

Television II: Television Commercials

Media theorist Jean Kilbourne argues that the purpose of the mass media is to deliver an audience to advertisers. If so, the goal of television programs is to round-up viewers for commercials. Television's dramatic entertainments, sports events, even the news and other information programs are all designed to make profits for the companies whose products are featured in commercials.

Commercials are big business. Communications professor Sut Jhally, who calls our media systems "vehicles for selling,"¹ notes that by 1998, over \$100,000,000 a year was spent on advertising, and people were seeing almost four thousand commercial impressions a day. As of 2004, the major networks sold approximately 28 minutes of commercials for every hour of television time. That means that as viewers watched television, almost half of what they saw was advertisement of one form or another.

Like print ads, television commercials do more than promote products. They frame their products in ideological constructs that embody cultural values and beliefs.

The Television Commercial: Ideological Center of Television

The most powerful personalizing and mythmaking form of advertising is the television commercial. Insofar as television is the culture in the sense described in Chapter 10, the ideological center of American network television itself is the commercial. The American thirty-to sixty-second commercial is so integral a part of network television programming that its impact is comparable to the filters of home, drama, and personality.

This chapter will discuss how television commercials are structured, how they function, how they have incorporated aspects of both avant-garde and popular art traditions, and how they impact viewers.

The Thirty-Second Television Commercial: A Basic Icon of American Culture

Like all forms of advertising, commercials promote products and create “images.” The television commercial, however, does more than this. Increasingly, the television commercial has lent its methodology—especially its techniques of packaging an “image”—to every aspect of American life.



Presidential campaigns are defined by commercials that package the slogans and the look of the candidate with the same techniques used to market products. In 1984, the Reagan and Mondale campaigns spent over sixty million dollars on commercials (11.1). For the first time in the history of America’s national political conventions, a major party’s nominee for president was introduced by a film—a “super-commercial” (made by the agency that produced Coca-Cola commercials) later cut into smaller segments and shown as commercials during the Reagan campaign. Since then, US political parties have committed increasing dollars to television commercials. The number of national ads in 2004 was more than twice the number for the previous presidential campaign.

During the 2004 presidential campaign, two series of commercials proposed contradictory interpretations of the Viet Nam War records of then President George W. Bush and his opposing candidate Senator John Kerry. The Internet-based MoveOn.org produced

commercials that questioned the nature of Bush’s last year of military service. The organization calling itself Swift Boat Veterans for Truth suggested Kerry didn’t deserve the medals he received for valor during the war. In mid-August 2004, the dueling commercials were discussed on CNN by a commentator who analyzed the reliability of news sources.

At the same time the political campaign commercials aired, viewers witnessed repeated airing of, for example, Priceline commercials that featured two actors who had starred in the historic television series “Star Trek” (11.2). The humor of the Priceline commercials depended on viewers recognizing that one actor had played Captain Kirk in the series, and the other actor had played his first officer Spock. Priceline was banking on the fact that the two actors and their historic roles were as recognizable to US television viewers as President Bush and Senator Kerry.



11.2 Production stills from Priceline.com.

Other commercials use the “licensed images” of singer Frank Sinatra or actor John Wayne to promote current products. Similarly digitally produced avatars were given wide public viewing in the 1994 film *Forrest Gump* (US, Robert Zemeckis, 11.3) which paired the fictional character with a digital performance by “real” US President John F. Kennedy.



11.3 Film stills from *Forrest Gump*, 1994.

As we consider the iconic value of commercials, we have to consider the way they present “real” people (for example, political candidates) in the same visual framework with simulated people (that is, actors performing television characters) and, increasingly, with digital avatars of historic “real” people. What does the equivalence of presentation mean to viewers’ perceptions of reality?

In the 1980s, Geraldine Ferraro capitalized on her fame as America’s first woman nominee for vice-president by starring in a commercial for Pepsi (11.4). This commercial caused as much interest as the earlier commercial that featured pop icon Michael Jackson and, according to Pepsi president Roger Enrico:

“demonstrated our total commitment to place Pepsi on the leading edge of American lifestyles.”² Enrico’s company, with over five million dollars invested in the Jackson commercials alone, understood the icon value of commercials very clearly.



Almost every organization and important issue eventually crystallizes its image in the format of a television commercial. The voice of Pope John Paul II has been used in a commercial

against nuclear war. US television actresses have alerted women to the dangers of breast cancer. And other countries are imitating the American pattern. The Venezuelan government used commercials to stimulate parents to attend to the educational potential of their children.

In America, however, children's Saturday-morning television approaches the condition of a single continuous commercial. Products and dollars have always followed in the wake of popular movies and television shows. The development of children's shows *after* the product is in existence is a more recent, and a qualitatively different, issue. The National Association for Better Broadcasting took the Los Angeles channel KCOP-TV to court in 1984, charging that the children's show "He-man and the Masters of the Universe" was nothing more than a 23-minute commercial based on an already existing line of Mattel toys (11.5).



Commercials today are powerful enough to create folk heroes and renew the lagging careers of former celebrities. Comedian Rodney Dangerfield greatly expanded his career on the basis of a series of commercials. Former football stars Bubba Smith and Dirk Butkus went from commercials to starring in their own prime-time series.

Michael Crichton, whose films deal with the intricacies of our technological culture, based his film *Looker* on the potential for commercials to manipulate personal behavior (11.6).

At one point in the film, the mastermind behind a commercial-making empire tells his colleagues that the average American will spend fifteen years of his or her life watching television. He continues:

“And the average American spends more than one and a half years of his life just watching television commercials. Fifty minutes a day, everyday of his life, watching commercials. What power!”³



11.6 Film stills from *Looker*.

Of course, Crichton’s film was produced in 1981. Viewers today watch many more commercials than they did more than twenty years ago.

How We Watch Commercials

Moshe Eizenman of the University of Toronto invented an eye-tracking device that has been used to monitor the actions of viewers’ eyes as they watch television commercials. According to Eizenman, “Our eyes are very busy. They’re continuously scanning the visual field in front of them.”⁴ Viewers focus on moving objects, sharp edges and contrasting colors. Eizenman’s work suggests that making the viewer think too much may slow their visual perception. When his test subjects were given simple mathematical problems—like adding two-digit numbers—their eye movements decelerated and they saw less of the visual field.

Advertisers who are aware of visual perception patterns use the artistic strategies that have been developed throughout the history of Western culture to insure viewers’ eyes will focus on the product and its intended associations—and to insure that viewers don’t respond to their

commercials by thinking seriously about them. Rather than offering information to be analyzed, today's commercials employ all of our culture's remarkable technology to present us with commodities that are experienced as personal icons, and situated in the context of mythic entertainments.

Commercials & Technology

Since World War II, advertising has taken on a qualitative new power in shaping American culture. With the television commercial, advertising has become arguably the most powerful form of art in our society today. The postwar role of advertising, in turn, has stemmed from the parallel growth of technology.

After World War II, America moved beyond factory-oriented industries and became the first society based on new organizational and informational technologies. The twentieth century was an age characterized by the triumphant expansion of technology into every aspect of Western culture. American popular and avant-garde art accompanied this spread of the influence of American technology over all the globe.



The importance of technology is directly linked with the increasing role of technology in American life. A 1980s IBM commercial named “Charlie” captured this change beautifully (11.6). The Charlie Chaplin-like character, formerly seen as a heroic outsider battling with technology, became a prosperous businessman. Appropriately, the commercial shows that Charlie’s transformation is in large part due to the friendly help of postwar technology.

Technology, however, is not just “there.” It expresses our basic cultural myth as clearly as Coatlicue expressed the Aztec culture or Michelangelo’s *David* expressed the Italian Renaissance. Technology expresses the Western cultural myth of the autonomous individual by transforming the physical environment to conform with our needs, wishes, and desires. This transformation is not seen only in our giant buildings, freeways, and dams. On a cosmic scale, it is the footprints of American astronauts that will lie forever on the surface of the moon. On a microscopic scale it is human intervention at the genetic level of biology and the atomic level of matter.

Despite its complexity, our technological culture depends upon advertising art for the same thing that native arts provide for their cultures: advertising images provide meaning, the kind of meaning that comes from the experience of myth--the meaning given by the icon aspect of art.

As we have seen in discussing print ads, advertising art attempts to connect the technological environment of products, organizations, and programming to *personal* patterns of perception and use. This connection happens in two phases: in the first phase, the advertisement attaches a sense of power and personality to the product, organization, or program; in the second phase, it attempts to connect this sense of power and personality--in however a small degree--to the personality of the individual who experiences the advertisement. To the extent that this sense of power and personality does transfer from the image to the viewer, the personal, mythic connection is made.

The impressive power of the television commercial stems in large part from its ability to absorb earlier forms of Western art and ingeniously redirect them into producing icons of

consumerism. A few examples will illustrate the structure of the television commercial, beginning with one of the most successful commercials ever broadcast: “1984.”

“1984”: The Commercial as Movie, Myth & Personal Experience

The commercial “1984” appeared on network television on January 22, 1984, during the broadcast of Superbowl XVIII (11.7). The impact of this commercial was so strong that it evoked almost as much post-game comment as the football game itself. It has become a classic example of the complexity, effectiveness, and iconic appeal of the television commercial.

Like most commercials, “1984” was not a videotape; it was a movie made for television. As a movie, it had a complete plot, a hero, and a happy ending. Its production costs exceeded half a million dollars.

The opening scene of “1984” showed lines of men filing into a huge hall set somewhere within a massive, bunker-like futuristic structure. All of the men’s heads were shaved, and all wore drab gray clothes.

Once seated somewhere inside the structure, all the men gazed up at a huge television screen that was filled by the stern, emaciated face of a dictatorial leader. The leader’s face looked troubled despite his triumphantly shouted propaganda slogans, which themselves appeared graphically on the screen beside his face.

Then the action suddenly cut to a scene outside the hall, an athletic young woman dressed in white-and-red track clothes racing down a corridor leading to the hall. Her face had an expression of unstoppable determination, and she carried a large sledgehammer.

Scenes then began to switch from the face on the screen to the rows of men to the onrushing figure of the woman. As she entered the hall she began to swing the sledgehammer over her head. When she reached the front of the room she pivoted in a single graceful, powerful

motion and hurled the hammer into the face on the television screen. There was an explosion of light. The camera showed the drab faces of the men in the hall suddenly illuminated with a sense of liberation.

Viewers began to understand the significance of the commercial when the following words appeared on the screen:

On January 24th

Apple Computer will introduce

Macintosh.

And you'll see why 1984

Won't be like "1984."

The entire movie drama took sixty seconds.

The effectiveness of this commercial is reflected in the fact that, despite only one showing of "1984" on national television, Apple sold out its stock of Macintosh computers on January 24, the first sales day following the commercial's broadcast.



Commercials draw on the entire tradition of film (which includes photography and painting). All the techniques discussed in Chapter 7, from the jump cut to the flashback, are included in commercials, plus the techniques that have been developed in film since that early period.

The director of “1984,” Ridley Scott, is one of many directors who produce both commercials and feature films. His films *Alien*, *Blade Runner* and *Gladiator* show the same kind of rich environmental detail seen in “1984.”

The title “1984” refers back to George Orwell’s famous novel of that name. A fine Hollywood film of the novel came out later in the same year, but the plot and imagery of the commercial played on the whole tradition of movies about totalitarian societies. The overall mood and the scene of the men filing into the building, for instance, bear a strong resemblance to scenes in Fritz Lang’s underground city in *Metropolis* (discussed in Chapter 7.)

As “1984” did, commercials often recycle themes from popular movies. That same year—1984--Pepsi aired commercials based on three Steven Spielberg films, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *E.T.*, and *Jaws*. More recently, Coca Cola centered a commercial on a man and woman meeting each other while watching the classic film *Casablanca*. And in late 2004, Burger King capitalized on the success of the film about popular cartoon character Sponge Bob in a series of commercials linking Sponge Bob watches with their boxed meals (**11.8**).



The interaction of commercials, film and personal products continued into the twenty-first century. Commercials for Samsung cell phones aired in 2004 showed a young woman using

her phone to create a video autobiography. She declared, “This is a movie about me, made by me” (11.9).



French cultural critic Jean Baudrillard would not be surprised by the Samsung commercial. As early as 1997, he wrote, “There is always a camera hidden somewhere. It may be a real one—we may be filmed without knowing it. We may also be invited to replay our own life on a television network. Anyway, *the virtual camera is in our head*, and our whole life has taken on a video dimension...Our own reality doesn’t exist any more. We are exposed to the instantaneous retransmission of all our facts and gestures on a channel...[I]t is just like an advertising promotion.”⁵

The Commercial: Dramas for Experiencing Commodities

The dreamlike yet fast-paced quality of the “1984” commercial provides a classic example of how the experience built into the commercial is calculated to link the viewer and the product in an emotional bond.

Despite its mere sixty-second length, “1984’s” narrative embodies several highly emotional themes: the individual versus tyranny, human strength versus technology, and women’s liberation versus male domination. By choosing a beautiful, athletic woman it also used sex appeal.

Who would not want the emotional charge from the dramatic experience of such themes connected, even if only subconsciously, with their product?

This principle explains why no Macintosh computer appeared in the entire sequence of image—no picture of a computer was needed. The purpose of the commercial was not to provide information about the computer. Its purpose was to fuse the emotional experience of the commercial with the product name, Macintosh. The commercial was, quite simply, an experience that carried a label—like a pair of designer jeans. The experience of the commercial, unlike the jeans, is worn on the *inside* of the person.

The emphasis on *experience* rather than *information* is a critical dimension in most successful commercials; “1984” was unique in having only one national showing. Most commercials rely on the ritual of repeated viewings, updated with a series of related commercials, to keep the desired experience resonating in the viewer. McDonald’s, for instance, has produced commercials that are based, not on hamburgers, but on the American Way of Life.

The Big Mac: The Experience of Patriotism, Family & Fun

The Big Mac is a hamburger. Through the constant visual ritual of its commercials, however, it eventually becomes—especially for children—a hamburger wrapped in the experience of fun, friendliness, and the American Way of Life. People in McDonald’s ads—old people, young people, black people, white people—are always enthusiastic and always smiling. The direct appeal to children is illustrated in the lyrics of an especially effective commercial called “Fries” (11.10):

“You

You’re the one.

You are the only reason.

You

You're the one.

We're takin' pride in pleasin'.

You're why a McDonald's fry

Is crisp and golden brown. You're what they're famous for,

Why they're the best French fries in town...

(chorus)

You deserve a break today..."⁶

That's a lot to get with an order of fries.



This “all-American” tradition of McDonald’s found its maximum expressive force in the series of commercials made exclusively for the 1984 Olympics. The theme of each mini-movie was “When the U.S.A. Wins, You Win!” Americans thus saw, sandwiched between gymnasts and rowers and updates on the quest for the gold medals, a series of fantasies that showed Dad, Mom, and the kids fusing their identities with the Olympian heroes. Although the vision of the gold medal, by the end of the commercial, turned out to be only a dream, the experience

packaged in the commercials aimed at coloring the next order of burger and fries with a bit of the aura of patriotism, family, and fun—and winning.

The commercial that pictured the swimming stadium donated to the games by McDonald's was also strikingly effective. A diver climbed up the ladder and dived into the pool, but his face was never shown: the hero was the pool. The McDonald's logo in the commercial helped turn the Olympics itself into an advertisement for McDonald's.

Diet Pepsi: The Product as Erotic Experience

Another experience often wrapped up with the imagery of the commercial is sex appeal. The Diet Pepsi commercials in the early eighties were a classic example of linking sex appeal to a product.

These commercials presented a succession of quick-cuts showing extremely shapely bodies, mostly of women, either in close-up detail or with partly covered faces. The key to the image sequence in each commercial was the last shot: it showed a can of Diet Pepsi posing alongside a final shot of a beautiful model (11.11).



Besides the obvious appeal to male and female viewers to get thin by drinking Diet Pepsi, these commercials included a more subtle appeal to motivate women to see their own bodies as sex objects. The commercial also sought to give women the experience of seeing themselves, so

to speak, through the admiring eyes of men—and also through the envious eyes of other women. The message of the commercial was not only for a woman to become a sex object, but to enjoy the experience.

Female viewers should be aware of the profound ambivalence in such a message. The admiring gaze of heterosexual men tends to objectify women, to empty them of their human subjectivity and turn them into mere things. It also tends to provoke envy and jealousy in other women. The feelings of competition between women are articulated in a print ad that features a gorgeous woman's face, beside the caption, "Don't hate me because I'm beautiful."

See How Cute My Corporation Is!

Many commercials employ humor to capture audience attention and forge positive bonds between person and product. A good example is the Budweiser beer commercials with three personable frogs croaking "Bud-wei-ser" in a comical swamp (11.12).



Such commercials are remarkably effective. A 2003 survey conducted by the Center for Science in the Public Interest revealed that children from the ages of eight to twelve could name more beer brands than US presidents. “Of course,” as Lynne Warren observes, “Millard Fillmore and Benjamin Harrison never had Budweiser’s talking lizards or a buxom St. Pauli Girl to boost their name recognition.”⁷

Since the economic decline that began in the late 1990s, Americans have resented the rising costs of basic living expenses like utilities, gasoline, and insurance. They have also been infuriated by reports of corporate fraud and of mammoth profits reaped by ethically questionable companies. Endeavoring to counter such negativity, several US corporations have generated appealing, even “cute” mascots to encourage consumers to identify their products with something positive and likable, rather than with scandalous business practices.

Humor is often used to make insurance and other powerful corporate conglomerates less threatening. A good example of this commercial strategy can be seen in the Chevron oil commercials that feature toy-like cars animated with wide open eyes and big smiles. Other examples are seen in the Geico commercials that “star” a computer-generated gecko lizard. Originally injected to visualize a play on words (Geico/gecko), the lizard was later presented as an exemplary Geico employee (**11.13**).



California Raisins Campaign

The manner in which commodities become humorous and appealing celebrities in television commercials can be seen as early as the 1987 California Raisins campaign (11.14). Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Chicano activist Cesar Chavez organized protests against California grape growers mistreatment of migrant laborers. Chavez worked with the United Farm Workers (UFW) and led strikes to demand higher wages and better working conditions. In 1965, Chavez and the UFW urged Americans to boycott table grapes as a show of support. The boycott became very effective, calling national media attention to the workers' plight and costing the grape growers considerable money.



A second round of protests, strikes and boycotts was initiated in 1985. Soon thereafter, the California Raisin Advisory Board hired Foote, Cone and Belding Agency to create an advertising campaign that would change public perception and re-stimulate the buying of grapes and grape products. The advertisers created a claymation commercial with four raisins performing as musicians. The raisins sang “I Heard It Through the Grapevine,” an immensely popular song first recorded by Motown star Marvin Gaye. The campaign was hugely popular, particularly with children, who were used to seeing inanimate objects like teapots imaginatively given human characteristics. The California Raisins went from stars of a commercial to stars of

their own animated television show. Related toys, games, dolls, tee shirts were sold at great profit. The advertisers had turned maligned products into celebrities with wide appeal to children. The political impact of buying California grape products was undermined by the mass media process of turning commodities into celebrities and the eager consumption of both.

Stereotypes & Humor in Commercials

The humor of some commercials is based on repeating stereotypes. Occasionally, these stereotypes have to do with national identities. A 2004 commercial for Jack in the Box “natural cut” fries presented the ball-headed Jack character being interviewed by a French journalist (11.15). The Frenchman sat in front of an image of the most famous French architectural icon—the Eiffel Tower—and spoke with a highly exaggerated accent. He asked Jack why the company was changing the name from French fries to “natural cut” fries, implying the French way was the only proper way to cook fries. Attired in patriotic red, white and blue, Jack stood for American ingenuity and independence against the conservative and closed-minded French manner.

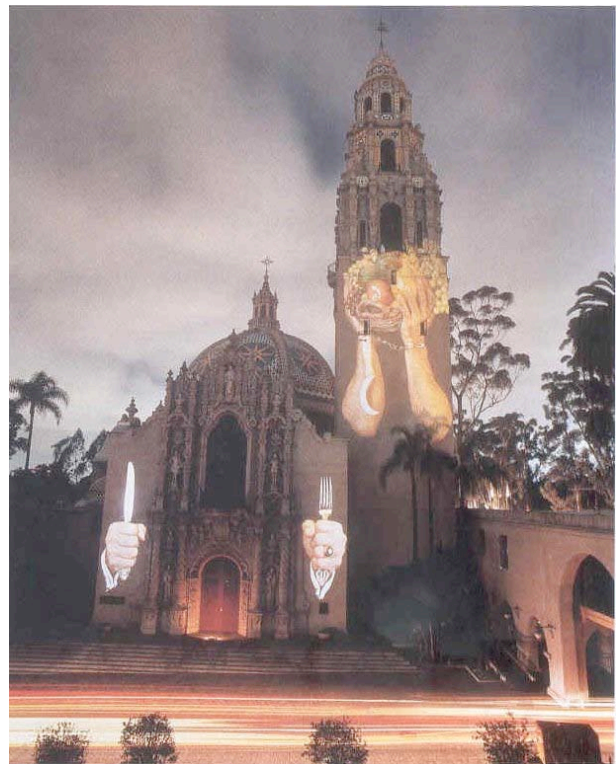


Sometimes, the stereotypes in commercials are troubling and potentially destructive in nature. The commercials for Supercuts that repeated male stereotypes—“non-committal mama’s boy,” “never asks directions,” “sex-obsessed procrastinator”—reinscribed limiting views of men, no matter how “funny” they appeared at first. This is also true of the many commercials that

portray fathers as inept at household chores and childcare skills. As discussed in Chapter 11, humor can serve to reinforce conservative social standards. Male stereotypes, no matter how comically conveyed, serve to oppress and limit human potential.

Commercials Online & in Film

Although this chapter focuses on television commercials, it is important to note that commercials have spread far beyond the television format. They have colonized many areas of life and media, clamoring for our attention on screens in sports stadiums, shouting at us as we stand in line in amusement parks, dwarfing us on city streets. Sut Jhally notes that one company even proposed sending an immense screen into the earth's atmosphere, so that companies could play commercials in the sky.



(SIDEBAR: Interestingly, the proposed commercial use of immense projections recalls Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* which (11.16) was supposed to project Russian Revolutionary images onto the clouds. More recently, **Krzysztof Wodiczko** (b. 1943) has done a series of huge projections highlighting how the erection of historic buildings displaces disenfranchised people. For example, he projected two images of hands on the walls of the San Diego Mission (11.17). The contrast between the manacled hands of a black woman pointing down in submission and the jewel-adorned hands of a white couple, holding knives and forks and raised in anticipation of a meal, called attention to the class histories imbedded in the construction of the mission.)

The two main venues for television-like commercials are the two other screen-based mass media: film and computers. Neither was originally conceived as a commercial venture, but both have become increasingly commercial.



An entire industry has arisen to insert commercial images in films. Product placement specialists convince filmmakers to use their products in films, and pay them to do so. Reese's Pieces candies were used to lure the extra-terrestrial, who later drank

Altadena milk in Spielberg's *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982, US, Steven Spielberg). A Pepsi can was used as a strategically placed target in *Independence Day* (1996, US, Roland Emmerich, 11.18). One of the stars of *Independence Day*—Will Smith—created a music video that functioned as a commercial for the film whenever it appeared on MTV. (Smith also performed in music videos for his films *Men in Black* and *Wild, Wild West*.)

The companies that co-sponsor films often link commercials for their products with promotions for the films. Burger King and McDonalds have co-sponsored children's films and used images from the film in commercials, insuring that their target audiences—particularly children—linked their products with favorite entertainments. During the filming of his recent James Bond movies, corporations that produced everything from credit cards to cars hired actor Pierce Brosnan to promote their products.

Both Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean* (US, 2002, **11.19**) and their *Haunted House* (US, 2003) can be considered feature-length commercials for the theme park rides after which the movies were named. Disney executives hired a mega-star to headline each film—Johnny Depp for *Pirates* and Edie Murphy for *Haunted House*—because they knew that the beloved celebrities would insure positive audience response in spite of the blatant commercial content of the films.



Movie theaters now play numerous commercials before films are screened. Rental videos and DVDs precede their feature films with commercials. And sports fans know that they cannot even watch close-up action on the field—like the college or NFL quarterback taking the ball from the center—without seeing the Nike “swoosh” icon printed on a sweatband or jersey (11.20).

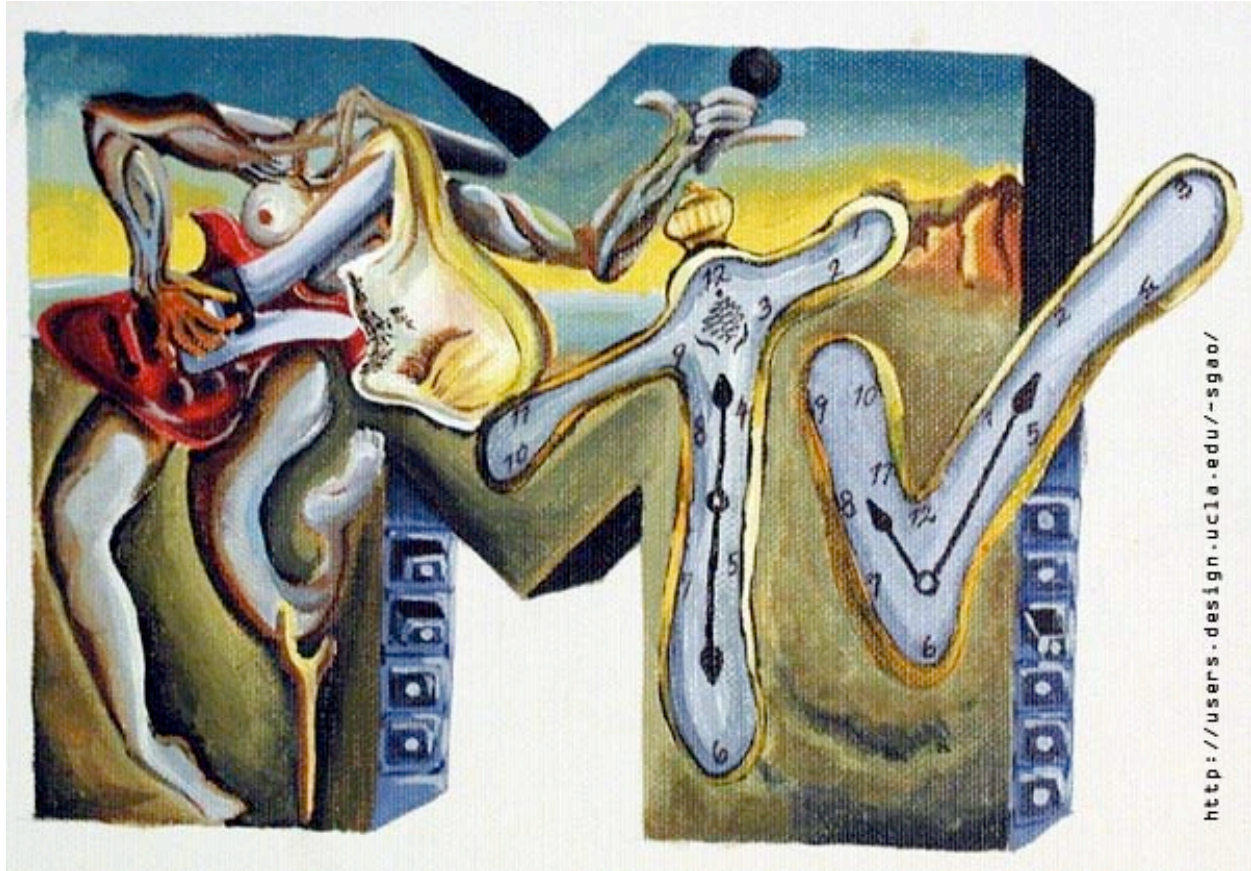


Many film-based commercials are screened on the Internet. For example, in 2003 and 2004, BMW hired British actor Clive Owen to star in a series of 8-minute movies aired on the Internet (11.21). A different internationally known director was hired to write and direct each film. In the films, Owen played a talented driver hired to perform daring feats, from saving a diamond smuggler attacked by masked gunmen (in John Frankenheimer’s *Ambush*), to saving a journalist in a war-torn Third World country (in Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu’s *Powder Keg*), to saving rock’n’roll icon James Brown from the devil (in Tony Scott’s *Beat the Devil*). Of course, Owen drove a fancy BMW in each of the films. The concept was so successful that Dark Horse Comics produced a spin-off comic book series based on the Clive Owen-BMW film character.



The Television Commercial: Absorbing the Western Artistic Tradition

Commercials reveal a strong connection with avant-garde films as well as with the Hollywood film tradition. For example, clips from Salvador Dali's *Un Chien andalou* (11.22) and Dziga Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* have been used in commercials for MTV. And many other avant-garde films have been used as the basis for music videos.



Robert Breer, who became involved in avant-garde filmmaking in order to control and review the processes in his own paintings, had this comment to make on the relationship between commercials and avant-garde films:

“Avant-garde inventions are often picked up first by the people who do TV commercials: they’re always on the lookout for new techniques and effects to hype a product. From commercials, the techniques are adopted by narrative film-makers, whether they’re willing to admit it or not.”⁸

The television commercial is also rooted in the history of Western painting. Art icons like the *Mona Lisa* appear in commercials as well as the print ads discussed in Chapter 9. The humor of a 2004 commercial for Crest Whitestrips played on the fact that viewers can't see *Mona Lisa's* teeth.

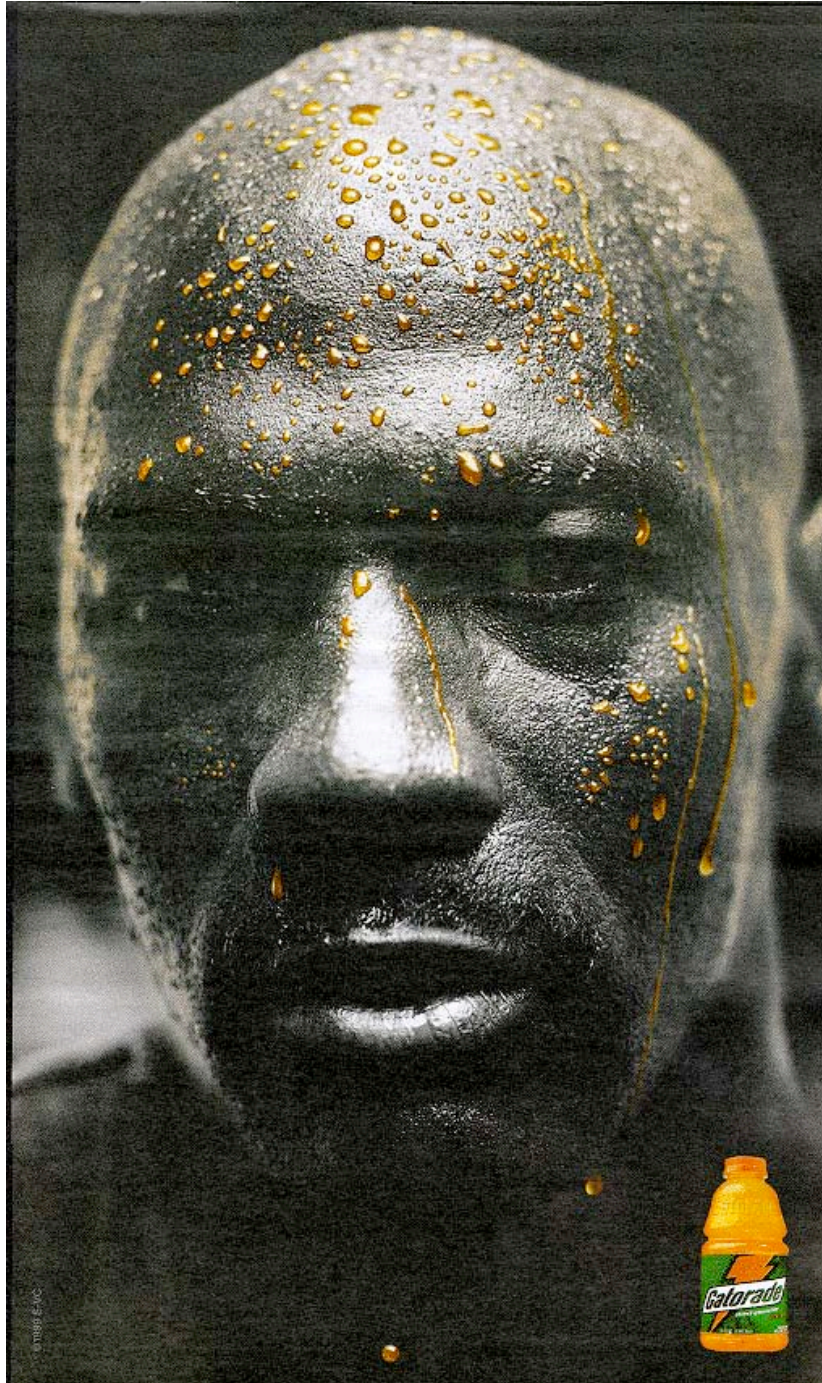
The eroticism of many commercials goes back to Academic painting's own exploration of veiled but exploitative eroticism. Art historian Linda Nochlin has commented on how much Academic painting's "strategies of concealment" anticipated the current use of sexual imagery in the mass media. She specifically referred to Gerome's *The Slave Market* (11.23):

"Works like Gerome's...are valuable and well worth investigating not because they share the aesthetic values of great art on a slightly lower level, but because as visual imagery they anticipate and predict the qualities of incipient mass culture."⁹



Commercials reflect an even stronger connection with avant-garde painting. Many commercials are based on the same principles of color theory that Impressionist painter Claude

Monet used. A series of Target Store ads was based on the visual contrasts of complementary colors like red and green, as were the Gator Aid commercials that transformed athletes' perspiration into brilliantly hued yellow and purple liquid (**11.24**). Other commercials have employed Cubist collage, such as Minute Maid Lemonade commercials that depicted cut-up lemons and lips scattered over landscapes.



As mentioned in Chapter 10, Surrealism—directly or indirectly—has been an ongoing source of both inspiration and instruction for American advertising artists and directors. The world of the thirty- to sixty-second commercial is a world of imagery that realizes Breton's Surrealist vision of fusing reality and dream. Commercials present a world where watches melt

and dinosaurs become oil before our very eyes. Corvettes fly high above city streets in a 2004 Chevrolet commercial (11.25). Eyelashes are several stories high in a commercial for mascara. Cars and other objects defy time, space, and matter with a frivolity and abandonment that can only exist in the world of dreams—and desire.



The world of dreams evoked by the television commercial, however, is not the same world as that sought out and explored by the Surrealists.

Tony Schwartz, who has made over five thousand ads and commercials, is one of America’s most important authorities on commercials. His description of the crucial role of “experience” within the advertising icon reveals how the television commercial, instead of liberating the individual’s subconscious (the Surrealist ideal), strives to achieve a kind of image-transplant:

“When the consumer sees the product in the store, whether he or she consciously remembers it or not, the product may evoke the experience of the commercial. If the experience was meaningful, and there is a need, the consumer is likely to buy the product.

“The critical task is to design our package of stimuli so that it resonates with information already stored within an individual and thereby induces the desired learning or behavioral effects.”¹⁰

The world of commercials also realizes to an astonishing degree the Futurist objective to intimately connect the technological and objective world with the human personality. Like the Saab advertisement discussed in Chapter 10, many commercials show the object merging with the person.

Even the Russian Constructivist artists’ brief alliance with the Marxist revolution pales before the iconic impact of the television commercial on American culture. As the drama critic Martin Esslin has commented, the American television commercial has used psychological research for ideological purposes more effectively than the most ingenious Marxist dramatists, including a playwright whose works are often performed in the West, Bertolt Brecht:

“Brecht advocated the use of drama as an instrument of social engineering, a powerful teaching tool to change people’s lives...It is ironic that the truest fulfillment of Brecht’s postulates of a didactic drama designed to convert mankind to communism...should have come in the television commercials of capitalism.”¹¹

The art form of the television commercial thus absorbs elements from the Western artistic tradition from Academic painting to Hollywood movies to avant-garde art. It fuses these borrowed elements, however, into an objective that is far more specific and attainable than anything sought by the revolutionary art of Futurism, Constructivism, and Surrealism: the cultivation of oneself as an image, based on purchasing the appropriate commodities. Commercials are icons that, in an image-conscious society, urge us to assemble our own selves.

This basic appeal to image, for the viewer to see his or her personality reflected and fulfilled in the commercial, is one of the crucial motivating factors in our culture.

The television commercial, despite its obvious power, cannot influence behavior to any predictable degree. For every campaign like Apple's "1984" commercial for the Macintosh computer, there are commercials like the ones during the same year for Atari computers, which even the acting and producing skills of Alan Alda ("M.A.S.H.") could not help.

The most important aspect of commercials, however, is not their effectiveness individually but their cumulative effect as part of the environment of television. Despite their immense variety in form and content, commercials surround us with icons that constantly affirm a specific set of basic values: that buying is a prime exercise of personal freedom, that happiness is a by-product of commodities, and that half-truths well packaged are the most valuable and effective forms of communication. Advertising, as one writer has recently demonstrated, has something like the propaganda role of Socialist Realism in Marxist Societies.¹²

One commercial form in which the iconic power is particularly apparent is the music video.

Music Videos: Musical Dramas to Sell Records, Tapes & CDs

Music videos are not simply creative visualizations of songs; they are a major art form that literally grew out of the television commercial genre. They are also commercials for the records, tapes and CDs on which the songs are sold. As early as the 1960s, music groups were regularly filmed and videotaped while performing, but it was not until MTV's stunning success in the early 1980s that videos became fundamental to the music industry. Although a small number of videos still focus on the performers singing and playing their instruments, most are dramas employing the full range of cinematic components, including professional actors and a

wide range of special effects. Many famed film directors, such as Spike Lee, have worked on music videos.

REM’s “Losing My Religion”: The Rock Video as Postmodern Art

In 1991, the Georgia-based rock group REM commissioned Bombay filmmaker Tarsem Singh to create a video to promote their pop song “Losing My Religion” (11.26). Tarsem juxtaposed *tableaux vivant* (living pictures) drawn from three different cultural systems: the paintings of Italian Baroque artist Caravaggio, sculpture and icons from the Russian Revolutionary avant-garde, and miniatures from ancient Hindu texts. Tarsem’s video was a hybrid conversation between diverse visual languages; its eclectic images caught the popular imagination and “Losing My Religion” won many awards at the MTV Annual Awards that year.



Tarsem’s video for “Losing My Religion” is a great example of the cultural style known as Postmodernism. First recognized in architecture of the late 1960s, and later acknowledged in the other arts and mass media, Postmodernism transformed contemporary culture. Throughout the 1990s, the Postmodern characteristic of eclecticism—that is, the fusion of cultural products from numerous a variety of sources—was seen in everything from restaurant menus to television comedies to music videos. In the early years of the twentieth century, Italian restaurants in the United States usually served classic Italian dishes like cheese pizza and spaghetti with meat sauce. By the end of the century, diners at the California Pizza Kitchen could select from a long

list of pizzas that combined tastes from several culinary traditions—Thai, Japanese, or Mexican—as well as Italian. Television programs and other entertainments were similarly eclectic. For example, “The Simpsons” drew on everything from Broadway musicals to contemporary political events, for its animated narratives.

After Tarsem’s innovative REM work, other artists also employed Postmodern visual strategies in making music videos. Two good examples are videos by “nu metal” rock group Linkin Park and R’n’B songstress Brandy.

Linkin Park’s “In the End” & Brandy’s “What About Us?”: Surreal Fantasies as Music Commercials



Linkin Park’s “In the End” video is a surreal blend of hybrid imagery (as befits a song from their album titled *Hybrid Theory*, 11.27). A fantasy tale of the transformation of a desolate landscape to a fertile paradise, the video centers on an immense tower shaped like a standing woman. Mystic signs cover the circular doors that open to reveal band members performing on a

terrace atop the woman's head. Whales fly, statues come to life, and the parched soil sprouts undulating plant tendrils, all through the sophisticated magic of CGI (computer-generated imagery). As visually sumptuous as the video may be, it actually has nothing to do with the content of the song lyrics. It is a seductive enticement to purchase Linkin Park tapes, CDs and concert tickets.

Brandy's "What About Us?" (US, 2004, Dave Meyers, **11.28**) is a similarly surreal blend of CGI imagery. In an apparent nod to filmic archetypes, the video opens with Brandy dressed as a pirate, alone with her treasure chest on a deserted island. The central image of the video is the artist performing in a large nest on top of a platform comprised of men whose skin has been painted a very shiny black. Uprooted trees float in the sky about the human platform.



Rap Videos: Authentic Expression or Market Construct?

Unlike such cutting edge music videos, many rap videos are culturally retrograde, depicting historic gender roles with often troubling and dangerous exaggeration. Many rap videos focus on male financial and sexual power, and position women as sex objects, always

willing and ready for male dominance. This is true of some of the videos produced by Dr. Dre, who “discovered” such rap stars as Snoop Doggy Dog, Tupac Shakur and Eminem. It is also true of some of the videos produced by P-Diddy (formerly known as Puff Daddy), whose “Shake a Tail Feather” begins with three men sitting at a counter and commenting on the bodies of women who walk by, and ends with the same men frolicking in a pool with very scantily clad, very well-endowed women (11.29).



Not all rap videos rehearse regressive gender constructions. Salt-N-Pepa’s videos, for example, present much more positive images of female sexual identity and of heterosexual relations. Among the first female rappers who achieved mainstream success, Salt-N-Pepa are known for their pro-woman lyrics. Music critic David Bertrand Wilson notes that Salt-N-Pepa “claim their own sexuality without turning into male-fantasy cartoons.”¹³

bell hooks present a compelling example of cultural criticism in her analysis of rap music videos. She sees rap as a paradigm of colonialism and argues that rap should be viewed as “a little black country that young white consumers can go to and take out of it what they want.”

However, hooks argues, it is absurd to demand that rap musicians be more moral than anyone else when they approach making money. Rap should be seen and analyzed within the

larger framework of cultural production under capitalism. Indeed, rap musicians practice business in the same model as US corporations: If they find a product that makes the maximum reward, then they push that product whether they actually believe what they're saying or not. If rap videos are viewed as part of an advanced technology of the capitalistic system of production, the question of authenticity becomes irrelevant.

Alongside such socio-economic discussion, hooks analyzes the sexualized images in the videos. She asks, how is the misogynistic and pugilistic eroticism of rap videos linked to lived experience? How much have rape and assault become defining aspects of black sexual encounters?

Further, if US culture is obsessed with transgression, and blackness is a sign of transgression, how is commodified blackness consumed by black and non-black viewers? Are rap videos an upscale form of primitivism? Does the separation between material aspirations and cultural concerns allow viewers not to be transformed by their encounter with blackness, in other words, to remain static and conservative? What do such images contribute to the US imaginary? These are questions that each viewer-consumer of rap videos must answer.

Sut Jhally on Music Videos

University of Massachusetts Communications professor Sut Jhally created his educational video "Dreamworlds 2: Desire, Sex and Power in Music Videos" (1995) in order to encourage people to think about MTV culture in an analytical way. "The idea was, can you use the images of popular culture, powerful images that people are so invested in, and get people to have distance from them, by using them against themselves—to take the power of the images away."¹⁴

Jhally is convinced that music videos are an important part of advertising and commercial culture. He believes with cultural theorist Stuart Hall that people inhabit the images of videos and commercials, “they sort of ‘put them on,’ and wear them...And the job of analysis and media literacy is to prevent people from being able to inhabit them without knowing what else goes with it—and to make these images uninhabitable.”¹⁵

In “Dreamworlds,” Jhally juxtaposes excerpts from music videos with images from the rape scene in *The Accused* (1988, US, Jonathan Kaplan) to establish the connection between the sexual objectification of women and violence against women.¹⁶ Jhally acknowledges what is called the new objectification of men, the objectification that makes possible popular film dialogue in which an attractive man is compared to a “butter leather Prada purse” (*Love Don’t Cost A Thing*, 2004, US, Troy Beyer, **11.30**). However, Jhally argues that women are still the primary carriers of sexual objectification in commercial culture. He argues, further, that the sexuality in music videos is overwhelmingly the sexuality of adolescent heterosexual males.



No scientific studies have established a direct cause-and-effect relationship between violent or sexually explicit music videos and adverse behavior. However, many critics argue that music videos like those analyzed by Jhally normalize sexual objectification and reinforce sex-role stereotyping.

Sut Jhally: Advertising & The End of the World

In his video “Advertising & The End of the World,” Sut Jhally analyzes of the role of advertising, particularly television commercials, and the potentially devastating result of our focus on consuming as a way of life. Noting that ads have colonized the entire visual environment and that commercial culture is now inside our heads, our identities, even our intimate relationships. Jhally suggests that advertising should be treated as a cultural system. Since culture is the place where a society tells stories about itself, that is, the place where values are articulated and expressed, we have to ask: What stories are being told by advertising? What values does it promote?

Advertising tells us that happiness comes from the market. But above a certain level of material comfort, it is not goods but social values like personal freedom, self-esteem, and close, meaningful relationships that provide the real sources of happiness. All of these social values are outside what the market can offer.

Advertising tells us that there is no cohesive society and that we are just a bunch of individuals operating on our own. In doing so, the market appeals to the worst in us—to our greed, selfishness and self-interest—not to our better characteristics like compassion and caring.

Since advertising focuses on the immediate present, it discourages long-term consideration of collective interests. In fact, argues Jhally, advertising promotes a sense of nihilism and despair about the future. Consumers are so committed to the comforts of capitalist consumption and so pessimistic about the future that they often disregard the warnings of scientists who urge us to curtail consumption of natural resources. In the last 50 years, Americans have used resources that equal the consumption of all the rest of human history. Jhally ties our accelerating consumption directly to advertising. The consumption practices of

relatively few humans are changing the very make-up of the planet; they may lead to devastating loss of natural resources. As a result, they may force radical changes in human culture.

Sut Jhally is convinced that we must make short-term sacrifices and diminish our consumption-driven relationship to the world. In order to do so, we have to engage critically with advertising. The stakes are too high not to.

¹ Sut Jhally, "Advertising and the End of the World" (educational video) Media Education Foundation, 1997. See <http://www.mediaed.org/videos/index_html>

² Roger Enrico, quoted in Fred Danzig, "Pepsi Cola Gambles on the Young." *Advertising Age*, March 15, 1984, 3.

³ Quoted in the screenplay of the film *Looker*, by Michael Crichton, Oct. 1980, 112.

⁴ Quoted in Joel Achenbach, "Doctor, My Eyes, How we watch TV ads" *National Geographic*, February 2003.

⁵ Jean Baudrillard, "Aesthetic Illusion and Virtual Reality" Thomas, *Reading Images* 198.

⁶ Quoted in Bruce Kurtz, *Spots: The Popular Art of American Television Commercials* (New York: Arts Communications, 1977) 18.

⁷ Lynne Warren, "The Science of Things" *National Geographic* February 2003.

⁸ Robert Breer, quoted in Charles Solomon, "Aspects of the Avant-garde—a first for the Academy." *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 10, 1981.

⁹ Linda Nochlin, "Imagining the Orient" *Art in America*, May 1983, 189.

¹⁰ Tony Schwartz, *The Resonant Chord* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1973) 21-22.

¹¹ Martin Esslin, *The Television Age* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1982) 53.

¹² Michael Schudson, *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion* (New York: Basic Books, 1984) 222.

¹³ Wilson & Alroy's Record Reviews <<http://www.warr.org/cgi-bin/search.cgi>>

¹⁴ Interview with Sut Jhally <<http://www.mergemag.org/2000/oct9DONE/sutjhally.html>>

¹⁵ Interview with Sut Jhally <<http://www.mergemag.org/2000/oct9DONE/sutjhally.html>>

¹⁶ Sut Jhally "Dreamworlds2" (educational video), Media Education Foundation, 1995. See <http://www.mediaed.org/videos/index_html>