

Reading Guide – Week 7 Day 1

Advertising in the Age of Accelerated Meaning

While our focus in this course is moving closer to the present, we are still covering the history of advertising and consumer culture. Recent topics have included the rise and transformation of television advertising as well as advertising's role in a broader period of cultural ferment in the 1960s. Most recently, we took another turn in our theorization of consumption, focusing on works by Henry Jenkins and John Fiske. Writing in the late 1980s, both authors emphasized that consumers do not simply *receive* meanings attached to consumer goods or experiences. Instead, consumers *produce* meaning, often in collaboration with others, as Jenkins illustrates in his study of Star Trek fandom and Fiske shows in his discussion of subversive mall shoppers.

Continuing the historical thread of our course, today we have articles by Set Jhally and Robert Goldman and Steven Papson. Goldman and Papson note that the U.S. advertising industry underwent another significant shift in the late 1970s. At that time, they write, "polling data registered rising consumer complaint about feeling 'manipulated' and 'insulted' by ads."

In response, "advertisers adopt[ed] narratives that were more abbreviated, oblique, and ambiguous" (83).

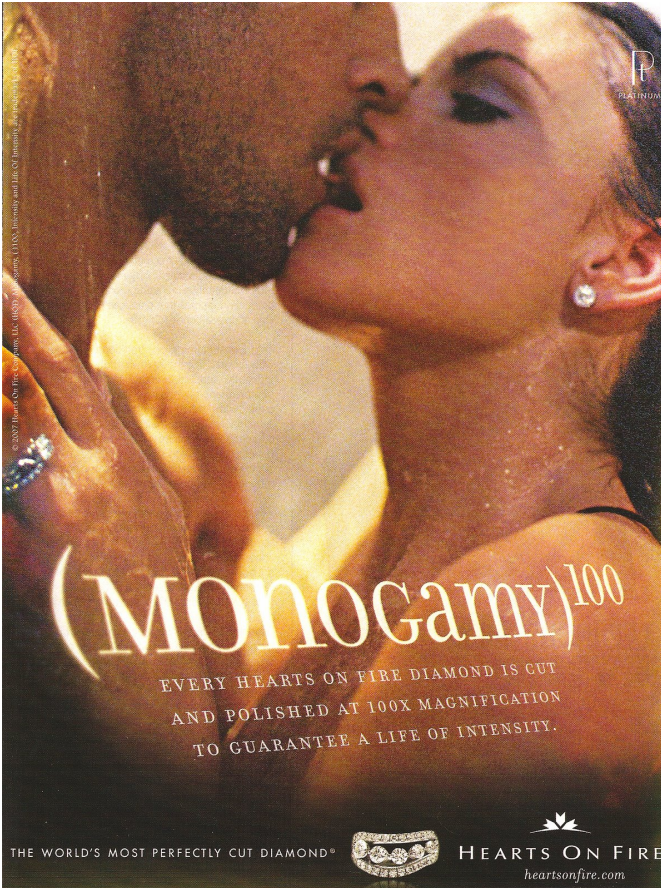
Changes in media and technology, such as the rise of cable and satellite television and the increasing sophistication of computer-generated images, further complicated late-20th-century advertising and consumer culture. Jhally notes that by the end of the 20th century, the world had come to be dominated by consumer culture and commercial images increasingly furnished the symbols with which Americans defined "the good life."

Section Title: Sut Jhally, "Image-Based Culture"

In "Image-Based Culture," Jhally declares that "the marketplace is the central institutional structure of society and is ideologically shaped by advertisements" (250). Advertising images saturate our world; their "speed and rapidity. . . require undivided attention and dissuade from critical thought" (255).

Jhally further states,

Advertising absorbs and fuses a variety of symbolic practices and discourses, it appropriates and distills from an unbounded range of cultural references. In so doing, goods are knitted into the fabric of social life and cultural significance (251).



How does this 2007 ad for Hearts on Fire diamonds, in which the product is linked to the power and intensity of being in a committed relationship, relate to Jhally's insight that "goods are knitted into the fabric of social life"?

What else do you find interesting about this ad?



Jhally argues that even our deepest feelings come to be associated with consumer goods. For example, "Happiness comes to be understood in terms of commodities and the image system" (251).

Section Title: Goldman and Papson on Sign Wars

Like Jhally, Goldman and Papson focus on the proliferation of commodity signs in the late twentieth century. As advertising, media and computer graphics became more sophisticated and pervasive, advertisers had to work harder to attract consumers' attention. In order to captivate viewers, Goldman and Papson write, advertisers increasingly engaged in "a process of routinely unhinging signifiers from signifieds so that new signifier-signified relationships [could] be fashioned" (85).

Advertisers "now try to jar viewers into interpretive quandaries as a way of keeping them engaged with the ads" (83). Consider the following example:



"Night Vision" – Wheat Thins – 2013 Super Bowl ad
<https://youtu.be/545VcUgCCO8>

What happens in this 2013 Super Bowl commercial for Spicy Buffalo Wheat Thins? How does the ad "try to jar viewers into interpretive quandaries as a way of keeping them engaged"?

Goldman and Papson argue that by the 1990s, the "competition in images [had] evolved into a stage that [they] call sign wars" (84).

At this stage, advertisements are not ordered according to conventional narrative expectations. Instead, they employ "spirals of speed, referential density, and media reflexivity," as the following example illustrate:



'The Truth' Official Kia Quoris Morpheus Big Game Commercial 2014

<https://youtu.be/FTNMYoKHwvU>

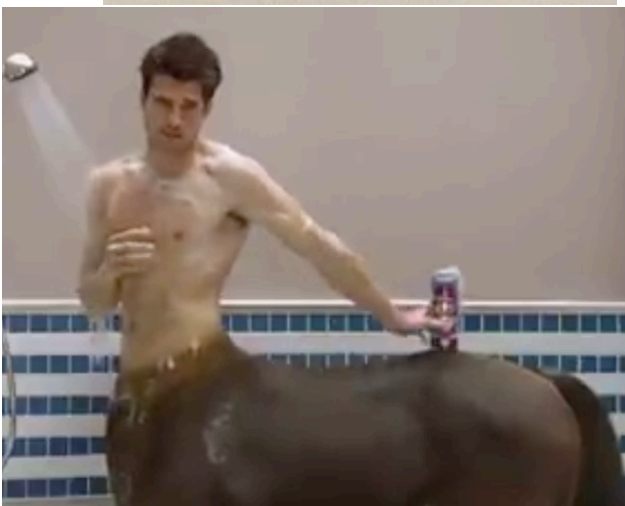
In the 2014 Super Bowl commercial above, the character Morpheus (from the 1999 sci fi film, The Matrix) is "unhinged" from his original narrative context and his reality-bending abilities are "rehinged" to the Kia K900.

How does the Kia ad utilize "spirals of speed, referential density, and media reflexivity"?

As further illustration of the shift from narrative transparency to referential density and media reflexivity, consider the following three Old Spice ads. The first was published in 1959; the second appeared in 2008, and the third appeared in 2012.



This 1959 print advertisement promises "Two great deodorants for all-day protection!" The narrative is coherent and the message is transparent.



If the 1959 ad above promised "two great deodorants," this 2007 commercial similarly offers "two things in one." But everything else about the ad is different. How does the commercial arrest viewers' attention by disrupting conventional narrative expectations?

To see the commercial, go here:
<https://youtu.be/06TBhGrzyN4>



Finally, this Old Spice ad brought referential density and media reflexivity to new heights in 2012.

(Click here:

<https://youtu.be/Yp7Q3UspBQ0>)

Taken together, how do these three Old Spice ads reflect broader changes in advertising and consumer culture, as discussed by Jhally and Goldman and Papson?

Goldman and Papson point out that authenticity -- long a desired property in advertising -- becomes increasingly elusive as original content gives way to second-order signifiers and media reflexivity. To approximate realness, advertisers begin to engage in "cultural cannibalism," appropriating "lifestyles and subcultures" such as "hip hop music, grunge, and feminist sensibilities" (88).

Mountain Dew, for example, appropriates the extreme sports subculture, associating the soda with skaters, snowboarders, and BMX cyclists.



Mountain Dew advertising has latched onto the masculine extreme sports lifestyle. Image credit: <https://melmagazine.com/en-us/story/why-is-mountain-dew-so-bro>

Goldman and Papson note that "at our current stage of consumer culture, references to the images of these subcultures are drawn from the mass media more often than from daily life" (88). Arguably, more Americans associate extreme sports with Mountain Dew commercials than they do with actual sporting events, just as they associate body positivity with the Body Shop rather than with body-positive feminists.

Section Title: Conclusion

Jhally and Goldman and Papson argue that modern consumers use advertising images to "socially and culturally construct a world" (Goldman and Papson, 95).

All three authors find this troubling because, as Goldman and Papson write, ads "disguise and suppress inequalities, injustices, irrationalities, and contradictions" and "reflect the logic of capital" (96).

In a world increasingly saturated with vivid and larger-than-life advertising images, we increasingly use those images and the messages they convey to fashion our identities and articulate our conception of the "good life."

Let's close with an unsettling question posed by Goldman and Papson:

What are the cultural consequences of continuously unhinging and recombining signifiers and signifieds to hail these identities? And what happens when the process of hinging and unhinging accelerates? (85)

I look forward to hearing your thoughts about these topics and texts when we meet!

Sources:

Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson, "Advertising in the Age of Accelerated Meaning," in Schor and Holt, ed. *Consumer Society Reader*, 81-98.

Sut Jhally, "Image-Based Culture: Advertising and Popular Culture," in *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Critical Reader*, 4th edition, 246-250.