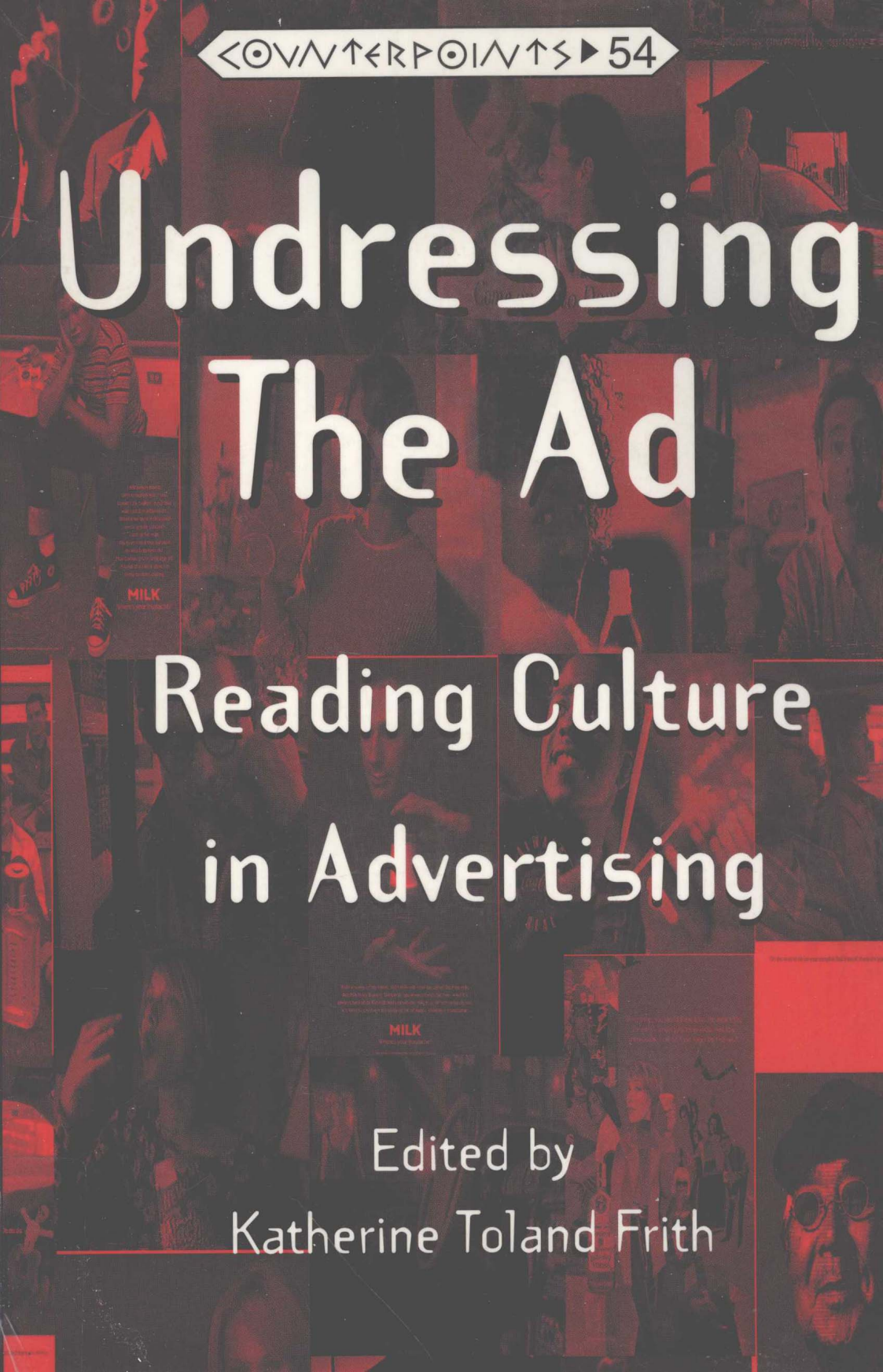


Undressing The Ad

Reading Culture in Advertising

Edited by
Katherine Toland Frith



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PETER LANG

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For Marjory Canavan Toland

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Preface

Advertisements sanctify, signify, mythologize, and fantasize. They uphold some of the existing economic and political structures and subvert others. Not only does advertising shape American culture; it shapes Americans' images of themselves. It is only through learning to critically deconstruct the codes of advertising that we can begin to learn the limits of these codes.

This book is designed to introduce undergraduate students to critical scholarship on advertising in a way that makes it accessible and builds on their own media knowledge and experiences. It asks the question, what do advertisements mean? And attempts to answer that question by showing that ads are much more than what advertisers promise, that is, messages aimed at selling goods and services.

While there are any number of books that have been published on advertising, the great majority of these defend the values, institutions, and lifestyles of consumer capitalism. The readings in this book take a decidedly critical political perspective. Rather than explaining how advertising works these readings are aimed at teaching the reader what an advertisement means. The purpose of this book is to empower readers to become media literate by deconstructing the consumer culture that surrounds them.

Each of the original chapters in the book was written with undergraduate students in mind. All of the articles included are original works that have not appeared previously in academic journals or other books.

Series Editor Introduction

Shirley R. Steinberg
Adelphi University

No book could have been released in a more timely fashion than Frith's collection of essays on the power agendas involved in advertising. Given the discussions of the past few years involving the accusation of child pornography ala Calvin Klein to the banishment of Joe Camel from the murals and walls of buildings, we are acutely aware that advertising has increasingly defined our collective consciousness. Many arguments, therefore, revolve around not only the political and economic intentions of advertisers but the ethics and pedagogy attached to each and every advertisement. Pedagogy, in this context, involves the production and transmission of knowledge and values, and the construction of identity. These themes play out consistently in all of the books in our Counterpoints Series.

As Katherine Frith opens this collection, she demands the need to "undress" the ad, to "read" the culture of advertising. This call for a pedagogy of advertising is essential in the postmodern era, especially to children and youth. As Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1997) called for the "reading" of the world—analyzing the texts presented within culture—Frith is calling for a deconstruction and political reading of promotional propaganda involved in the economic dynamics of the late twentieth century.

As a society, we are whirled spun by spin doctors. Our media and advertisers spend vast fortunes working to construct a consumer consciousness. By the age of three, most children throughout the world are able to recognize the

golden arches and their meaning (Kincheloe, 1997). In Southern Brazil, for example, gauchos ride along with Ronald McDonald, demanding that young children have their birthday parties at McDonald's. In Versailles, Ronald accompanies Napoleon through the streets of Paris. The corporate appropriation of history and culture legitimizes the advertising of products. Ads become an educational tool, twisted into a cultural curriculum that fits the needs and interests of each consumer.

The authors in this book call for a pedagogy of media literacy, an ability to understand and teach the hegemonic notions and corporate agendas for the public. Such a pedagogy allows us to consume as intelligent participants in our own lives. This is the nature of empowerment: we make our own decisions on what to consume and how to be entertained. Such are our rights in the mediated cosmos of hyperreality.

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Chapter 1

Undressing the Ad: Reading Culture in Advertising

Katherine T. Frith

Historians and archaeologists will one day discover that the ads of our times are the richest and most faithful daily reflections that any society ever made of its entire range of activities.

Marshal McLuhan

INTRODUCTION

Most people think that there is too much advertising, that it makes us materialistic, that it perpetuates stereotypes, that it plays on our fears of not being socially acceptable, that it lies, exploits children, and generally corrupts society. While most of these criticisms are not altogether true, there is some truth to all of them.

As a society we are embedded in a culture of consumption. Neil Postman (1985) notes that by the age of forty the average American will have seen well over one million commercials and have “close to another million to go before his first social security check” (p. 126). In order to comprehend the impact of all this advertising on society we must learn how to see through advertisements, for they are not just messages about goods and services but social and cultural texts about ourselves. Solomon (1988) has pointed out:

As long as you are unable to decode the significance of ordinary things, and as long as you take the signs of your culture at face

value, you will continue to be mastered by them. But once you see behind the surface of a sign into its hidden cultural significance, you can free yourself from that sign and perhaps find a new way of looking at the world. You will control the signs of your culture rather than having them control you. (p. 8)

In order to understand how to read advertisements critically we must begin to incorporate “popular culture as a serious object of politics and analysis” (Giroux, 1988, 164). While all culture is worthy of investigation, popular culture is often devalored as “sub-literature or para-literature” (McCracken, 1982, 30). However, in critically reading even something as seemingly mundane as an advertisement we can begin to see “the political, social and cultural forms of subordination that create inequities among different groups as they live out their lives” (Giroux, 1988, 165). This type of critical pedagogy enables teachers and students to view aspects of popular culture within broader social, cultural, and political considerations. In the case of advertising, which has historically been linked to marketing and sales, it allows us to discover the broader social and cultural implications of these seemingly simple messages.

The benefits of critically examining the whole advertising message, not merely the surface or sales message, is that it helps to sharpen one’s critical sensibilities. As McCracken (1982) points out this can “counteract the non-critical response so often conditioned by the mass media” (p. 31). The methodological tools we will be using to deconstruct ads are interdisciplinary, drawing on a variety of theoretical positions, including literary theory, feminist critique, postmodernism, Marxism, semiotic analysis, and what Cornel West (1990) terms “the new cultural politics of difference” to name just a few. In fact, demystification of any aspect of mass culture “is most successful when several methodologies are jointly employed” (McCracken, 1982, 31).

UNDRESSING THE AD

The conventional way that marketers define advertising is to describe it as messages that “impart information about products which consumers use to make brand choices” (Domzal and Kernan, 1992). The limitation of this definition is that it falls short of giving us the whole picture. Advertising does much more than impart product information, it tells us what products signify and mean. It does this by marrying aspects of the product to aspects of the culture. Embedded in advertising’s messages about goods and services are the cultural roles and cultural values that define our everyday life (Stern, 1992). The products we consume express who we are, they are cultural signifiers. The type of watch we wear, the brand of athletic shoes, or the kind of car we drive tell others a lot about us. Advertising not only tells us about the products we consume it also tells us what those products signify in our culture:

People ‘read’ advertising as a cultural text, and advertisers who understand this meaning-based model can create more powerful and intriguing campaigns. (Domzal and Kernan, 1992, 49)

One way to begin to understand “how” an advertisement means (Stern, 1988) is to learn how to deconstruct them. Deconstruction, a critical theory of European origin (Saussure, 1966; Barthes, 1972; Levi-Strauss, 1970; Foucault, 1970; Lacan, 1968), is the reigning school of literary theory. Its proponents find the real significance of texts not in their explicit meaning, nor even in their implied meaning but in their unintentional meanings, or as one author states, “in the slips, evasions and false analogies that betray the text’s ideology” (McConnell, 1990, 100). In essence, deconstruction is a way of reading against the text, or as John Fiske (1989) and Stuart Hall (1974) would say, taking an “oppositional” reading. The aim of deconstruction is to expose the social and political power structures in society that combine to produce the text.

By analyzing both the foreground and background of the advertisement-as-text it is possible to reveal the secondary social or cultural messages in which the primary sales

message is embedded. Leymore (1975) explains this holistic view of advertisements in this way:

Now if the product is the mental representation conjured up by the advertisement and supported by the story and the pictures, then the background, which includes users in their various settings, color, accessories, layout and so on is the signifier. In other words, the advertised product is the signified to which the background acts as a signifier; together they both form a sign. Thus, both are essential and as they are a unity there is no sense in asking which is more important or necessary than the other. (p. 37)

This means that, in fact, the background of the advertisement is as important as the foreground because it creates the context without which there can be no meaning. Analyzing the cultural content of an advertisement involves interpreting both verbal and visual aspects of the advertising text to determine not only the primary sales message but also additional secondary social or cultural messages. Advertisements reflect society, in a sometimes slightly distorted way (Pollay, 1986), and by undressing or demystifying ads we can begin to see the role advertising plays in the creation of culture.

ANALYZING LEVELS OF MEANING

The most useful technique for critically deconstructing both the surface and the deeper social and cultural meaning of advertisements is a form of textual analysis (Dyer, 1982). This type of analysis is based on literary and artistic methods of critique. To begin, the textual analyst must devise a system of classification for understanding the meaning in a given text. Since print advertising is easiest to analyze in a book, we will start with some magazine advertisements. There are at least three ways in which any text, including an advertising text, can be approached (Scholes, 1985). First, one can read within the text “identifying the cultural codes that structure an author’s work” (Giroux, 1988, 167). The second stage is retelling the story, which involves elaboration of the story in the text. The final stage is to “explode” the text, or what Stuart Hall (1974) calls