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Joseph Turow and Matthew McAllister (Eds.), **The Advertising and Consumer Culture Reader**, Routledge, 2009, 456 pp., $103.29 (hardcover), $40.00 (paperback).

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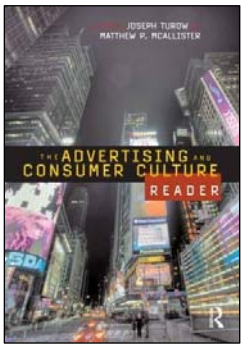

The impact of commercialism in shaping everyday culture is the focus of a new book, *The Advertising and Consumer Culture Reader*, edited by Joseph Turow and Matthew McAllister. Primarily approaching the topic from a critical perspective, 27 scholars reflect on the pervasiveness of capitalism in modern life that has transformed our culture into a consumer society. Collectively, the authors argue that not only are we beholden to the marketplace for all the material objects that surround us, but also that marketplace values have infiltrated all facets of social life, and have indelibly shaped our notions of love, community, self worth and even religion. In the consumer society, we are valued not so much for what we produce, but for what we consume.

As one of the fixers of capitalism, a significant portion of the book is centered squarely on the advertising industry. Several essays make the case that advertising promotes consumption by fetishizing material goods, but it also states that advertising serves as a system of ideology that inherently promotes the logic of capitalism. By linking material objects to universal ideals — such as happiness, success, etc. — advertising celebrates consumerism while simultaneously presenting an optimistic view of progress. Thus, advertising presents only ideal living when it suppresses the inequalities and contradictions that exist within a consumer society. As a result, commercial products become the answer to social problems and act as the centerpiece of human relationships.

The reader is organized into eight parts beginning with a historical account of modern day consumption. In separate essays, Raymond Williams (p. 13) and Susan Strasser (p. 25) argue that the consumer society is a relatively recent phenomenon that is tied to the industrial revolution and the mass production of standardized goods. Prior to this time, goods that could not be made in the home were, in general, purchased locally, but as production became a national rather than local endeavor, a system was needed to educate consumers on new products, and to distinguish competing brands from one another. These dynamics gave birth to the advertising industry, a thoroughly modern institution. Over the past century, advertisers have become proficient at imbuing commercial products with mystical qualities that extend far beyond their functional value.

Collectively, the book builds a damning case against the advertising industry. Several authors suggest that advances in both the sciences and the arts have allowed marketers to more effectively craft persuasive messages while the evolution of a highly sophisticated media system over the past century media has enabled marketers to reach consumers with highly vivid messages in ways never thought possible. Divided into eight primary sections, the authors reflect on several key themes, including

advertising's impact on objective media, production, globalization, cultural meaning, political advertising and the citizen-consumer.

In the concluding chapters, several authors offer some form of protest for the active citizen. Christine Harold (p. 348), for example, promotes "pranking" as a form of culture-jamming in which commercial symbols can be playfully turned against themselves. She cites the case of the Barbie Liberation Army, who pranked Mattel by replacing Teen Talk Barbie's voice chip with that of G.I. Joe. When young children opened their toys, Barbie exclaimed, "Eat lead, Cobra!" while G.I. Joe suggested, "Let's plan our dream wedding." In her essay, Naomi Klein (p. 369) encourages schools, religious organizations and other large non-profit organizations to exercise their economic clout by holding their suppliers accountable for their production practices. The book, however, ultimately concludes with a bleak vision of the future. In a discussion framed in apocalyptic terms, several authors foresee a future in which the influence of capitalism extends far beyond what Marx could have imagined. In one of the text's final chapters, scholars Ruskin and Schurz invite us to consider the situation and "disgust among" ourselves.

In the midst of global economic crisis, the text does offer some important reflections into the cost of immersing ourselves wholeheartedly into consumerism, and perhaps this will give some readers some pause. For the scholar, the reader serves as a good resource for bringing together several important texts about the ethics of consumption in modern life and the essays are most effective when they offer some insight into how brands and advertising actually work. For example, several essayists make the essential point that commercial products are artifacts of culture, and that advertising serves a cultural system providing the coordinates of meaning that make the physical world consistent and comprehendible. Consumers are believed to look to the commercial world to infer essential information about which people, objects, practices and social institutions are important in contemporary society.

Several of the text's authors find unique and refreshing ways of exploring this theme. For example, Schudson (p. 237) draws the comparison between advertising and social realism, state-sanctioned art in the Soviet Union. Working in much the same way, advertising presents a vision of reality not as it is, but as it should be — life worth emulating. But while Soviet art idealizes the producer, American advertising idealizes the consumer. As Schudson (p. 251) sharply points out, "advertising is capitalism's way of saying 'I love you' to itself." In "Reflections and Reviews: An English Teacher Looks at Branding," James Twitchell connects our relationship with brands to developments in Romantic poetry. Like Keats' "Grecian Urn," audiences animize and engage with material objects, allowing brands to play essential roles in modern day storytelling.

At times, the essays and case studies highlight the pervasiveness of commercial dynamics. When reading Inger Stole's article on cross promotion in 1950s daytime programming, it is hard not to compare how products are used to subsidize another cheaply produced genre, the reality television show. Still, other essays fail to consider new issues that have arisen in recent decades. Beginning in the mid-1980s, the advertising industry has undergone several profound changes largely related to globalization. First, the advertising industry has experienced tremendous consolidation where much of the world's advertising dollars are in the control of just a handful of multinationals. Second, an increased flow in transnational migration has resulted in an influx of new immigrants, dramatically altering the consumer landscape.

Finally, advances in communications technology and the proliferation of media channels have not only offered marketers more opportunities to connect with consumers, but have also changed the very nature in which marketers and consumers engage with one another.

These changes to the field have been significant, yet they go largely unexplored in this reader. Instead, the authors focus their efforts on revisiting familiar themes. For example, globalization does receive some attention, although it is largely related to issues of gender identity within the national context. What is overlooked, however, is how advertising agencies themselves have become global corporations, and now have the organizational structure to craft global consumer segments that extend far beyond the nation state. In short, identity is no longer the purview of the nation, but is formed largely through consumption behavior. There are, of course, implications to this process. Certainly the dominance of global ad networks makes the process of homogenization more efficient**,** but what about other consequences? How do we account for the construction of a global black identity in which commercial products play a central role? Again, spirited discussion on the topic is conspicuously absent.

At the heart of the matter is the book's overall view of consumer agency, of which there is little beyond formal protest. Several of the essays refer to advertising as "modern day religion," but today's consumers are not necessarily commercial fundamentalists who take a literal interpretation of advertising. Thus, the book ignores that the scholarship that argues that persuasion is discursive, not unilateral, and that consumers are actively negotiating commercial messages and using commercially branded products in ways not necessarily intended by the marketer. Hebdige's work on British punk culture and Cosgrove's work on Zoot Suiters in East Los Angeles provide compelling arguments that subcultures can resist homogenization precisely through the use of commercial products. Furthermore, while new technology has allowed marketers to become more invasive, it has also empowered consumers to take a more active role in contesting and re-appropriating commercial meaning. The overwhelming perspective of the book is that the only way to exist within consumer society is to become absorbed by it or to rebel against it, but it does not allow for the multiple smaller ways in which consumers may control commercial meaning.

The book's treatment of minorities and women is particularly problematic. These groups are characterized as being especially vulnerable to advertising and from this perspective, the book's discourse seems particularly outdated. It is widely acknowledged that advertisers have not been kind to women, although discussions of gender have become more multi-faceted in recent years. The question today is not whether advertising presents women with an unattainable image of self. This claim is beyond discussion and it is hard to imagine the scholar who would take a contrary view. The new question is whether *Dora the Explorer* can be both a lucrative commercial brand, and also be an icon of feminist ideals.

Similarly, and despite their growing economic clout, ethnic minorities receive very little attention in the reader. Watts and Orbe examine how advertisers construct versions of black identity that are palatable to white audiences, and likewise, Robyn Goodman dedicates part of her cross-cultural study examining how Latinas negotiate images found in magazines. Again, these essays explore familiar themes but do not address more complex issues regarding advertising and ethnicity. Of particular concern is the role of advertising in public discourse. Of all the essays, only Goldman raises the point that advertising

may serve as an alternative voice in the public sphere. But in a moment in the nation's history where discourse on immigration has become toxic, Pepsi's rhetoric of inclusion, empowerment and reassurance to Latinos serves as a refreshing alternative to public discourse that has framed immigrants as criminal. Perhaps the more relevant and interesting question is: What are the implications of this dialogue?

There are smaller, less problematic issues like the reader's fascination with the iconic superbrands (e.g., Nike, Coca Cola) and their preoccupation with magazine ads and 30-second television spots. Certainly, they are more compelling and make the case more strongly; after all, it is easier to make a case against tobacco than it is to make one against nasal spray. But what about the less compelling, but equally effective radio spot or online banner that make up the vast majority of advertising? Ultimately, this was not the spirited dialogue that Turow and McAllister promise in their introduction and the 27 authors appear to be more in agreement than in dialogue. While the reader addresses an important topic in modern society, the text may have been better served by exploring the multiple dimensions of the consumer society by including alternative voices and competing points of view.

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