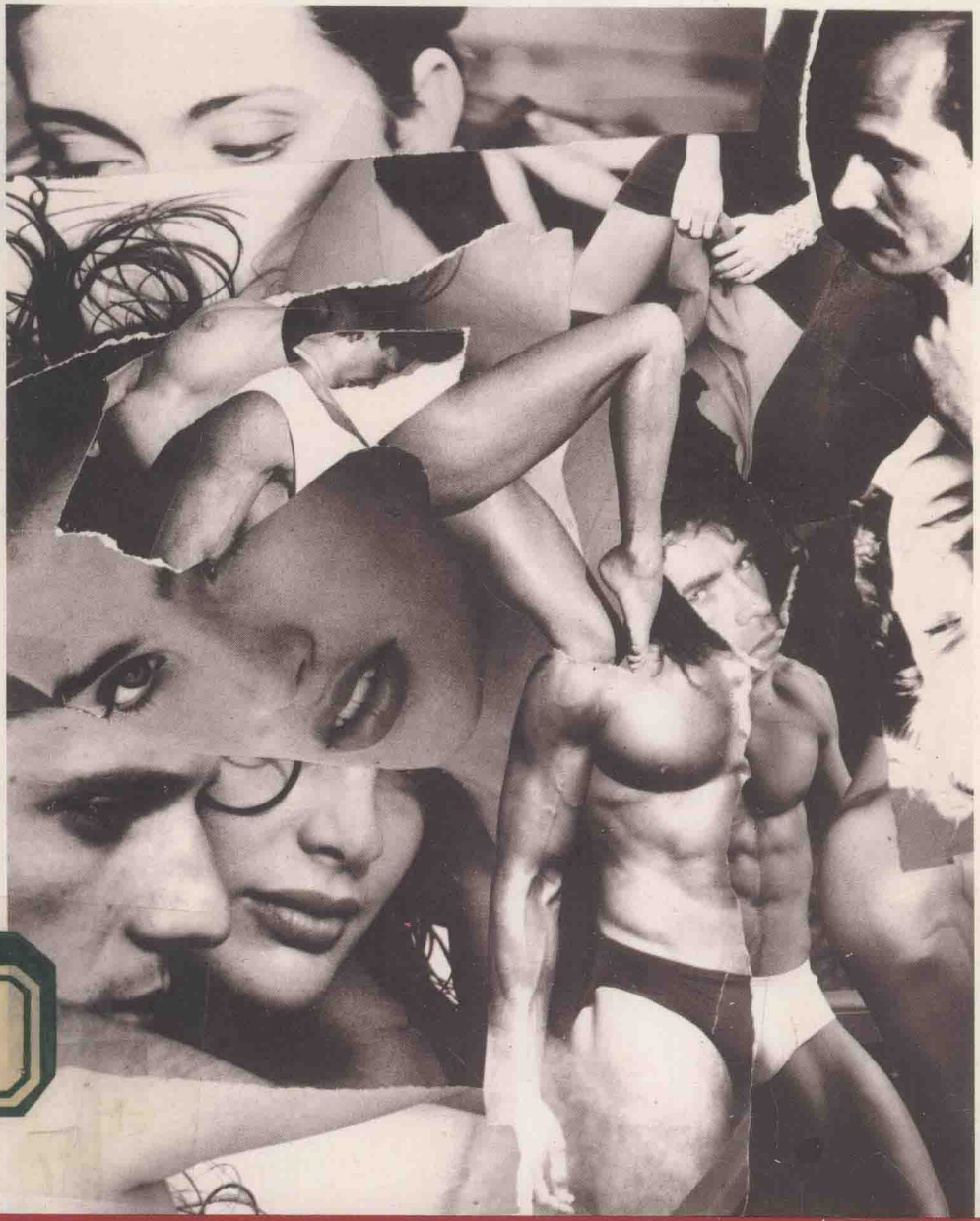
THE CODES OF

ADVERTISING

FETISHISM AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF MEANING IN THE CONSUMER SOCIETY



SUT JHALLY

THE CODES OF ADVERTISING

FETISHISM AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF MEANING IN THE CONSUMER SOCIETY

SUT JHALLY

ROUTLEDGE New York London

Published in 1990 by

Routledge, an imprint of
Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc.
29 West 35 Street
New York, NY 10001

Published in Great Britain by

Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane
London EC4P 4EE

Published by arrangement with Pinter Publishing, Ltd.
Published in 1987 by St. Martin's Press

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jhally, Sut.
The codes of advertising.

Bibliography: p.
Includes index
1. Advertising—Social aspects. 2. Symbolism in advertising. 3. Mass media. I. Title.
HF 5827. J49 1987 659.1'042 86-20349
ISBN 0-312-00211-4
ISBN 0-415-90353-X (pb)

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Jhally, Sut
The codes of advertising: fetishism and the political economy of meaning in the consumer society.
1. Advertising—Sociological perspectives
I. Title
302.23
ISBN 0-86187-584-2
ISBN 0-415-90353-X

Acknowledgements

The initial stage of this work developed from 1980 to 1984 at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada. I consider myself extremely fortunate to have been able to participate in the fertile, stimulating and challenging intellectual and social environment that I found in Vancouver in these four years. I wish to thank Martin Laba, Paul Heyer, Heribert Adam, Russell Jacoby, Rick Gruneau, Dallas Smythe, Ian Angus, Liora Salter,Mike Lebowitz, Debbie McGee, Rohan Samarajiwa, Peter Cook, Lynda Drury, Diane Charbonneau, Robert Davidson, Cam Landell and Verla Fortier. Lynne Hissey deserves special mention for her copy-editing of the first draft manuscript.

The final version of the manuscript was completed at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, USA, from 1985 to 1986. I wish to thank David Maxcy, Jarice Hanson, Dianne Cherry, Michael Morgan, Barnett Pearce, Vern Cronen, Mary Goodlett, Eileen Mahoney, Carolyn Anderson and Rhonda Blair.

Thanks are also due to my editors, Peter Moulson and Kermit Hummel, for their support of this project.

I would like to thank Methuen, Inc. (Toronto) for permission to use some material from *Social Communication in Advertising* (1986) by William Leiss, Stephen Kline and Sut Jhally.

This book could not have been written without the profound influence of three people on my life and my work. I acknowledge my debt and thank Bill Leiss (who taught me how to think critically), Steve Kline (who taught me how to study advertising), and Bill Livant (who allowed me to latch on to his unfettered genius). I look forward to many more years of learning, friendship and collaboration.

Preface

This book has a strange ontogenesis. Like many other works it started as research for a doctoral dissertation that began in 1980 and was completed in the summer of 1984. Immediately after finishing this, I started work on a collaborative project with Bill Leiss and Steve Kline. This was published in 1986 as *Social Communication in Advertising: Persons, Products and Images of Well-Being* (hereinafter referred to as *SCA*). It included a comprehensive review of the field of advertising and culture and a thorough historical analysis of the development of the link between media, marketing and the advertising industry. Reported were the results of an extensive study of magazine advertising in which we identified four major epochs in the development of advertising form and content. This empirical material was woven into a highly theoretical analysis of the cultural role that goods play as satisfiers and communicators in modern society and the relationship of advertising to this cultural process. In seeking to understand the *system* of commercial messages, we took an *institutional* approach that examined the advertising industry as being located at the crucial conjuncture where media, industry and popular culture all converged and interacted. The evolution of the four stages was explained by an historical tracing through of the changing relationships between these three domains.

The present work was written after completion of *SCA* and has been substantially changed by the arguments we developed there. While much of the original thesis material was used in *SCA*, the central core of the argument was not developed and expanded in that work. Although the present book is concerned with many of the same issues and problems, it approaches them from a very different perspective. The central analytical dynamic in this work is the material social relations of advanced capitalism as an

economic system. The understanding of advertising's social role is developed in relation to the accumulation dynamic of modern capitalism operating in the economy in general and also more specifically internal to the system of commercial television. I will argue that the symbolic dimensions of needing and culture and the economic dynamic of capital accumulation are symbiotically intertwined in the new 'communication age' of advanced capitalism. As such the arguments developed here and in *SCA* form part of a single explanatory framework on the role that advertising plays in the modern mediation of the person–object relationship.

Contents

1 Introduction: fundamentals and starting points

People and things

It could be argued that advertising is the most influential institution of socialisation in modern society: it structures mass media content; it seems to play a key role in the construction of gender identity; it impacts upon the relation of children and parents in terms of the mediation and creation of needs; it dominates strategy in political campaigns; recently it has emerged as a powerful voice in the arena of public policy issues concerning energy and regulation; it controls some of our most important cultural institutions such as sports and popular music; and it has itself in recent years become a favourite topic of everyday conversation. However, we should not let its enormous presence in a wide variety of realms obscure what it is *really* about. At the material, concrete and historical level advertising is part of a specific concern with the marketing of goods. It rose to prominence in modern society as a *discourse through and about objects*. It is from this perspective that an analysis of advertising has to unfold. More particularly, this discourse concerns a specific, seemingly universal relationship: that between people and objects.

The relationship between people and their things should not be considered a superficial or optional feature of life. It is in fact a definitional component of human existence. All societies are based upon the use of nature by humans. Humans as a species are only able to survive by the 'appropriation' of the material elements that surround us. We eat the food of nature, we shelter under materials provided by it, and we clothe ourselves in fabrics woven from its raw materials. This relation between people and objects has been

described as one of 'objectification'—we objectify ourselves and our lives in the materiality of the concrete world. We continually take what exists outside of us, and, by our activity, make it a part of our daily existence. Herbert Marcuse (1972b) believes this objectification is not merely a small part of what constitutes the human experience, but is its 'deeper foundation'. In fact, objectification lies at the basis of what we can call a distinctive human experience, the mediation of human need through objects.

Based on this understanding, Jean-Paul Sartre (1976, p. 79) writes that 'the crucial discovery of dialectical investigation is that man is "mediated" by things to the same extent as things are "mediated" by man'. While it seems obvious that things are mediated by humans—in that without us things might have existence but not meaning—and that in this sense *things need people,* it is equally true that *humans need things.* The evidence from history and anthropology on our necessary intimate interaction with objects is overwhelming. A widely accepted theory holds that the utilisation of objects as tools was a decisive step in the evolutionary process of humanity. Indeed, the authors of a book titled *The Meaning of Things* remark that, 'Man is not only *homo sapiens* or *homo ludens,* he is also *homo faber,* the maker and user of objects, his self to a large extent a reflection of things with which he interacts' (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981, p. 1). Advertising then, as a discourse concerning objects, is dealing with one of the fundamental aspects of human behaviour. This should be the starting point for an analysis of advertising's social role.

Use, symbol and power

The social debate concerning advertising has diverged considerably on the contemporary person–object relationship (for a full discussion see *SCA,* Chapters 2 and 3). The many critics of advertising claim that it is a tool whereby consumers are controlled and manipulated by the producers of goods (on whose behalf advertising is waged) to desire things for which they have no real need. The imperative for this creation of demand comes from the huge number of goods that

capitalism as a system is able to deliver. To avoid stagnation and the ultimate demise of capitalism through a depressed economy, manufacturers have to ensure that what is produced is also consumed. Advertising is the main weapon that manufacturers use in their attempt to 'produce' an adequate consuming market for their products. To this end advertising works to create false needs in people (false because they are the needs of manufacturers rather than consumers). Writers from a variety of viewpoints (John K. Galbraith, Stuart Ewen, Herbert Marcuse, Raymond Williams, Paul Baran, Paul Sweezy, Ernest Mandel, Guy DeBord, Vance Packard, Jerry Mander) seem to be agreed on this point. Particularly, it is the manner in which this is achieved that is held to be socially harmful. In his important book *Captains of Consciousness* (1976), Stuart Ewen argues that in the early years of this century the need to create desires in the newly enfranchised consuming public necessitated a shift away from a stress solely on products, to a context where it was the relationship *between* people and products that was important. If demand for products had to be created by the marketplace itself (rather than reflecting the true needs of consumers) advertising would have to incorporate more direct references to the audience. Increasingly, advertising integrated the consumer within a rich and complex web of social status and symbolic meaning.

The cultural theorist and historian, Raymond Williams, believes that this social and symbolic significance conferred on goods by advertising shows us that it is wrong to regard modern society as being too materialistic, as putting too much emphasis on the possession of goods. Rather, we are in fact *not materialistic enough* (Williams 1980, p. 185):

> If we were sensibly materialist, in that part of our living in which we use things, we should find most advertising to be of insane irrelevance. Beer would be enough for us, without the additional promise that in drinking it we show ourselves to be manly, young at heart or neighborly. A washing machine would be a useful machine to wash clothes, rather than an indication that we are forward looking or an object of envy to our neighbors. But if these associations sell beer and washing machines, as some of the evidence suggests, it is clear that we have a cultural pattern in which the objects are not enough but must be validated, if only in fantasy,

by association with social and personal meanings which in a different cultural pattern might be more directly available.

There are two important points to be distinguished here, one of which is valid and one which is problematic. Williams is correct in noting that modern capitalism provides social and personal meanings through the consumption of goods that were previously (and could be again) more directly available. The conclusion that Williams draws from this is, however, questionable: that is, without advertising and in a 'sensibly materialist' society, goods would only be seen as things which are practically useful but socially meaningless. It is the general acceptance of this proposition which, I believe, has stalled a truly adequate critical perspective on the role that advertising plays within modern consumer societies. The contention that goods should be important to people for what they are *used* for rather than their *symbolic* meaning is very difficult to uphold in light of the historical, anthropological and cross-cultural evidence. In all cultures at all times, it is the relation between use and symbol that provides the concrete context for the playing out of the universal person–object relation. The present radical critique of advertising is unbalanced in its perception of the 'proper' or 'rational' relation between use and symbol. It suffers from what could be called 'commodity vision'—the problem of capitalist commodities has not been sufficiently distinguished from the problem of objects in general. While the person–object relation has been set within the context of *power*, the critique as presently conceptualised has lost the link with culture and history. That Raymond Williams should fall into this misperception is extremely surprising, for in the rest of his magnificent corpus of writings he strongly focuses on the central role that culture has played in the development of human societies.

The recognition of the fundamentally symbolic aspect of people's use of things must be the minimum starting point for a discourse that concerns objects. Specifically, the old distinction between basic (physical) and secondary (psychological) needs must be superseded. The anthropologist Marshal Sahlins (1976) points out that all utility is framed by a cultural context—that even our interaction with the most mundane and 'ordinary' of objects in daily life is

mediated within a symbolic field. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981, p. 21) note that:

> Even the use of things for utilitarian purposes operates within the symbolic province of culture. The most 'utilitarian' objects in the home, such as running water, toilets, electric appliances, and the like, were all introduced into general use no more than 150 years ago by advances in Western technology—all considered luxuries when introduced. Thus it is extremely difficult to disentangle the use-related function from the symbolic meanings in even the most practical objects.

William Leiss (1976), too, refers to the dualistic nature of human behaviour and argues that every facet of human needing has both symbolic and material correlates, and that even our basic physiological requirements (food, shelter, clothing) have always been 'firmly embedded in a rich tapestry of symbolic mediation' (Leiss 1976, p. 65). (See *SCA* for fuller discussion of these points.)

The importance of the symbolic constitution of utility has not been lost on writers from within marketing and business circles who have been called upon to answer the attacks directed against advertising. Indeed, they have made it the cornerstone of their legitimation of advertising's symbolic aspect. Theodore Levitt goes so far as to equate advertising with art. Art presents by definition a 'distortion' or interpretation of reality with the aim of influencing an audience to think in a particular way—beyond functionality and practicality to abstraction. Advertising has the same goals, uses similar means and so should be evaluated by the same noble criteria as art.

> One does not need a doctorate in social anthropology to see that the purposeful transmutation of nature's primeval state occupies all people in all cultures, and all societies at all stages of development. Everybody everywhere wants to modify, transform, embellish, enrich and reconstruct the world around him, to introduce into an otherwise harsh or bland existence some sort of purposeful and distorting alleviation. Civilisation is man's attempt to transcend his ancient animality: and this includes both art and advertising . . . Both represent a pervasive and I believe *universal* characteristic of human nature—the human audience *demands* symbolic interpretation in everything it sees and knows. If it doesn't

get it, it will return a verdict of 'no interest' (Levitt 1970, pp. 87, 89).

Because humans are not confined to pure utility in their use of objects, the messages of the marketplace (advertising) must reflect the symbolic breadth of the person–object relation. The symbolism of advertising reflects a deeply felt human need. Only deception and outright lies are considered inappropriate for this discourse. Michael Schudson (1984) also uses what may be called an anthropological perspective to build his case against the 'puritanical' critics of advertising. Noting that needs are socially relative in any society and that the true–false distinction is an exceedingly difficult one to sustain, he argues that the real issue is not 'false' symbolism, but the direction that symbolism takes in any society.

However, the defenders of advertising are just as one-sided as the critics in their analysis. While they recognise the symbolic element in all human needing, they ignore almost totally any discussion of the dimension of *power* or of the *social effects* of advertising. The appropriation thus from anthropology is incomplete, for just as it is true that the symbolic mediation of human needing is a vital feature of human existence, so it is just as true that power also clouds and influences all social relations. Goods always mean something within a social context where different interests are being played out. On this the defence is virtually silent, falling back on a vague belief in the market as an institution where conflicting interests are given an impartial mediation. If the evidence from anthropology is to be introduced into the debate, then it is important that all the evidence is used, and not just selected fragments of it. All utility may be symbolic—but for whom and with what ends?

Goods and social communication

The most important attempt so far to initiate what could be called an 'anthropology of consumption' has been *The World of Goods* by Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood (1978). Noting that in traditional economic thought two main assumptions are made about human needs (materialism and envy) that do not stand up to sustained analysis, they suggest

instead that an anthropological approach would regard consumption as part of the *cultural pattern* in any society (Douglas and Isherwood 1978, p. 59).

> Instead of supposing that goods are primarily needed for subsistence (materialism) plus competitive display (envy), let us assume that they are needed for making visible and stable the categories of culture. It is standard ethnographic practice to assume that all material possessions carry social meanings and to concentrate a main part of cultural analysis upon their use as communicators.

A communication theory of consumption tied to the concept of ritual is invoked to analyse the 'world of goods'. Ritual, in the anthropological sense, seeks to give shape and substance to dominant social meanings, to anchor social relationships. 'Rituals serve to contain the drift of meaning.' For any society to operate without some form of ritual is for a society to live without a shared collective memory. While ritual can take a verbal form, it is more effective when tied to material things. 'Goods, in this perspective are ritual adjuncts: consumption is a ritual process whose primary function is to make sense of the inchoate flux of events' (Douglas and Isherwood 1978, p. 65). Goods are used in the negotiation of social life, and act as meaningful 'markers' of social categories. The precise form that this takes is framed by both cultural and economic relations—that is, by *social power*.

The use of goods as social markers has been extensively documented in the anthropological study of 'primitive' societies. In many such societies, the economy is divided between the prestige and subsistence sphere, with very little exchange between them. The 'subsistence' economy includes those materials related to food, clothing and shelter and fairly easy to obtain. The 'prestige' economy consists of less readily available, socially scarce goods, possession of which in ritual settings translates material values into abstract values of prestige, reputation and status. The native society of Ponapea had such a dual economy, with specially grown and cared for yams acting as the prestige goods of the upper sphere. Similarly, the potlatch ceremonies of the Kwakiutl of British

Columbia demonstrate the value of certain goods acting as social markers between social groups. (Leiss, 1978)

The Tiv people of Nigeria had a more elaborately ranked three-tiered system which included two spheres of the prestige economy. The higher of these consisted of holding rights over women, while the lower was made up of goods such as metal rods, cloth, guns and slaves. The subsistence economy was concerned with domestic goods. The goods of the lower part of the prestige economy could be obtained either through outside trade or through conquest in war, and it was the metal rods of this sphere that acted as a kind of 'currency' for the whole economy. Social action was based upon the conversion of lower-level to higher-level goods. However, because it was solely men who had access to prestige goods, it was impossible for women to move into the prestige economy except as objects of prestige themselves. By making only some goods for prestige (and hence access to power) and then by limiting access to these goods to certain privileged groups, the contextualisation of goods within a symbolic/material field sought to stabilise the existing organisation of social power.

The critical anthropologists Rey and Dupre (1973) also focus on how goods are used for social control and domination and show how power was exercised in West African lineage societies both materially and symbolically. They start their analysis by focusing on a key problem—how goods produced by one group (cadets—unmarried, young, male) can be entirely controlled by another group (the elders). After rejecting a number of conventional explanations based on physical coercion, they argue that the vital element is that the elders

> reserve for themselves control of social knowledge (knowledge of genealogies, of history, or marriage regulations) and their control is prolonged in the spheres of artifice (magic, divination, cultural rites). Above all, they reserve for themselves control of the cadets' and their own access to women, and they guarantee this control by holding the 'elite' goods which are indispensable for marriage (Rey and Dupre 1973, p. 145).

They control the objects and symbolic knowledge then that a cadet needs to become an 'objectively individuated man'. If symbolic processes are always played out in contexts of power, there is no reason to think that the symbolism of advertising should be exempt from this, especially when it is so clearly controlled by a small clearly identifiable group using it for particular ends.

The capitalist market and goods

The anthropological evidence shows that goods are simultaneously *communicators* (about social ideas and power) and *satisfiers* (of human needs). This added to the person–object, use–symbolism and symbolism–power relations is the minimum starting point for any analysis of the modern institution of advertising. However, while the literature I have examined thus far has stressed the *similarity* between modern and traditional types of society, we must not lapse into these generalisable relations as explanations *in themselves* of modern social relations. They merely provide a framework with which to approach the problem. What we have to examine rather are the different social forms in which these dimensions have been cloaked, or 'the various modes of representation for it that correspond to qualitative differences in forms of social organisation' (Leiss 1983b, p. 2).

In order properly to contextualise these seemingly universal relations within the contemporary situation of Western industrial societies we need to understand the arena where these relations are 'represented' in the capitalist economy—the market. Modern society has 'collapsed' the separate spheres of traditional economies into the one sphere of general consumption. However, Douglas and Isherwood (1978, p. 150) argue that there is little difference between the two contexts and that the modern market works pragmatically in fact to produce separable spheres of activity.

> That which disguises itself as a disinterested, friendly, hospitable consumption sphere in practice draws up dividing lines between those in control and those they are excluding. The ethnography suggests that we will find these consumption spheres, distinct and