**The Panoptic Role of Advertising Agencies in the Production of Consumer Culture**

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Advertising’s role in promoting an ideology of marketed consumption has been widely commented upon by critical theorists yet the mechanisms through which this influence becomes manifest remain relatively under-examined. In particular, there has been no explicit examination of the mediating role of cultural knowledge in the production of ideologically driven advertising. This paper invokes the panoptic metaphor to position the knowledge gathered by and on behalf of advertising agencies as a major dynamic in the production of consumer culture. The consumer of advertising is a known entity for advertising agencies: the subject is watched, filmed, questioned, recorded, and tracked. Indeed, consumer biography and subjectivity itself has become material that is both produced and consumed by advertising agencies in order to produce culturally constitutive advertising. The paper integrates disparate literatures to situate knowledge of consumer culture at the hub of advertising’s constitutive ideological influence.

INTRODUCTION

Research on advertising has paid relatively little attention to the role of cultural knowledge.

Exceptions are found in the work of Mick and Buhl (1992) and Scott (1994a,b) who each

showed that a considerable order of cultural knowledge must be invested in an advertisement

before a consumer can draw any meaning from it. It follows that advertising agencies must

tap into the cultural knowledge of consumers in order to design advertising that has the

potential to resonate with meaning for particular consumer cultural communities. Critically

informed work on advertising (e.g. Elliott and Ritson 1997; Leiss et al. 1997) situates

advertising as a major site of ideological influence yet has not hitherto focused on the cultural

knowledge implicit in the consumption, and therefore in the creation, of advertising. This

paper invokes the panoptic metaphor to tease out the critical implications of this omission in

the literature and to situate the consumer cultural knowledge gathered and held by

advertising agencies at the hub of advertising’s ideological mechanism.

There has been a limited but important range of research pointing to advertising’s cultural

influence. Elliott and Ritson’s (1997) post-structuralist analysis draws on the Foucauldian

notion of power as a constitutive effect that is realized in the linguistic and other

micropractices of daily life. Hence, advertising can be seen to have a powerful culturally

constitutive effect that is ideological in character. Working from a semiotic perspective

McCracken (1986) has suggested that advertising generates new cultural meanings by

expropriating symbolic meanings that are extant in non-advertising culture and then placing

them in suggestive association with consumption opportunities. Implicit within this general

viewpoint is a theory of (or a set of suppositions about) how the consumer-advertising

relation is realized as a cultural phenomenon. This paper contends that this relation can be

better understood by focusing on the knowledge of consumer culture that advertising

agencies use as the source material for developing creative advertising. The nature of this

knowledge is problematic. It is both produced and consumed by advertising agencies in the

course of developing individual creative advertising campaigns. It is sometimes codified but

is often not: in can range from the highly formal and systematic study of consumers,

markets and consumption to the informal, ad hoc, semi-articulated observations, insights

and intuitions that inform creative development. In this paper I use the term “consumer

research” in a broad sense to indicate all the possible sources of knowledge about consumers

that advertising agencies draw upon, both the formal and the informal. I suggest that this

vast amount of knowledge is the interpretive material from which advertising is constituted

as a culturally resonant thing. Advertising agencies can be seen, then, as repositories of

cultural consumer knowledge. This knowledge mobilizes advertising’s potentiality as a

vehicle of cultural meaning and, hence, in the aggregate, enables advertising as an

ideological force.

It is difficult to mount a discussion around the cultural force of advertising unless the

artificial distinctions between promotional activity are dissolved so that “advertising” can be

seen as a wave of marketing consciousness that sweeps over consumers in developed

economies. Hence the term “advertising” is used here in a broad sense to refer to any

communications activity whatsoever that, at some level, has a marketing motive. This

perspective allows advertising to be seen as a cultural totality. Introductory managerial texts

on advertising or marketing communications tend to mark a distinction between various

forms of promotion. “Advertising” tends to be carefully defined and differentiated from sales

promotion, direct mail, “e”-marketing communication and other aspects of the

“communications mix”. Some academic texts have begun to recognize the artificiality of

such distinctions: Percy et al. (2001) point out that “people generally look at all marketing

communications as ‘advertising’: from a strategic standpoint, they are right-

. . .everything. . .is. . .advertising.” (p.v). Major advertising agencies recognize the integrated

and inter-textual character of promotional activity and consider communications planning in

a broad strategic sense. It is clear from historical analyses of advertising such as those of

Leiss et al. (1997) and Marchand (1998) that corporations have intuitively understood the

integrated and symbolic character of marketing communications for a long time. Indeed, the

sub-categorization of marketing activity into ever more discrete elements can itself be seen

as an ideological strategy since it silences the critical voice by representing marketing

communications activity as a set of ethically neutral technical disciplines that is, implicitly,

culturally trivial (Hackley 2001 p. 103). Hence this paper considers advertising as an

overarching category of marketing communication that invades, shapes and reflects

consumer consciousness from any number of trajectories from within interlocking and

integrated media and corporate interests.

Advertising agencies use neo-positivistic approaches to advertising research such as “copy

testing”, often in quasi-experimental settings, and survey research. Increasingly, they also

make extensive use of consumer research approaches deriving from the interpretive

traditions including semiotics, ethnography (or more accurately quasi-ethnography),

anthropology and discourse analysis. It is well known that consumer research in advertising

development makes use of qualitative data generated through, for example, focus groups,

two-way mirrors, observation, action research, depth interviews, mediated introspection,

subjective accounts, consumer diaries (written or video recorded) and consumer biography.

Ogilvy in New York have a “discovery team” of anthropologists who feed consumer insights

into the planning process while planners at DDB Needham Worldwide (also of New York)

conduct medium term anthropologically inspired “deprivation studies” to generate insights

into particular consumption practices.1 In London agencies the use of semiotics, discourse

analysis and “quasi-ethnographic” techniques is increasingly common in brand and

communications planning, especially in new technology areas (Elliott 2001). The advertising

industry’s espousal of such approaches can be seen in a cynical light as part of the advertising

agency marketing effort to clients. However, it also implies that, somewhere in the industry,

the paucity of insights from neo-positivist advertising research has been acknowledged

(a paucity alluded to in, for example, Kover 1995 p. 605) Such research informs creative

advertising strategy but the ways in which this happens are not unproblematic or transparent.

Knowledge of the consumer in advertising agencies tends to be a highly contested area. This

knowledge is played out, interpreted, re-interpreted in the formation and conduct of

advertising campaigns in ways which are subject to internal political battles in agencies and

which are, furthermore, informed by discourses that influence agency personnel from the

world outside (Hackley 2000a,b). Creative professionals in ad agencies are known to adopt

an idiosyncratic but perceptive stance on consumer research (conceived broadly as the

assimilation of consumer cultural knowledge) in order to better understand the consumers

with whom they must communicate.Within advertising talk of qualitative consumer research

and also of creativity is often informal and colloquial (Kover and James 1995; Hackley

2000a). Creative staff employ informal theories of communication (Kover 1995) to order

their thinking about advertising creativity and its power to disarm consumers, resonate with

their fantasies and aspirations and normalize consumption practices. This kind of broadly

interpretive understanding resides in agencies as knowledge not as codified facts but, rather,

as folklore or cultural knowledge. This knowledge may have an intuitive, semi-articulated,

discursive character, and it may but often does not derive from relatively formalized

approaches to data gathering. So representations of the consumer that circulate within

advertising agencies tend to be tentative, relatively un-codified and contested. Agencies are

very poor at collating and archiving consumer knowledge: the results of consumer research

are highly disposable. Nevertheless, this paper will contend that the surveillance,

categorization and interpretation of consumer data by advertising agencies represents a

significant dynamic driving advertising’s ideological force. Indeed, it is the very

insubstantiality of the knowledge about consumers that it gives its ideological character: it

is largely hidden from public view and yet it is the primary production material for

advertising agencies.

ADVERTISING RESEARCH AND THE ROLE OF CONSUMER CULTURAL

KNOWLEDGE

Relatively little advertising research has explicitly drawn attention to advertising’s culturally

constitutive and ideologically driven character. Exceptions include Stern (1996) which uses

advertising character Joe Camel to illustrate deconstructive strategy for consumer

researchers. While this analysis shows that advertising meanings are contested and

interpretation can never be closed or final, it also shows the extent and subtlety of cultural

knowledge implicit in an ad. Furthermore it shows how ideologies (in this case ideologies of

gender construction and attendant power relations) can resonate through advertising even as

apparently innocuous as a cartoon character. Elliott and Ritson (1997) have conducted an

extensive post-structuralist examination of advertising as a dialectical yet

profoundly ideological cultural influence. Advertising is cast not merely as a super-ideology

but as “the form of ideology which now surpasses and supplants all others” (Elliott and

Ritson 1997, p. 204). For these authors the “polysemic” meaning potentiality of an

advertisement does not dilute advertising’s ideological force. Most research focusing

specifically on advertising (as opposed to research that focuses on symbolic consumption and

invokes advertising as a vehicle mobilizing consumption practices) has tended to take the

individual consumer as its unit of analysis (Ritson and Elliott 1999, p. 261, citing McCracken

1987, p. 123, and Holbrook 1995, p. 93). In other words consumers have been held to engage

with advertising as if in a social vacuum. Crucially, ignoring the social context of advertising

obscures the tendency for consumers (of advertising) to de-couple advertisements from their

product referents and to creatively adapt advertising meanings for discursive purposes of

social positioning that are entirely removed from product usage. Advertising’s role as a

source of cultural meanings can be more clearly delineated when it is acknowledged that the

continuum linking marketed products and services with advertisements dissolves when

advertising becomes part of the consumer’s discursive repertoire in its own right. Ritson and

Elliott’s (1999) ethnographic study of the uses of advertising among adolescent groups in the

UK clearly shows how this effect can take place. The evidence that consumer groups create

new and novel cultural meanings from advertisements implies that a clear distinction cannot

be drawn between the culturally constituted World and advertising. Advertising is revealed

as an intimate feature of the culturally constituted world. Among other works that have

included a collective perspective on advertising as cultural phenomenon is that of

McCracken (1986) who pointed out the major role of advertising in realizing the cultural

significance of consumption and consumer goods. For McCracken consumer cultural

meaning is dynamic and has a “mobile quality” (p. 71) that resists static analyses.

Advertisers, along with designers, producers and consumers themselves are said to form a

framework within which cultural meaning flows in a fluid process that defies the

“personobject” relational perspective that typifies much research in the area (p. 71).

McCracken argues that consumer goods, invested with symbolic value, “are both the creators

And creations of the culturally constituted world” and advertising is positioned in this effect

as an “instrument of meaning transfer” (p. 74).

However, McCracken’s (1986) exposition of the creative advertising development process

(pp. 74–76) pays no explicit attention to the role of consumer cultural knowledge.

Neglecting this role hinders the critical examination of advertising as an ideological force.

Panopticism acts to create knowledge and thereby generate material than can be used to

acquire power. Where this is most powerful in constituting realities it is an invisible force.

Consumers can see the puppets but not the strings. Advertising as a super-ideology (Elliott

and Ritson 1997) turns on the fulcrum of consumer interpretation. There is a centre, a source

of insights, a “center of formation” (Gramsci 1971) from which the most powerful

advertising radiates. This centre is the advertising industry with its skill in gathering and

interpreting consumer cultural knowledge in order to fashion culturally resonant advertising.

This conception of knowledge may seem insubstantial and vague. But a condition of

ideology is that its source remains unknown to those formed by it (Eagleton 1991). And

indeed the power of advertising to reach into consumer lives by expropriating and re-forming

cultural meanings is obscured. Knowledge rendered scarce confers power (Barlett 1989).

Knowledge rendered mystical or obscure (such as, for example, when advertising’s cultural

resonance is mystified as “creativity”) is effectively rendered scarce and, potentially,

similarly powerful to those who own and understand it. The “indefinable creative brilliance”

discourse in a long-standing advertising industry tradition (Kover and James 1995). But

pragmatic creative staff knows that their work must solve a commercial problem by

connecting with consumers in some way. As such creative work in advertising can only be

effective or striking to the extent that it taps into the cultural meanings and practices of local

consumption communities. Advertising agencies engage in the gathering and interpretation

of these cultural meanings so that creative work can be grounded in consumer meaning

(Hackley 2000a). Creative advertising can, then, be seen as a function of the interpretive

social insight and skills of consumer researchers as well as the technical craft and creative

imagination of creative staff. Advertising creativity can be seen to hinge on the extent to

which cultural meanings can be extracted from the consumer’s milieu and re-formed in

juxtaposition with marketed meanings. In this way advertising’s ideological power to

promote consumption by valorizing marketing objects is mobilized. As McCracken (1986)

avers, in order to accomplish the desired meaning transfer from culturally constituted

meanings to product, the creative advertising must utilize culturally constituted meanings

that will suggest the association desired by the agency. These might include interior or

exterior settings for the advertisement, models, body postures, gestures, clothing and any

other means of signification that features in the ad. By implication, if the agency takes the

wrong creative turn then the association suggested by the advertisement may not be accepted

by the targeted consumer: it may be found implausible, unappealing or it may simply not be

understood. Detailed deconstruction of advertising meanings (e.g.Williamson 1978) implies

that just one discordant element in an ad packed with visual, textual and auditory signs could

turn off the targeted consumer and render the ad meaningless for them. To cast this point in

another way, Barthes (1993) referred to denotative meanings in semiosis. Denotative

meanings are second order meanings that work to naturalize advertising images and allow

consumption practices to be portrayed as a natural part of the social order. These second

order meanings can be seen as preconditions for culturally bound semiosis. Ad agencies’

knowledge of consumers facilitates creative advertising development by generating a stock

of denotative meanings that are the source material of creative, and ideologically powerful,

advertising. As a “message” an advertisement can be evaluated and found wanting, or

appealing. But, as anyone who has watched television with young children will confirm, a

great deal of learned cultural knowledge must be invested in an ad in order to “read” and

understand it. The complexity of understanding that goes into “reading” an advertisement is

easily underestimated. Within this complexity there must be an element that established that

the consumption practice portrayed or symbolized in an ad is a normal part of cultural life.

Mick (1986) uses advertising to exemplify the nature of semiotic significance for

understanding symbolic consumption. Advertising can be seen as a “cultural document. . .a

way of construing” (Sherry 1985, p. 1–3, cited in Mick 1986, p. 203). Mick also draws on

previous work by McCracken and Pollay (1981) and Leach (1976) to draw attention to the

“objects, persons and activities” that advertisement bring together with the product in order

to suggest resemblances in the hope that the audience will “transfer properties between the

co-present entities” (p. 203). Once again this analysis considers the way in which an

individual consumer who has cultural understanding of that particular advertisement might

read the advertisement. The link (or transference) from semiotic suggestion to product is an

assumed possibility. What is not considered in Mick’s (1986) analysis is the extent to which

advertising meanings can spiral out into consumer culture, splitting and attaching to other

signifiers, and becoming signifiers themselves. Advertising intertextuality (Brown 1995)

takes meanings deriving from advertising, newspapers and movies to suggest new meanings

in relation to marketed products, people, political parties, charities, services, countries or

anything else that requires an engagement with marketing. Hence the advertising “message”,

and also the more subtle semiotic suggestions that valorize products in terms of

extraconsumption values, are similarly made possible by the extent to which the ad employs

currently important and resonant signifiers. In this sense the present paper is in accordance

with McCracken’s (1986) thesis: advertising’s aggregate effect is in large part conducted on

a level of cultural semiosis. That is, there is a level of meaning-making that is a precondition

for advertising interpretation. Clearly the semiotic perspective can invoke an infinite regress:

the preconditions for interpretation ultimately entail biological semiosis, communication

between cells. Rather, it is suggested here that advertising agencies have to learn, then

employ, quite specific cultural vocabularies as a precondition for advertising specific

consumption practices to particular consumer groups. McCracken’s (1986) exposition of

creative advertising development underplays the role knowledge about consumers plays in

creatively resonant advertising. Ad agencies must acquire knowledge of consumers’

symbolic meaning-systems in order to invest the advertising development process with its

culturally meaningful potentiality. Support for this general argument can also be found in

Scott (1994a,b). Scott (1994b) suggests that reader-response theory can articulate the ways in

which consumers read advertisements as if they were literary or dramatic artifacts. Self

evidently many advertisements have a rudimentary or condensed narrative form. But Scott

points out that the narrative element of the ad has often been regarded as an “entertaining

distraction”. Consequently the “real” business of consumer

and advertising research has been seen as the task of analyzing how brand information is

processed as if it were cognitively distinct from the context in which it is presented. “Since

even the music and pictures in an ad are cultural constructions that must be ‘read’ before they

are understood (Scott 1990; Scott 1994a,b), every response to an ad depends first on the

cognitive activity of reading text” (p. 463). Scott considers the ways in which consumers

engage with advertising in a much broader light than conventional advertising research has

tended to do. She suggests that “Ads are crafted by people who share a social milieu with the

audience, and thus reflect collective cultural knowledge and imply the probability of

response” (Scott 1994a,b, p. 468, citing Iser 1978;Bakhtin 1989).This is supported froma

general consumer research context

by Thompson et al. (1994) who draw attention to the cultural knowledge that “underlies the

meanings expressed by consumers” (p. 432). Scott (1994b) points out that “reading” an

advertisement requires a strategy that is part psychological and idiosyncratic, part culturally

learned. The cultural knowledge required to begin to interpret advertising was impressed

upon me when I stayed in New York to conduct depth interviews with advertising

professionals. In spite of our common use of English and my long standing professional

interest in advertising I could not, and cannot, “read” a great deal of US advertising because I

lack the localized cultural knowledge that is a precondition for interpretation.

Scott’s (1994b) analysis differs in several respects from the semiotic perspectives

mentioned previously. Scott points out that semiotic explanations tend to be regarded as

structuralist, that is, they assume a deep structure of semiotic codes that subsist at some level

of material reality. These codes have to be tapped into for communication to occur. “Reader

response theory” is a collective term for a broad collection of approaches which share a focus

on the cognitive strategies that readers bring to reading. This contrasts with the emphasis

literary criticism has traditionally placed on meaning as it resides in the structural or formal

properties of texts. Scott’s (1994b) reader response perspective differs from Ritson and

Elliott (1999) in that it focuses on advertising interpretation as a subject–object relation

which, although dependent on learned “cultural/textual conventions” (p. 463), is enacted

within a cognitive space and not, as Ritson and Elliott (1999) maintain, within a social space.

Scott is critical of traditional advertising research because it typically assumes that brand

information can be directly extracted from the ad by readers, “. . .truncating the process that

lead to response in a way that seriously distorts our view of both advertising and the mind that

reads it.” (p. 463). This truncation results in a naive position that leads to a crude

categorization of advertising “appeals” such as humor, emotion and sex as if such categories

represent unproblematic unities beyond interpretation and distinct from advertising context.

This approach misrepresents the psychology of advertising interpretation and grossly

simplifies the cognitive complexity of reading a text. It also assumes that interpretations

converge within particular consumer communities. As the other studies cited above suggest,

advertising is itself a consumption practice and as such assumes a highly malleable symbolic

quality. Semiotic, discourse analytic, ethnographic and reader response approaches alike

share a concern with meaning and its interpretation. Scott (1994b) often uses “cognitive

processing” phraseology to refer to the psychological character of reading an ad but this

usage does not imply adherence to the assumptions of the cognitive information processing

paradigm. On the contrary, Scott makes it clear that readers actively construct the meaning of

advertisements. In the cognitive information processing approach meaning is taken to be

implicit in the construct “information”.

Hence, broadly interpretive approaches to examining the ways in which consumers engage

with and understand advertising differ in important respects, for example with regard to

structuralist or post-structuralist forms of explanation and critical and non-critical analyses,

and also with regard to the asocial or social character of advertising interpretation.

Nonetheless, the concern with meaning as an actively constructed experience places them all

in a category that is philosophically removed from the mainstream research enterprise that

regards advertising texts as messages to be processed as primarily economic information.

Mick and Buhl (1992) express this distinction clearly when they offer a model of advertising

as it is experienced from an idiographic standpoint. They maintain that “. . .conventional

theories and research. . . [assume that]. . .ads are. . .relatively fixed stimuli. . .while consumers

are studied as if they are solitary subjects, without identities, who react to ads through linear

stages or limited persuasion routes, for the principal purpose of judging brands (Buhl 1991).

McCracken (1987) labels this view the information approach to advertising”. (p. 317).

On this broad interpretive perspective the meaning potentiality of an requires that the ad is

loaded with cultural knowledge. In the absence of this cultural knowledge interpretation

cannot commence, or at least is severely distorted. In the present paper it is suggested that the

“shared social milieu” (Scott 1994b) within which this cultural knowledge resides is subject

to re-representation within advertising agencies. Rather than being a taken-for-granted

knack, a matter of creative genius, or perhaps a “common touch” invested in the creative

director, the consumer’s social milieu is imported into the agency by means of devices of

organization. These include the custom and practice in the industry that allows creative staff

a high degree of autonomy to leave the premises and engage in the informal research

practices of going to the movies, traveling on public transport or joining with consumers in

any given consumption practice on company time. It also includes techniques employed by

the agency to save the time of creative staff by bringing the consumer’s social milieu (or the

insights residing within the social milieu) to the creative’s desk through relatively

systematized consumer research functions. Scott argues that reader response theory can offer

a richer understanding of how consumers engage with advertisements but remains grounded

in an advertising-object (reader) relation. Hence the cultural level of analysis and with it an

appreciation of advertising as ideology is not a major part of Scott’s (1994b) analysis.

However, Scott’s insights into the complexity of the consumption of advertising makes it

clear that advertising agencies must be major repositories of cultural knowledge. While

agencies offer clients a strategic marketing communications and creative execution service,

the reason they have been indispensable to corporations is because they generate this basic

vocabulary of consumer cultural meanings from which creative advertising is crafted.

Corporations tend to act within a self-referential matrix of managerial control, inwardly

directed to issues of resource allocation and the attendant political battles for power.

Advertising agencies act as their window to the world.

THE PANOPTIC METAPHOR

The metaphor of panopticism is applied here to illustrate the constitutive cultural effect of

and the disciplinary power exercised by, the gathering and interpretation of consumer

research in advertising agencies. This is conceived here as knowledge of consumer culture.

To the extent that denotative meanings represent malleable but temporally relatively stable

structures of meaning in the individual consumer’s psychological landscape the observation,

categorization and assimilation of such meanings into creative advertising can be seen to be a

panoptic effect. It is based on an intimate and all-encompassing consumer surveillance that

generates knowledge about the particular cultural meanings that will valorize and legitimate

consumption practices for particular market segments of consumers. This knowledge is used

to reproduce structures of ideological domination in the corporate interest. The process is

inherently ideological because as consumers we are largely unaware of it and we willingly,

even eagerly, partake in it. The process is hidden not only because consumers have little

knowledge of the advertising development process. It is also largely hidden from the

marketing industry itself because few advertising agencies or marketing institutions

understand well the role that informal interpretive consumer research plays in providing the

denotative cultural meanings that are the creative material from which advertising derives

much of its ideological force.

The ideological power of advertising which valorizes objects of consumption and orders

consumer culture and, hence, forms and re-produces consumer subjectivity, radiates

significantly from these relatively intangible sources of research insight. By re-casting the

epistemology of consumer research data in a post-structuralist light the panoptic character of

interpretive consumer research becomes apparent. The metaphor of panopticism is apt in this

case to evince the disciplinary effect of interpretive consumer surveillance, classification and

sorting. Unlike Bentham’ panopticon the advertising panopticon does not carry out

temporally continuous surveillance on spatially discrete objects. Rather, the panoptic effect

of advertising agencies is conducted on socially discrete (fragmented) consumers in a realm

of psychological time. Consumer identities are formed, fantasies of self are fulfilled and

relations reproduced with each successive engagement with the advertising/marketing

complex. The psychological continuity arises because of the constitutive role of advertising

in the production of consumer culture.

Bentham’s panopticon was a model of a correctional institution (devised originally by his

brother). Central to this architectural ideal was the notion of panopticism: the disciplinary

observance of every detail of a resident’s life. Foucault (1979) took panopticism as a

metaphor for a much broader form of constitutive power at work in society at large, power

which is reproduced in and presupposed by, knowledge. In Bentham’s institution the

observation tower provides a vantage point for viewing constantly into every corner of every

cell. Each cell is subdivided from the others. Subjects can be observed at all times but do not

know when they are being observed and when they are not. The surveillance is conducted in

order to codify behavior and categorize subjects against norms. Deviation from proscribed

norms is punished. The observers need not have the same motives: they are unseen and

observation can in principle be done by anyone. The power of surveillance lies in the analysis

of the accumulated data. The subjects cannot know what data is stored about them and cannot

know the criteria that are applied to categorizing behaviors. Panoptic surveillance is

disciplinary in the sense that it produces norms of behavior by normalizing particular modes

of practice rather than by brute force. Foucault’s (1979) use of the metaphor illustrates his

conception of power as constitutive, grounded in asymmetrical knowledge and reproduced in

normalized social practice.

It has been widely noted that a starkly increasing order of control through surveillance

characterizes the cultural life of late modernity. Giddens (1985) suggested that

“administrative power now increasingly enters into the minutiae of daily life and the most

intimate of personal activities and relationships” (p. 309). For Gandy (1993) the panoptic sort

entails citizens and consumers being classified according to the public record of their past

economic and political behavior. Corporations and states can utilize this knowledge in

imposing classifications that serve institutional interests. Gandy (1993) illustrates the

concept of the panoptic sort with the metaphor of triage in its medical usage meaning to sort

and categorize patients according to their degree and type of illness or injury.

“The operation of the panoptic sort increases the ability of organized interests, whether they are selling shoes, toothpaste, or political platforms, to identify, isolate and communicate differentially with individuals in order to increase their influence over how consumers make selections over these options”. (Gandy 1993, p. 2)

Critiques of the information society often refer to the masses of electronically stored data

that exist about each citizen. Government agencies and corporations hold data on personal

incomes, transactions, biographical data, home and family details: hidden cameras record

behavior in public places and overseers monitor workplace emails and telephone

conversations. Such information is used to identify, classify, assess, segment and target

individuals for purposes of control. The provision, ownership and use of proprietary

information by institutions serves to objectify persons and render them instruments of

institutionalized interests. Gandy (1993) sees increasing consumer and citizen segmentation

on the basis of institutionally held knowledge as a feature of technical rationality that denies

individuals the means of engaging in Habermas’s (1984) ideal speech situation. In this

situation consumers are subject to carefully managed marketing interventions that expose

individuals to corporate power on a false basis. The individual is isolated and targeted in a

flattering legitimization of acquisitive individualism. Yet this targeting is based on

information that the individual cannot see and has limited power to influence. Furthermore

the marketing interventions themselves are designed by placing particular interpretations on

the data that is held. These interpretations serve the needs of the corporation to produce

resonant messages that promote particular patterns of consumption as a means of acquiring a

kind of authenticity as a consumer. Hence the consumer is categorized according to a hidden

agenda and is subject to stark power asymmetries in his or her engagement with marketing

interventions. In any case it can be argued that, regardless of marketing orthodoxy,

preferences are not innate in the cognitive structures of consumers but are taught to them and

reflect structures of domination (Etzioni 1988). Advertising pervades cultural space and is a

hugely powerful ideological force yet it can be sensitive to consumer’s strategies of

resistance because of the intimate understanding that advertising personnel can glean about

highly specific interpretive communities. This kind of understanding is earned from research

strategies that are idiographic rather than nomothetic, experiential rather than objective, and

judgmental rather than inter-subjectively verifiable.

The panoptic metaphor has various applications. For Gandy (1993) the explosion of data

gathering and sharing technology constitutes a contemporary panoptic influence. Extensive

consumer information about each citizen is held by banks, government agencies and other

institutions dedicated to monitoring consumer behavior in order to try to control and regulate

it. Advertising agencies clearly perform a similar task with a rather different emphasis. In ad

agencies, the creative staff or the account planner/researcher seek to generate qualitatively

grounded insight into consumer experience as well as gathering and codifying factual,

objective information. Certainly an advertising professional will draw on such information as

they can obtain about a brand or product’s market share, sales patterns, competitive activity

and so on. But the function of interpretive consumer research in advertising is to inform the

creative dynamic of advertising development by providing insights about the social practices

and meanings of consumption in differing contexts. Advertising agencies may not have

access to the extent of consumer information available to government agencies and financial

institutions (although some come close with technologically advanced libraries within the

agency) but some parties in agencies try to immerse themselves in consumer life in order to

generate intimate knowledge, insights and understanding of consumers and consumption

within cultural contexts. Their panoptic aspirations to observe and regulate consumer

thinking are, if credible, potentially more socially significant that the banks of data held

about consumers as a result of the computerization of consumption. Interpretive consumer

and advertising researchers can be seen as prime movers in the corporate effort to design life

in the image of consumerism.Consumers are not captured within a systemofwriting in the

same sense as that in Foucault’s (1979) panoptic surveillance.Observation (and codification

and subsequent analysis and sorting) of consumer behavior is a powerful technique used in

advertising but more powerful still is the way the consumers are captured within a non-

orthographic system of knowledge. This system of knowledge is the largely tacit and un-

codified knowledge of consumers that resides within advertising agencies. It derives fromthe

interpretive judgment of agency staff charged with producing, managing or fostering

creativity.

The metaphoric use I want to make of the panopticon, then, differs from other uses in

several respects. I want to apply a post-structuralist analysis that emphasizes the

constitutive character of cultural life and the fragmented nature of self identity in consumer

culture. Furthermore I want to draw attention to informal structures of cultural knowledge

from which advertising’s ideological power radiates and yet which also obscure the

operation of that power. The metaphor operates in this case on a very abstract level.

Consumers are not spatially discrete as in the panoptic institution but I suggest that an

order of social fragmentation can be discerned in consumer culture. Take-out meals and

drink-at-home alcohol, home entertainment systems, increasing family break up serviced

by single occupant home designs, social reticence and fear of crime fostered by media

stories may be increasing the sense of isolation among consumers. So too does the drive for

marketing strategy to analyze consumer data to further refine segmentation and targeting to

promote the cult of individuality (“one-to-one relationship marketing”) through

consumption of branded products. So consumers can be seen to be psychologically, and

culturally, as opposed to spatially, discrete and separated. The advertising panopticon does

not act in collective unison in one sense: agencies and marketing institutions are in open

competition with each other. But panoptic surveillance and control does not require

homogeneity of motives. It merely requires a relatively stable asymmetry of power.

Corporations and their satellite institutions (such as advertising agencies) have economic

and political power that enables them to maintain the asymmetry between the observing

corporation and the observed consumer. The conception of knowledge in the advertising

panopticon also differs from Gandy’s (1993) in that it is only partially codified and written.

Rather it is consumer knowledge of an interpretive character that subsists in the collective

understanding of creative staff and other advertising account team personnel. Finally, the

surveillance of the advertising panopticon is not temporally continuous. It is however,

continuous in psychological time because consumer meanings are constituted with every

successive engagement with the advertising/marketing complex. As advertising becomes ever

more influential in contemporary life one’s sense of identity, aspiration and order is

increasingly inconceivable other then within the terms of reference of consumption. The

cultural meanings appropriated by advertising and linked to consumption practices are

universalized in advertising ideology. You are what you consume and consumer meanings

become structures of understanding that persist even in the minimal psychological and social

spaces that remain between advertising messages.Hence consumer culture subsists in a realm

of psychological time that is rarely interrupted by other value systems. Access to the

meanings of consumer culture through interpretive surveillance is uninterrupted in this

abstract sense.

CRITICAL THEORY AND ADVERTISING

Critical theory (CT) takes man’s everyday assumptions about his social role as it is defined by

institutionalized relations and norms and challenges the presumption that “social reality and

its products are extrinsic to him” (Horkheimer 1976, p. 220) CT seeks to reveal the hidden

agenda of asymmetrical power relations that lies beneath the unproblematic reality promoted

by capitalist institutions. These unproblematic realities encompass social relations and

identities of all kinds including those of worker, manager, professional and consumer. In this

paper I propose that advertising is an especially potent site for critical examination given that

the mechanisms by which advertising constitutes itself are largely invisible to consumer.

Writing in post war Los Angeles Horkheimer and Adorno (1944) noted that

“Advertising and the culture industry merge technically as well as economically. . .the same thing can be seen in innumerable places and the mechanical repetition of the same culture product has come to be the same as that of the propaganda slogan. In both cases the insistent demand for effectiveness makes technology into psychotechnology, into a procedure for manipulating men.” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944; reprint (1986), p. 163).

The inter-textual as well the technological merging of advertising with other popular

culture vehicles is today far better developed than in 1944. Advertising production has

become a training ground for Hollywood movie producers. Many movies are part financed by

product placement, using branded products as props. Actor-celebrities supplement their

income and generate exposure by appearing on TV advertisements endorsing products as

charismatic leaders in the consumption movement. Even knowing that these celebrity

endorsements are flagrantly insincere does not weaken their effect. Rather it enhances it

because cynicism normalizes advertising practices rendering them legitimate (Williamson

1978). It is not uncommon for movie careers to be launched in advertising for models, actors,

producers and copywriters. The concept of the culture industry may seem crude if it is seen in

neo-Marxist terms as a conspiracy of shared interests and a vehicle for hegemonic capitalist

power. Yet the culture industry has become a reality as a seamless cultural film of

proletarianized entertainment and advertising. As an ideological vehicle it has no need of

unified or connected motives or interests and neither need it be based on a division of class.

Its cultural effect is constitutive and its techniques are the same: the industry of industry and

the industry of entertainment alike resonate with consumers to the extent that they offer up

attractive and culturally meaningful portrayals of consumption. Each must understand their

respective consumers as seekers after meaning and not only as seekers after economic value.

This perspective results from a reappraisal of advertising as ideology not from Marxism or

structuralism but from a post-structuralist analysis.

There is a substantial amount of critically informed research in advertising and consumer

studies. Hetrick and Lozada (1994) drew explicitly on Critical Theory to broaden the critical

and emancipatory potential of consumer research while Hirschman (1993) offered a feminist

critique of ideology in consumer research. Other research has been implicitly critical in the

broad sense that it delineates ways in which power relations are manifest in consumer

discourses, such as Stern (1993) who conducted a feminist deconstruction of advertising as a

gendered phenomenon. Firat and Venkatesh (1995) position postmodernism in a

fundamentally critical stance towards modernist schemes (especially modernist epistemologies)

of consumption. Postmodernist perspectives upturn the rational, ordered, subjectcentered

economic order of modernism to reveal consumption as a value-producing activity

in its own right (p. 242). This implies that marketing and consumption activity constitutes a

richly signifying symbolic realm with, Firat and Venkatesh (1995) suggest, emancipatory

potential. Clearly, advertising is a major site of symbolic meanings appertaining to

consumers and consumption and as such is open to many forms of postmodern critique.

However, the everyday understanding of advertising is that it is not only unproblematic but

culturally trivial (Cook 1992) and hardly worthy of proper intellectual examination. This

kind of minimizing discourse tends to displace advertising from serious critical examination

and in doing so works to obscure its ideological power. But advertising, seen as a totalizing

super-ideology (Elliott and Ritson 1997), plays a culturally constitutive role in forming

relations and subjectivities. Advertising can be seen to employ a great variety of strategies

that conform to Eagleton’s (1991) taxonomy of ideology. We don’t notice advertising

because it is everywhere. As consumers we don’t question the values of consumption because

particular consumption practices are rendered normal through advertising’s portrayal of them

within systems of second order, denotative cultural meanings. Hence cigarette smoking, once

a rare, expensive and exclusively male habit, was and is portrayed as an activity that is

entirely normal because it is supported (visually) by other non-consumption cultural value

systems such as health, individual freedom, toughness, attractiveness, and material aspiration

(Williamson 1978). Advertising’s ideological strategies are revealed when the power of

denotation to create implied yet powerful associations is acknowledged. Denotation can be

located within cultural codes and is particular to cultural groups and social contexts at

specific times. Hence it cannot be captured within a conventional logocentric system of

codified knowledge but rather must be understood and conveyed as a relatively intangible,

subjective and interpretive form of understanding. In this light advertising agencies

understand consumer culture from an insider perspective.

Advertising is a ubiquitous cultural phenomenon that valorizes marketing symbols and

invests them with cultural meaning (Sherry 1987; Mick and Buhl 1992). As consumers we

use advertising actively (O’Donohoe 1994) in daily discourse. We project a symbolic

extended self (Belk 1988) to ourselves and to others through the valorizing of possessions by

advertising. We construct symbolic selves by drawing on selective ensembles of

communicated brands (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998). These symbolic selves signify

social relations, social status and identification with valorized objects (brands). Through the

mediation of advertising we assimilate and transform cultural meanings to symbolically

realize aspirations and fantasies of social positioning. This process has an ideological

character in that its core dynamic and beneficiary is corporate capitalism yet advertising

produces consumer culture by promoting the idealization of self. The promotion of

consumption above all other value systems is the key collective theme of advertising as a

totality. Advertising as ideology is infinitely varied and flexible and has a polysemic

character (Elliott and Ritson 1997). Consumers of advertising can simultaneously resist

advertising ideology yet also assume subject positions as a result of its subtle promptings.

Ritson and Elliott (1999) noted that adolescent school students used advertising actively to

compile a discourse of inclusion, a way of talking and relating in the group that was locally

idiosyncratic yet made use of popular and widely understood advertising in a suggestion of

resistance. But resistance is an affirmation of ideological power as well as an agentive poly.

The active and unpredictable cultural assimilation of advertising into adolescent discourse

inverts the commercial messages of advertising but also leverages their constitutive power as

cultural artifacts. The ideology of consumption seeps through localized meaning-making

even as people claim their right to subvert advertising messages in their own search for an

anti-identity. The ever-present character of advertising in all its many forms (Hackley and

Kitchen 1999) represents a historically unprecedented source of discursive material.

Individual advertising campaigns have been formed with a particular intent by marketing

institutions that have gathered, interpreted and used cultural material provided, willingly or

unconsciously, by consumers themselves. Hence advertising is culturally interesting because

it tells us about our own fantasies, wishes and fears as consumers. It is also important as an

economic conduit for innovations in practices of consumption to feed through from

consumers to advertisers and to manufacturers. Advertising became a channel between

manufacturers and consumers that enabled the legitimization project of corporations to be

accomplished (Leiss et al. 1997). Advertising acts as an ideological virus that reaches

constitutively into consumer psychologies. Consumers do not merely “behave” in response

to managed advertising messages. Advertising and consumer culture is, rather, a mutually

dependent entity that acts in a dialectical manner (Elliott and Ritson 1997) to reproduce

capitalist ideology within a self-actualizing narrative of consumer culture.

Critical perspectives in consumer research have been positioned as holding emancipatory

potential in a relatively benign way (Murray and Ozanne 1991) or in a more politically radical

sense (Hetrick and Lozada 1994). The former viewpoint distances critical theory (CT), or less

pointedly, critically inspired consumer research, from its Marxist origins (Horkheimer and

Adorno 1944). The latter view regards Marxism and CT as mutually inseparable intellectual

products. Neither view necessarily implies a particular route for critical analysis: to employ a CT orientation in academic work is one thing, to postulate a particular system of state control is another. Where CT perspectives are valuable is in the task of opening up the discursive

spaces closed off by established, mainstream approaches to thinking about organizational

marketing and management. Mainstream discourses tend to “incorporate and swallow up

larger and larger domains of social and personal life, such as culture, conflict and even

pleasure” (Alvesson and Willmott 1992, p. 3). The de-populated area that lies at the heart of

mainstream business and management discourses is re-populated byCTapproaches that

vividly articulate the interests and ideological agenda that, together, give mainstream

managerial discourse its ideological dynamic. A post-Marxist critical understanding of

capitalism moves away from notions of commodity fetishism and false consciousness and

develops instead an understanding of commodities as human wishes articulated by an

advertising–marketing semiotic vehicle which serves itself in the service of commodification.

Consciousness is not so much false as stifled by the continual reflection of socially

constructed consumer reality back on itself. The object of advertising and the culture industry

is to “overpower the customer who is conceived as absent minded or resistant” (Horkheimer

and Adorno 1944; reprint 1986, p. 163). This overpowering force can be seen as emanating

from marketing as “the engine of a vast panoptic system of observation and social control by

means of which it tracks, traces and seduces unknowing consumers into participation in its

processes” (Brownlie and Saren 1999, p. 8, citing Packard 1960; Alvesson 1993 and

Alvesson and Willmott 1996).

The marketing concept has often been conceived in terms of giving consumers what they

say they want. However, in contrast, marketing can be seen to act by expropriating consumer

cultural meaning and turning it to the service of corporations. This is possible because of the

extraordinary power exercised by corporations, particularly the economic and legal power to

populate social space with the symbols and enactments of consumption through advertising

in all its forms. Hence the marketing concept as an idealized ethic of corporate-consumer

relations has been realized symbolically through advertising. Advertising portrays the needy

consumer in a multiplicity of dramatic, aesthetic and literary guises and makes use of

innovations of language, visual design and music in an infinite variety of juxtapositions

(Cook 1992). These guises have meaning conferred upon them to the extent that they can be

adopted as cultural material to symbolize and valorize human relations. Historically

advertising has played a leading role in normalizing consumption as symbolic social practice

and in legitimising the power of corporations (Marchand 1998). That it has done so is due in

considerable part to the techniques of consumer surveillance and disciplinary control learned

and understood by advertising agency professionals. In this sense advertising agencies act as

a panoptic cultural influence in the service of corporations.

THE PANOPTIC CHARACTER OF CONSUMER RESEARCH FOR ADVERTISING

Much work that develops the panoptic metaphor in critical analyses of marketing has focused

on the institutional uses of relatively tangible kinds of data to direct and shape individual

behavior. Marketing activity that segments and targets consumers with specific marketing

interventions is clearly a manifestation of corporate power that can be seen to have a

constitutive cultural effect. It is difficult to resist corporate activity that so powerfully

portrays individuals in terms that resonate with the possibilities of identity formation and

subject positioning. Yet mass advertising is not only a prime, yet relatively neglected site of

the panoptic influence. It is also a true reflection of Foucault’s panoptic metaphor because its

influence acts to control consumer subjectivity by promoting self-surveillance. Advertising’s

stock of cultural knowledge is invisible. Advertising’s consumer research techniques (the

“focus group”, the “depth interview”) are often subject to minimizing discourses that

caricature the advertiser’s claims of technical expertise or special skill. The “focus group

mentality” is sometimes invoked pejoratively to belittle what is seen as the subjectivity (and

hence the irrationality) of qualitative consumer data. Western knowledge systems privilege

the present, the explicit and the codified and assert a positivist grammar of knowledge. The

tacit, the informal and the denotative tend to be suppressed in this tradition. Perhaps this

accounts for the marketing academy’s instinctive preference for research designs founded on

realism and developed with quantitative methods. But while the marketing establishment

retains its infatuation with quantitative, inter-subjectively verifiable market data (Hunt 1994)

this in itself has an ideological character since it obscures the very phenomenon it purports to

reveal, namely the dynamic behind the asymmetrical power relation that constitutes

“successful” managerial marketing communication interventions.

The kind of knowledge I propose is potentially even more insidious in its panoptic

character than electronically or orthographically stored knowledge of consumer activity

because it cannot be categorized in terms of a positive epistemology. It cannot be resisted or

pointed to in lawsuits and it cannot be “held” because it does not exist in a place. Much of it is

derived from consumer research that is qualitative in character and hence resides in the

judgment of individuals rather than in public, codified form. It is institutionalized knowledge,

cultural knowledge residing within advertising agencies. But it is understood only partially in

a world that conceives of knowledge predominantly in quasi-scientific terms. This

interpretive consumer knowledge is fragmented, discontinuous, implicit, informal and tacit

in character. Qualitative consumer researchers enlist the help of households to investigate the

consumption habits of families by, for example, rooting through bedrooms, looking at

possessions, studying waste bins, conducting qualitative interviews, observing behavior and

examining receipts from credit card purchases. They interview children in nursery

environments to assess their understanding of and liking for particular brands and logos.

Corporations are served better where humans are socialized into consumption at an early age

and advertisers are well aware that advertisements, especially television advertisements, have

great appeal for very young children. Researchers develop profiles of brand “personality”

through group questioning of these children in order to provide creative staff with the

symbolic cultural material to make advertisements potentially meaningful and appealing. In

general the advertising industry is thought to lack the innovation in consumer research for

which it was once noted. But some agencies appreciate the creative leverage to be gained

from a qualitatively based interpretive understanding of consumer culture and subjectivity.

So the Panoptic metaphor is applied to the consumer search function in advertising where

it observes and monitors consumer behavior, eavesdrops on consumer talk and delves into

consumer constructions of experience by using highly developed qualitative skills and

methods. Focus groups and depth interviews are a normal part of consumer research at each

stage in advertising development. Again, the free flowing character of this qualitative

research ensures that what emerges is intimate, unguarded but mediated by the commercial

experience, research judgment and hidden agenda of the researcher. The most striking thing

about qualitative consumer research is its intrinsic appeal to consumers. While people

actively avoid street vendors wielding questionnaire surveys consumer researchers seldom

have any difficulty in recruiting focus groups to talk about products or advertisements.

Consumers actively, even eagerly comply in the expropriation of their understanding by

researchers. Families co-operate as researchers wander unhindered through the family house

in order to peer into draws, cupboards and waste bins to infer the state of mind of parents and

children towards consumption practices. Insights gleaned from these inquisitory

interventions are used in the formation of brand communication strategies. Consumers

want to be party to the design of new varieties of consumption (including the design of new

varieties of advertising to consume to make consumption seem more attractive still). The

uninhibited, almost confessional state that skilled consumer researchers are able to elicit in

consumers is striking, to say the least. Focus groups are routinely videoed and in these tapes

people reveal themselves and their inner motivations with striking candour under the

benevolent gaze of the socially adept researcher. People are fascinated by their own

consumption practices, especially as these are portrayed in various communications media.

Partaking in qualitative consumer research, as a subject is a piece of the action, an affirmation

of ones’ project as a consumer, a ritual of self-worship. The attention of a skilled consumer

researcher who is interested in YOU not as a flawed human, a sinner, a partner or an

employee but as a consuming symbol is the ultimate flattering practice of post-modernity.

The researcher is your conduit to the world of consumer perfection, the world of the idealized

symbolic self (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998). Gandy (1993, p. 10) cites Douglas (1986) in

noting how eagerly people respond to new categories of identity in Foucault’s process of

“self-formation”. This process is mediated by an external figure of authority: in this case, the

consumer researcher.

The panoptic metaphor may seem inappropriate given that qualitative consumer research

is usually temporally and spatially fragmented. Consumer researchers cannot observe and

control consumer behavior and thinking in a literally continuous sense (but perhaps:

“consumer cam?” consumer tagging? No doubt it’s already happening). But advertising

account planners, creatives and consumer research agencies use their interpretive skills to

infer psychologically constitutive insights from discrete moments of data. They seek to

understand what brands, products and other marketing entities mean for consumers in

context. They feel they have a range of skills including “sensitivity” for social data, a

perceptive talent for observation, an interest in people, client skills in that in that they can talk

to clients in marketing terms as well as to creatives and focus groups (Hackley 2000a). Most

importantly, consumer knowledge can “lead” creative advertising development in certain

directions by translating research findings into a telling creative brief that is grounded in a

penetrating insight into the construction of consumer reality. The qualitative consumer

research data that can generate creative insights is epistemologically dis-connected and

temporally dis-continuous. Yet the conventional epistemological purview depends upon an

order of epistemological and temporal unity: knowledge is often conceived as knowledge in

terms of a positivist grammar of codification. If, in contrast, knowledge is re-cast in an

interpretive light as a matter of personal judgment deriving from a qualitative understanding

of consumer experience then the power of consumer research to reach into and form the

subjective experience of consumers begins to reveal itself. Such qualitative consumer

insights are transient: their power to inform telling marketing interventions quickly fades.

Nonetheless, the process of consumer surveillance as a totality never stops. At all times

advertising agencies and other consumer research organizations are conducting numerous

parallel research projects to accomplish every kind of marketing and corporate objective.

Hence, knowledge of consumers generated through research, formal or informal, that is

conducted with a strategic marketing rationale and feeds into the development of marketing

communications can be seen to have a psychologically panoptic character. As a totality it

subjects the social construction of consumer experience to a continuous surveillance. It is

disarming, unthreatening, apparently benign and little understood. Yet it lies at the heart of

the creative communications strategies that are the central dynamic of the signification

process that is marketing. The knowledge of consumers and consumer culture that is

employed in the formation of creative advertising and is gathered and held by advertising

agencies can be seen as a primary vehicle in the reproduction of corporate power and control

over individuals. Consumer research enables corporations to understand the consumer

culture and behavior of particular groups of consumers with regard to specific consumption

objects and practices. Understanding the constitutive character of consumer culture and

thought is potentially even more powerful than a continuous physical observation of subjects

since it is observation of a self that exists only in the ontologically and temporally discontinuous

symbolic world of brand identification. The consumer’s self is realized through

the advertising process and the advertising panopticon has no need of continuous temporal

surveillance. The surveillance is conducted in a timeless symbolic realm that is produced and

reproduced with every discrete consumer engagement with the marketing and advertising

complex. And, as we have seen, in developed capitalist economies this engagement is

temporally discontinuous: no-one watches TVall day every day, except people whose job it is

to monitor surveillance cameras. Presumably they watch surveillance cameras all day then go

home to watch some real TV (perhaps to watch a “reality”) show made up of edited

surveillance camera tapes recording private indiscretions). But the engagement with

marketing ideology saturates consumer culture and produces brand identities in a time-void.

Communicated brands become an intimate part of our consumer consciousness that we draw

on as constitutive discursive material. Our consumer consciousness is re-energized and restimulated

once every few seconds as we encounter yet another logo, brand, advertised

product, designed package, any cultural object valorized by marketing and advertising. Even

engagement in relationships is subject to advertising’s cultural imposition of idealized

consumer lifestyles and consumption linked norms of sexual attractiveness. Consumer

research that appreciates the constitutive character of cultural life and the dialectical nature

of meaning formation reaches into consumer meanings to engage directly in their

reconstitution in the corporate interest. This panoptic gaze embraces consumers at a cultural

level and invades the timeless realm of subjectivity.

CONCLUDING COMMENT

This paper has suggested that an advertising panopticon conducts a disciplinary surveillance

of consumer culture at the level of meaning formation. Conceived at this level informal,

interpretive forms of consumer research can be seen at the heart of advertising’s culturally

constitutive and ideologically powerful character. That advertising has an ideological

character is not a new suggestion. Many authors have pointed to specific aspects of

advertising’s ideological strategies. The panoptic metaphor, however, used in conjunction

with a post-structuralist theoretical stance on knowledge and meaning, reveals a new aspect

of advertising’s ideological strategy connected to the uses advertising agencies make of

consumer cultural knowledge. They gather data about consumers in various forms using

diverse sources and methods, and then they interpret this data in the light of their professional

experience as consumer watchers (and as consumers themselves). This kind of knowledge

tends to be relatively un-codified and its strategic value to corporations is poorly understood.

But its informality hides its power in generating denotative meanings that are crucial in

accomplishing the ideological strategy of naturalization. Creative advertising assimilates

denotative meanings into portrayals of consumption thereby re-forming consumer culture.

This aspect of advertising agency practice revolves around an informal but pervasive system

of observation, analysis and categorization of consumers that operates at the level of meaning

rather than at the level of fact. The advertising panopticon, revealed when advertising agency

practice is subject to an analysis informed by critical and post-structuralist theoretical

influences, lies at the center of the constitutive formation of consumer culture.

NOTES

1. The author interviewed senior account planners in each agency, in New York, in June 2001.

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