising, is especially interesting. In this chapter the author discusses ads in the 18th and early 19th centuries designed either to sell slaves, buy slaves, or offer rewards for runaway slaves. This chapter analyzes the ads as a source of information about slave life and is filled with fascinating information, including the claim that Harriet Tubman would adjust the timetable for her underground railroad because of slave ads: "She would usually make her journey on a Saturday night so that masters would have to wait until Monday to place advertisements in newspapers for slaves who had fled with her" (p. 21).

Organized roughly in a chronological order, other chapters focus on the different images of African-Americans in post-Civil War ads. Some chapters present case studies of particularly well-known stereotypical images, including a detailed chapter on Aunt Jemima, especially relevant in 1994 given the controversy over Gladys Knight's role as an Aunt Jemima endorser. Other chapters describe African-American protests against racist ads, look at the proportions of African-American models and images in ads compared to their actual population percentage, and review studies that focused on different audiences' reactions to various racial portrayals in ads.

There are a few problems, however. The work would greatly benefit from more theoretical and historical discussions of the advertising industry itself. In the slave advertisement chapter, for example, what do slave ads tell us about the nature of advertising and slave life, given the historical moment of advertising in which these ads appeared? Similarly, how do the semiotic techniques of advertising accentuate racist images? Is there something about the nature of advertising that encourages promotional discourse to be especially accepting of stereotypes (most advertising critics would say yes)? Also, most of the book is highly dependent upon secondary sources. In general, chapters are well-organized literature reviews, and I often found myself wanting less description and more of the author's original analysis. In particular, the book would have benefitted from a chapter that presented a deep interpretation of the most modern images of African-Americans in advertising. At one point in the book, the author mentions that racist imagery has become more subtle in modern advertising because of civil rights activists (p. 58). A chapter that deconstructed a sample of recent ads in this light would have been very interesting and valuable.

*Advertising and Popular Culture*, edited by Sammy R. Danna, offers a taste of the breadth of advertising criticism scholarship. Published by the Popular Press, this work represents the diversity of topics that marks the tradition of
American popular culture studies, especially the work influenced by scholars at Bowling Green State University. Again, applying Sillars' (1991) labels for different types of message criticism, this paradigm is generally not so much ideological criticism as "value criticism," characterized by a focus on how a popular culture message reflects the values of its sociocultural context. Such popular culture studies often apply a "mirror" metaphor to describe media, and this characterizes many of the chapters in Advertising and Popular Culture. The only problem with value criticism, though, is that it is sometimes light on theoretical sophistication and, frankly, not very interesting as a result.

Some of the chapters in the Danna book deal with advertising's changing nature over the past decade, consistent with a value-analysis orientation. The first chapter, for example, focuses on how advertising is exploring alternative media like "place based" media (Channel One being the most notorious example). Other chapters highlighting recent trends in advertising describe images of yuppies in ads, the ad industry's adjustment to an aging population, and advertising's depictions of nontraditional fathers. I found the two best chapters to be by Morreale and Buzzard on a series of ads for New England Telephone that camouflaged itself as a melodramatic serial involving a fragmented family, ultimately brought together, in the last commercial installment, by their telephone, and MacGregor's discussion of the racially problematic Golligwog doll.

However, if the Bowling Green tradition of topic diversity characterizes this book, so does that tradition's occasional lack of theoretical and analytical depth. Many articles simply described advertising phenomena rather than interpreting them critically. An article on perfume ads, for example, although well written, did not have nearly the analytical sophistication of Goldman's treatment of the same. Similarly, several articles failed to take advantage of previous research on advertising that would have contributed greatly to the scholarship. None of the 16 chapters, for example, cites Williamson's book, which would have provided theoretical and methodological insights to enhance the contributions of the book. Likewise, one chapter on the use of the Mona Lisa in advertising does not address the arguments of either Benjamin (1969) in the classic, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," or Berger's (1972) Ways of Seeing, both of which are required reading when discussing the mass reproduction and appropriation of high art in the mass media. The author's conclusion that ads for "low culture" products like Prince spaghetti sauce tended to ridicule the painting more than ads for "elite" products like fine china might have been amended, given Benjamin and Berger's argument that the reproduction of artistic objects by mass technological and capitalistic production by definition alters the art, regardless of the form of the reproduction.

The above works focus on the symbolic characteristics that are a part of the advertisements themselves, and the possible effects these symbols might have. Another school of advertising criticism, political economy, takes a more external focus by concentrating on the economic effects of advertising as a financial system rather than a symbolic system. One of the most extensive political economic treatments of modern advertising is Armand Mattelart’s Advertising Inter-
**national.** Revealing his scholarly focus on the economic rather than the symbolic, Mattelart argues that “advertising is no longer where the rub lies” (p. 121). According to Mattelart, the symbolic manipulations of the ads themselves are not as significant as the expansion of advertising's financing effect and mentality on information systems in general.

Mattelart skillfully combines economic and legal factors in his warning about the expansion of the advertising institution's economic influence in the global arena. Mattelart summarizes the economic changes both affecting and being affected by mass advertising:

> During the 1980s, the space occupied by advertising worldwide expanded considerably. The processes of deregulation and privatization of the systems of information and communication have opened up access to screens and targets which only yesterday, in the name of public service and interest, or the protection of vulnerable categories of the population, were kept closed. (p. 206)

The book is structured inductively. Starting with detailed examples, such as the development of the London-based agency Saatchi and Saatchi, Mattelart interweaves critical perspectives and analysis as the book moves on. The first few chapters focus on organizational and industrial examples: how the development of mega-agencies and megamedia have increased in size to maneuver throughout the world, using a series of case studies to illustrate the trends. Mattelart then devotes a chapter to the effect of deregulation on this process and moves on to how increased size and global philosophies affect advertising’s economic strategies and activities. Later chapters deal with the effect of global advertising upon media content, audience measurement, the categorization of audiences into lifestyles, and the application of an advertising model to other social activities like politics and academia.

As expected, much of the interest of *Advertising International* is the international focus that Mattelart puts on processes that have troubled scholars about American advertising: product placement in entertainment content, infomercials, increased media conglomerate growth, advertising audience research, and integrated marketing synergy, among others. Mattelart explains how these processes are best understood from a global vantage point. Given that this book was first published in 1989, Mattelart was indeed ahead of the criticism curve in his analysis of many of these expansive qualities of advertising.

Scholarship that grapples with the power of advertising is especially needed in an era when these powers are increasing. The ever-evolving symbolic techniques of advertising messages, or the leverage of advertising as a financial source on nonadvertising media messages, or the expansion of the commercial and promotional imperative to such social domains as politics, education, and health, demand increased academic scrutiny. Before the Energizer bunny begins pounding into our classrooms, media studies should do some more pounding of its own.
References


Marion Boyars.