

Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson
 “ADVERTISING IN THE AGE OF
 ACCELERATED MEANING”
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We’ve seen them thousands of times. They are commodity signs. The most familiar include the Coke insignia, the McDonald’s arches, the Levi’s 501 emblem, the Nike “swoosh.” Commodity signs find their source in advertisements.

Today most television viewers have long since become acclimated to advertisements. We take them for granted. We decipher ads routinely, automatically, even absentmindedly, in what Walter Benjamin once called a “state of distraction.” Ordinarily, little attention is paid to the codes that enable us to make sense of advertisements. Yet the transparency of these advertising codes is critical to our daily routine of reading and deciphering ads.

When we as viewers step back from this process of making and taking meaning from ads, it becomes apparent to us that the process depends on how we understand the advertisement itself as a framework for telling a particular kind of story. Once the commercial narrative framework is accepted as unproblematic, we are able to routinely decipher and evaluate the combinations of meanings that commercials advance as potential sign currency. We rarely pause to consider the assumptions imposed by the advertising framework since our attention is usually fixed on solving the particular riddle of each ad as it passes before us on the screen; just as importantly, our attention is usually fixed on the question of whether or not we like the ad. The vast majority of ads offer viewers few satisfactions from deciphering; but the few ads that do excite decoding pleasures place their products in line to realize profitable sign values.

Stripped of its glamour, advertising is a kind of cultural mechanics for constructing commodity signs. Advertisements are structured to boost the value of commodity brand names by attaching them to images that possess social and cultural value: brand-name commodity + meaning of image = a commodity sign. Constructing this currency of commodity images requires that advertisements take the form of semiotic equations into which disconnected signifiers and signifieds are entered

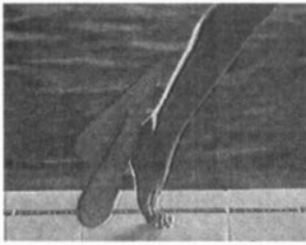
and then recombined to create new equivalencies. Ads invite viewers to perceive an exchange between otherwise incommensurate meaning systems, and they must be structured to steer interpretation in that direction if they are to fulfill their purpose.

Advertisements are always commodity narratives. John Berger and Judith Williamson have each described the general curve of the commodity narrative expressed through the advertisement. According to Berger, "The spectator-buyer is meant . . . to imagine herself transformed by the product into an object of envy for others, an envy which will then justify her loving herself."¹ Consumer ads typically tell stories of success, desire, happiness, and social fulfillment in the lives of the people who consume the right brands. Interpreting the stories that ads tell is always conditional on how they address, or "hail," us—how we are positioned, how the commodity is positioned. When ads hail us, they *appellate* us, naming us and inviting us to take up a position in relation to the advertisements. Consumer ads greet us as individual viewers with what seem to be our own (*already*) ideological assumptions and personalities.²

Judith Williamson, in her pathbreaking book *Decoding Advertisements*, cracked open the operation of the advertising framework. She calls this the *metastructure*, "where meaning is not just 'decoded' within one structure, but transferred to create another."³ This metastructure sets up tacit rules guiding these transfers; the metastructure is the framework within which sign currencies are assembled. Within this framework, advertisers attempt to engineer the transfers of meanings and values necessary to generate commodity signs. The *commodity sign* is formed at the intersection between a brand name and a meaning system summarized in an image.

We are socialized into recognition of sign values at an early age. A 1991 study of 6-year-old children confirmed the potential potency of sign values when it reported that children were as familiar with Joe Camel's link to cigarettes as they were with the Mickey Mouse logo and its connection to the Disney Channel.⁴ In today's consumer-goods markets, products require signs that add value to them. Product standardization makes it imperative that products attach themselves to signs that carry an additional element of value. Nike captured a larger market share of the sneaker industry than Reebok did between 1986 and 1993 because Nike effectively harnessed the power of Michael Jordan's image while Reebok failed to counter with a superior or even an equal stream of imagery. In this kind of industry, everything depends on having a potent, differentiated image.

In the hotly competitive advertising industry, advertisers struggle to differentiate their images. For years, advertisers relied on a formula for joining the meaning of a brand-name product to the meaning of a socially charged image, vying for viewer attention by devising visually



This Special K ad told of a relationship between eating cereal and gaining the look (body shape) you want. The narrative is a slightly modified version of the "envy and desire" script iterated in Berger's quote above. This concluding scene defined the Special K sign in terms of the arched foot and calf of the model. The product sign now stands for the object of desire that supposedly comes with purchase of the product. Notice how the sign is literally formed as a combination of meaning systems: half product lettering and half product outcome. The calf is transformed into a marker of desire realized through the sign of Special K. Because of the relationship between the viewer and

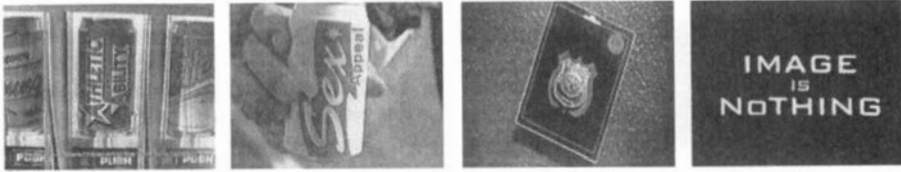
the object of desire, the calf portion of the sign functions as a closing form of appellation.

Like the Special K image, these Citicorp images offer a study in the formation of a commodity sign. Here the sign is formed by joining an image of the Citicorp Tower with the reflection of portraits of people who are labeled as "Americans" (like ourselves) who "want to succeed."



distinctive styles of joining meanings. The formula's success led to expanded usage until it began to provoke sustained consumer resistance. Late 1970s polling data registered rising consumer complaint about feeling "manipulated" and "insulted" by ads. In the late 1980s, advertisers responded with a wave of more "realist looks" in ads. But the problem of advertising clutter continued unabated and eventually pressured advertisers to adopt advertising narratives that were more abbreviated, oblique, and ambiguous. By the late 1980s, a new cultural cutting edge of advertising emerged as advertisers began to indulge in self-reflective banter to win back the favor of disenchanted viewers. An avant-garde of advertisers—most notably Wieden & Kennedy and Chiat/Day—bypassed the clutter by stylistically differentiating their methods of narrative representation. What advertisers once sought to conceal in their ads, they now boldly compete to utter aloud. Where advertisers once sought to maximize the transparency of the framework, they now try to jar viewers into interpretive quandaries as a way of keeping them engaged in the ads. Some ads now humorously caution viewers to remember that a sign is just a sign, and not the product itself. Replicas already abound. For example, a current, extra-hip Sprite commercial has jumped on the bandwagon to position its sign against other folks' advertising claims that soda pop can make you popular, give you athletic ability, or "make me more attractive to the opposite sex, though I wish it would." "If I need a badge I'll become a security guard," declares the youthful, black, inner-city narrator. "If I need a refreshing drink, I'll obey my thirst. Image is nothing!"

Advertising campaigns have even attempted to disrupt the taken-for-granted semiotic framework that supports the usual advertising as-



Sprite's campaign lampoons the typical advertising hype that one can secure athletic accomplishments, sex appeal, popularity, or status badges by consuming commodity signs.

sumptions concerning the correspondence between commodities and social outcomes.⁵ Already, imitators have adopted the tactic of disregarding coding rules associated with video editing, so that sequences of images are not ordered according to conventional narrative expectations. But how far can advertisers go in creating narrative confusion without undermining the goals of advertising? What happens when viewers can no longer figure out what the point of an ad is? Ambiguous and oblique ads may temporarily solve problems of clutter, but how effective are such ads in establishing commodity signs? In today's consumer-goods markets, the competition in images has evolved into a stage that we call *sign wars*. Today, advertisers seem caught between the Scylla of fetishized formulas that annoy and alienate viewers, and the Charybdis of clever self-reflexivity that regains viewer attention at the risk of blowing apart the whole system of sign value.

SIGN WARS: CONSTRUCTING SIGN VALUES

Corporate competition in selling consumer commodities has become centered on the image, the look, the sign. The sign value of the commodity gives a brand name its zip, its meaning. Over the years the cycle of this sign competition has begun to race along, while its density and intensity has escalated. Our study of sign wars explores what happens when meaning is systematically commodified and becomes subject to an economic circuit of exchange and devaluation.

We look at consumer-goods ads as exercises in sign construction. We view advertising as a system of sign values. A sign value is generally equal to the desirability of an image. A sign value establishes the relative value of a brand where the functional difference between products is minimal. Contemporary ads operate on the premise that signifiers and signifieds that have been removed from context can be rejoined to other similarly abstracted signifiers and signifieds to build new signs of identity. This is the heart of the commodity sign machine. No cultural analysis of advertising today can ignore the mercurial process of recombining meaning systems in order to generate additional value and desirability for brand-name commodities.

The necessity of differentiating products motivates sign competition.

The competition to build images that stand out in the media markets is based on a process of routinely unhinging signifiers from signifieds so that new signifier-signified relationships can be fashioned. This process occurs with such rapidity and frequency that we scarcely notice it anymore. But, slow down the videotape and the process becomes blatant as advertisers associate meaning systems that otherwise would not occupy the same space: for example, the sleek, phallic grace and power of a fighter jet in a steep climb is joined to an image of a female diver in a Diet Coke ad. The fighter jet is unhinged from its usual context and some of its connotations—sleekness, phallic grace, and power—can now be rehinged to the signified of the cola via the signifier of the gracefully arched female form. Stating the process in this linear march-step fashion makes it seem very mechanistic and formulaic, and to a certain extent it is.

Ads ask us to choose and construct our identities out of our consumption choices. 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? By the mid-1980s, the average duration of television ad campaigns decreased to less than 13 weeks, as images were taken up and abandoned at an increasingly frenetic pace. That pace has not abated, and viewers are no longer surprised by the MTV-style of mutating images—a style based on an overfamiliarity with media formulas and clichés, and a frenzy of images thrown at us at ever-accelerating speeds until the speed itself is the primary signifier. As Moore remarks:

Advertising is picking up speed. After more than 45 years of watching television commercials, after more than a decade of MTV and video games, viewers are used to a barrage of visual stimuli. In fact, younger viewers demand it. So television commercials move blindingly fast: Sometimes hundreds of images are crammed into 30 seconds. To follow the story in Nike's 1993 Super Bowl ad, in which [Michael] Jordan and Bugs Bunny battle Marvin the Martian and his flock of giant green chickens, you probably needed super-slow motion on your VCR. . . . What's pushing this frenetic pace? . . . Zapping. Viewers armed with remote controls can, and will, zap an ad that doesn't hold their interest. They also flash among channels, following the action on several. "They look at little snippets. Then they lean on that thing [the remote control] and they do their own editing at home. They're able to glean the content of six shows instead of one." As a result, commercials have started to skip around, too. "In the past [ad producers] paid the minutest attention to continuity. Now you can shorthand a lot," Sann says. In fact, if you don't, "you're going to bore people and they're going to shut you off."⁶

The appetite of advertising—what we call the commodity sign industry—for new meanings and styles is voracious. The production and re-production of competitive sign values require the continuous search for

cultural matter that might have fresh value. The economy of images drives cultural turnover, eroding the premise that anything carries lasting value (except perhaps the famous iconic trinity of Elvis, Marilyn, and James Dean).

Ads vary widely in the stylistic strategies used to compete in the field of sign value. In the jeans industry, ads for Bongo jeans or Shawnee jeans or Steel jeans are structured by mechanical formulas for making sign values out of fetishized glamour looks. At the other end of the spectrum, Diesel jeans ads construct convoluted, angry, and self-conscious images about cynical and jaded consumption, yet continue to tease with the fetish character of glamour. Practices of sign production have grown more extreme with each passing season in parity industries like the fashion and footwear industries, where jeans and sneakers are distinguished mostly by their signs. With brand names like Get Used or Damaged or Request jeans the sign is the primary commodity—where the commodity, the social relation, and the sign are collapsed into a single signifying field.

In a mature sign economy, allusions to previous ad campaigns become rampant and imagery is fashioned out of bits and pieces of previous signs and media representations, including ads, TV shows, movies, and music videos. When this logic of sign articulation escalates too far, it results in absurd campaigns that race along on the pure logic of pastiche—drawing together and combining meanings that otherwise seem ludicrous in the same sentence. Case in point: Miller Lite's 1993 campaign combines meanings that do not go together—for example, sumo wrestlers with competition divers; rodeo bulldogging and divorce lawyers; recliner ski jumping; drag-strip racing and Wiener dogs—to create a unifying image that functions as an analogy for the combination of meanings that Miller Lite takes as its sign: "Tastes Great" and "Less Filling." While ads like this may seem brain-dead, they illustrate how the logic of constructing novel sign values edges us toward a postmodern world where recombining meanings to construct differentiated sign values results in a "wild and wacky" TV image world composed of a cut-and-paste culture.

The "look" has become an essential element of currency production because escalating market competition has made it renewable, ephemeral, and disposable. In 1990, Nike's advertising sign machine created a spin-off commodity—a commodity based solely on sign value; a commodity whose sign value eclipsed its use value. Nike put out a new line of T-shirts featuring images drawn from their successful TV ads starring Michael Jordan, Spike Lee, and Bo Jackson. The product targeted teen and preteen boys in a market defined by the circulation of images. Every six weeks, Nike released a new T-shirt with another "hot" image from their ad campaign.⁷ This truly is planned obsolescence in the sign industry. This constant refreshing of signs illustrates the imperative of

finding new spaces for signs and circulating them as quickly as possible. The same process reveals a fundamental social instability of sign value in a mature political economy of sign value.

THE LOGIC OF APPROPRIATION

Advertising continuously appropriates meanings, which it chews up in the process of recontextualizing those meanings to fit commodities or corporations. Think of it as a giant harvesting machine—but instead of harvesting wheat, it harvests signifiers and signifieds of meaning. This harvest of uprooted meanings is delivered to a film editing studio, where it is reorganized according to the “scripts” (and agendas) of the advertiser. Advertising contributes in this way to a postmodern condition in which disconnected signs circulate at ever increasing rates, in which signifiers become detached from signifieds and reattached to still other signifieds.

Constructing a sign value retraces the path of meaning Roland Barthes describes as the transformation of language into myth.⁸ It may be useful to walk through his formal grid for tracking the signifier, using an example from a Reebok campaign for the Blacktop shoe. The campaign drew on the referent system of “the blacktop”—a social and cultural space where inner-city youth play basketball. Appropriating signifiers for the purpose of constructing sign values tends to fetishize the signifier. What does this mean? Reebok’s Blacktop campaign lifted the photographic image of the chain-link fence and turned it into a signifier of inner-city alienation. Similarly, Reebok has stolen and hollowed out rapper images in the form of the MC and the DJ and the “fatboys.” When Reebok took the name of the so-



The DJ,



the chain-link fence,



and the fatboys



are turned into reified signifiers of Reebok’s appropriation of the “hood,” a.k.a. the “Blacktop.”

cially structured space of the asphalt basketball court—the blacktop—and appropriated it as the name for their shoe, they not only sought to inflate the sign value of their shoe, they also turned the blacktop as a social and cultural space into what Barthes called a second-order signifier. Inside the semiotic space of the Reebok ads, the Blacktop (as defined by the chain-link image, the stylized MC image, etc.) has been turned into a reified signifier that marks the “place where legends are made” by Reebok.

Producing marketable commodity signs depends on how effectively advertisers are able to colonize and appropriate referent systems. Few referent systems are immune to this process, although the Bush White House aggressively combated consumer-goods advertising usage of the presidency because of its “sacred” status. Any referent system can be tapped, but remember that advertisers appropriate referent systems for the purpose of generating sign value, so they dwell on referent systems that they calculate might have value to their target audience. Celebrities are usually sought because they have high potential sign value. The referent systems that can pay off most handsomely when properly appropriated involve lifestyle and subcultures. In recent years advertising has appropriated nostalgia, hip-hop music, grunge, and feminist sensibilities. 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.

There exists no finite list of referent systems available for ads; there are as many as humans are capable of subjectively expressing. However, at any given moment, audiences will not be receptive to, and cannot recall, an infinite array of referent systems linked to brand names. At any rate, the issue is not whether all meaning systems will be used up, but rather how the sphere of cultural meaning has been turned over to the service of sustaining a system of commodities. The value-production process is insatiable as meaning systems are abstracted, appropriated, and carved up to fit the agendas of semiotic formulas necessary to fuel the engines of commodity sign production. Over the years, the velocity of this process of meaning circulation has accelerated, and the process of extracting sign value from any given meaning system has become subject to marginally diminishing returns. Ceaseless repetition of this circuit, the ceaseless replacement of images, has led to a rising cultural sensibility that meaning is insubstantial and ephemeral. Much of what has been written in marketing and reporting circles under the rubric of “Generation X” (members of the post-baby-boom generation) chronicles the culture of cynicism that has grown up in response to a cultural world characterized by the constant turnover of superficial meanings.

Sign values depend, then, on a system of cultural cannibalism. Though methods for producing sign values resist capsulation, we can distinguish some general approaches to appropriation. A common approach starts

with the positive or “mimetic” appropriation of value. This frequently involves appropriating an image—a celebrity, a style, or the like—that is “hot” in terms of its potential market value. A second route relies on the negative signifier and the practice of counterpositioning, so that a sign value or a sign identity is established by sharply contrasting it with what it is not. A third maneuver adds the self-referential and media-referential domain. Here we enter into the logic of sign and code differentiation. A well-known combination of these strategies is the Energizer Bunny ad campaign, which is premised on using parody to harness the negative value of overused and irritating advertising genres. Like any system of currency, sign values only exist in relation to other values. Because sign values are constructed out of meaning, they must be articulated with reference to another system of value—a meaning system that is external to, and different from, the product. More and more frequently the referent system that is cannibalized to construct a new image comes from the land of television itself.

Effective sign values are rarely manufactured out of thin air. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule—for instance, Spuds MacKenzie for Bud Light. However, the risks associated with inventing an image are considerable, as Burger King (with Herb the Nerd) and Reebok (with its “UBU” campaign) found out. In each case the effort to invent a signifying image or gesture for their signs failed. Inventing a signifier without any basis in daily life (e.g., the Pepsi “summer chillout” gesture) is generally a recipe for sign failure in the contemporary era.

VALUE ADDED

Once upon a time, the Nike swoosh symbol possessed no intrinsic value as a sign, but value was added to the sign by drawing on the name and image value of celebrity superstars like Michael Jordan. Michael Jordan possesses value in his own right—the better his performances, the higher his value. The sign of Nike acquired additional value when it joined itself to the image of Jordan. Similarly, when Nike introduced a new shoe line named “Air Huarache” and wanted to distinguish its sign from those of other shoe lines, Nike adopted John Lennon’s song “Instant Karma” as a starting point for the shoe’s sign value. Nike justified drawing on Lennon’s classic song by insisting that it was chosen because it dovetailed with Nike’s own message of “self-improvement: making yourself better.”⁹

No less common than drawing upon the value of a commodity classic like a famous song is the adoption of a subcultural style or image that has captured the popular imagination; the most pervasive current example of a signifying style appropriated for its sign value is rap or hip-hop music. This is almost invariably based on a cultural trickle-up process in which value is appropriated (it trickles up) while the critical

ideological force of the style is dissipated (it trickles away). We emphasize that the mimetic approach to producing sign value works by sponging off other values.

Effective appropriation of a cultural moment or style is contingent on how the ad appellates (hails) its target audience members. An excellent example of appellation can be found in a series of McDonald's ads that hailed the viewer with a dude who speaks in the tongue and intonation of Southern California surfer-valley dudes immortalized and cleaned up in the movie *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure*. The "Excellent" campaign, by Leo Burnett USA of Chicago, offers viewers a permanently stoned, long-haired youth who wears the layered garb that signals membership in this subcultural totem group. In one ad he shares with viewers his analysis of navigation:

"In the past, when ancient old dudes cruised, they used the stars to lead their way. This was not a very excellent system because they were lost all day and ended up living in bogus caves. But luckily we dudes of today have a most excellent number of highways and very many busy streets, and even more excellent than that—they've all been built right next to a McDonald's."

Another ad has him acting as a tourist guide, sitting astride a stone wall in front of a mansion as he discourses about the site. The content of his monologues is unimportant; it is the style with which they are delivered that defines the ads and their attitude.

"We have here a major casa. Home of seriously rich dudes. Now I know rich dudes have the most excellent manners. If we ask politely, well they're sure to invite us in. [He turns toward the mansion and yells out:] Yo, seriously rich dudes. May we come in and see your most excellent stuff? [When there is no reply, he turns back to us with a shrug:] Not home. Must've gone to McDonald's for apple pie or something."



These ads begin and end with a wildly painted yellow "M" that extends beyond a red block. From its position in the lower right corner of the screen it is obvious that this replaces the ubiquitous golden arches logo of the fast-food giant. A change of this sort in a semiotic building block like the corporate logo should not

be taken lightly. McDonald's here shows their moral flexibility to modify their corporate insignia to fit with the aesthetic preferences of a dif-

ferent target audience. Presenting this emblem at the start of the ad is as much a part of the hailing process as the youth who addresses us.

Generation X has recently become the hot topic in the advertising and marketing industries. It's risky hailing youth like this because if the representation does not ring true, then the advertiser has antagonized and estranged the viewer. Young and Rubicam Advertising's director of consumer research advises that when targeting youth, "You need to speak to them in their language and on their terms . . . Contrived 'hip' is the kiss of death with young people."¹⁰ Constructing sign value by appropriating linguistic usage or gestures or music or clothing style also requires careful attention to the process of restylizing, which deletes—"airbrushes"—negative moments. Ads that build on a borrowed speech usage or a gesture or a look are based on the tacit acknowledgment that subcultures are the source of authentic—read: desirable—signs. Authenticity must have a referent system to back it up. Whether it is rap or Generation X or punk or grunge, this process of producing sign value makes images palatable by stripping out—extracting—the essential political ideology that initially drove the expression of these discourses. What is left is mere surface.

Driven by the logic of hailing, the practice of cultural appropriation when situated within the framework of the advertisement seems to magically unfold into an equivalency between brand and cultural icon. In an attempt to appeal to the "twentysomething" audience, Chevrolet has recently laid claim to the history of rock 'n' roll as represented by the music of Jimi Hendrix. Chevrolet justified this act of appropriation as "a natural combination. Camaro and rock 'n' roll truly grew up together. For a quarter century, the car and music have been the life of the party." Chevrolet cements this new equivalency with the slogan "From the country that invented rock 'n' roll."¹¹

Once a sign is appropriated it circulates between advertising discourse and everyday life in a stylized form—this kind of mediation invariably changes the sign's cultural meanings and associations. Whether or not these signifying efforts are successful in marketing terms, the signs thus produced tend to be reified images of social relations. Despite this, our critique of commodity signs cannot end with the simple assertion that these signs are nothing more than the alienated relations and desires denied people in their production relations. Historically, the cultural emphasis on consuming, owning, and wearing signs as an indicator of personal identity was well under way by the 1920s. Since then, the commodity self has offered an identity assembled out of the sign-objects that a person consumes. Individuals may seek to present an identity through the commodity signs they possess and wear.

Signwork has evolved as a key practice of what Erving Goffman termed "face-work" in an impersonal urban society. The commodity self based on the packaging of self as a collection or ensemble of com-

modity signs is predicated on a certain degree of plasticity. At the very least, advertising has established the premise that the most gratifying social relations are those associated with the confident, and discriminating, sign user. While this contributes to rampant pseudoindividualism,¹² it is also true that commodity signs provide people with real social indicators of identity—after all, consumers do use signs to construct identities and to make invidious distinctions between themselves and others. This is one social consequence of positioning spectator-buyers to step into the advertising mirror.

Two generations ago, Sennett and Cobb examined how wearing badges to earn respect in our urban class-based society resulted in an array of social-psychological injuries.¹³ Hebdige tracked how this, in turn, contributed to subcultural resistance to fashion codes, as youth bent the “approved” signs to suit their meanings (signs of disapproval). Hebdige adapted the concept of “bricolage” to describe the act of wearing meaning-laden objects (signs) in ways that seem to violate the cosmology (the moral hierarchies) of consumerism that binds the many signs into a cultural system.¹⁴ As working-class political opposition has become closed off, opposition in the society of the spectacle is most readily expressed through the category of style. Though the code of commodity culture has always been able to reabsorb opposition and turn it into new commodity styles, the punk subculture’s efforts at bricolage upped the ante, and advertisers eventually responded by appropriating and restylizing the bricolaged look, and then turning it back into yet another commodity sign. Levi’s advertising led the way, and others followed, into a period of “counterbricolage.”¹⁵

This movement between bricolage and commodity counterbricolage has in its own right been a form of sign wars. Today, the appropriation process has grown so rapid that it can exploit and exhaust a subcultural movement before it has had time to develop—grunge is a case in point. Grunge has not only been thoroughly appropriated, its style stolen in a media blitz, the term itself has been adopted by the culture industry as a metaphor for what cultural analysts like ourselves call *bricolage*. Grunge has become a mass-media metaphor for the new style of mixing things that don’t go together. In this brave new world of hyperappropriation, anything goes—retrolooks from any decade are thrown into the blender, as are the political sensibilities of any marginalized subculture—and everything becomes a mishmash.

FLOATING SIGNIFIERS AND THE IMAGE BANK

The perpetual abstraction and recombination of images in pursuit of new currency has logically led to the creation of “image banks.” Image banks are an institutionally rationalized approach to managing a marketplace of images for the construction of commodity signs in a

stage of advanced sign competition. Banks deal in currency. The name *image bank* is indicative of the fact that images have become a free-floating and interchangeable currency. Image banks deal in stock photos—of mountain tops, sunsets, farm scenes, sea birds, and so on—that have been severed from meaningful context. Advertising agencies work with image banks because they provide a cost-cutting measure. Bankable images, catalogued and filed, are a reminder that signifiers and signifieds are no longer conceived of as necessarily or naturally conjoint. The same image or scenic representation may appear in multiple and diverse commodity narratives—for example, the same shot of flamingo-like waterbirds in flight appears in a Du Pont ad to signify nature-not-yet-destroyed, while in a Kodak film commercial it signifies superior image quality. The image bank also signals a world where there is no necessary material ground—no necessary correspondence between image and referent system. The arbitrariness of the relationship between image signifiers and signifieds has reached a new plateau. A humorous instance of image bank abstraction gone haywire is illustrative. The advertising agency BBDO created a newspaper ad for Apple Computer that proved embarrassing when it discovered that the stock photo of an office building used in the ad was actually an image of the IBM Tower in Atlanta.¹⁶

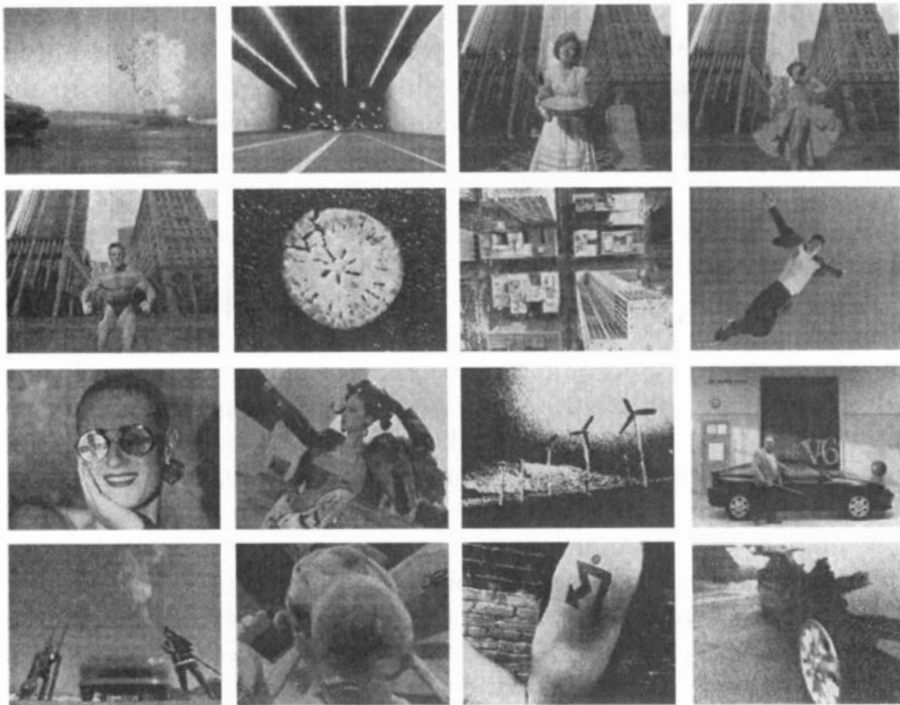
SPIRALS OF REFERENTIALITY, SPEED, AND REFLEXIVITY

In the past, most ad campaigns (failures as well as successes) aimed at conveying a coherent and memorable symbolic value for their product by connecting it with an object of desire. But as these symbolic contests have escalated over the years, the turnover of images and symbols has accelerated and the reliance on media intertextuality has increased. This has contributed to an important cultural shift, the “substitution of referential density for narrative coherence.”¹⁷ Referential density means that frames become packed with multiple referents minus unifying threads that give the viewer clues about their relationships. Texts become defined not so much by the story they tell, but by the referential combinations they style. Style overwhelms story. Accelerated editing, a refusal to obey sequencing conventions, and a devotion to supermagnified close-ups—all place greater emphasis on the isolated signifier whose meaningfulness is now divorced from the contexts that initially gave meaning to it. Referential density is becoming a prominent characteristic of our cultural landscape, the result of a seemingly endless process of cannibalizing and lifting isolated images from previous media references and reassembling them in pastiche form. Indeed, advertising has shifted from an emphasis on narrative coherence such as that described by Roland Marchand as the “social tableaux”—stories about

how to successfully live and act in modern society through the proper use of commodities—to visual fascination. While narrative coherence has hardly vanished in the world of ads, its importance has diminished and the old stories have been abbreviated into tacit assumptions.

More and more today, ads either refer to other ads or are about the subject of advertising itself as a method of positioning the commodity brand name. This process is usually referred to as “media self-referentiality” and “intertextuality.” Spirals of referentiality are a function of the continuous process of lifting meanings from one context and placing them into the advertising framework where they become associated with another meaning system. Each time this occurs, meanings are modified and chains of signification are constructed. Let’s take an apparently simple example of a bell. Initially, a bell may have meaning to you because it is located in the church near your home and you associate its ringing with the time of day when your mother called you home for dinner. In other words, its meaning was linked to its location and to your relationships with others. But as Walter Benjamin and John Berger have both shown, when a bell is photographed, the image is freed from its context and can be put to almost any service. Now the image can be used to signify a brand of tomatoes or it can be used to indicate “not-suburbia.” Today, such an image has been used in a generic way to signify tourism or Europeanness, what we call a “Euro-signifier.” We have just described what Barthes meant by second-order signifiers—that is, the bell now stands for Europeanness. Barthes understood that in the modern era this process of hinging and unhinging signifiers and signifieds could go on and on as the image of the bell gets lifted from its new context of generic tourism for use in yet another way. In this sense, advertising contributes to a world littered by second-order signifiers. The circuit of sign-value production is predicated on the diffusion of second-order signifiers. In advertising, harnessing the power of splitting the sign (much like an atom) releases significant potential energy as each signifying valence is steered toward recombination with another split sign to produce a new sign value. But this process also produces cultural by-products. In advertising, one result is an abnormally high level of second-order signifiers—what Barthes saw as the fundamental element of myth.

For decades, advertisers sought to avoid raising the subject of their ad’s agenda or the power dynamic going on between text and viewer. Instead, the focus was on the glitter of the spectacular moment. But after decades of this, audiences have matured, become more media-literate, media-saturated, and media-cynical. The arbitrariness of the process eventually rises to the surface and can no longer be ignored. By the latter 1980s there emerged a genre of ads that played at being self-reflexive about the arbitrary process of meaning construction in ads. A new spiral emerged in which advertisers tried to top one an-



As commercials increase in referential density, images can be thrown together without any relationship to the image that comes before or after. These are but a few of the arbitrary images that populate a 1992 Mazda ad. No order is implied by our layout.

other in how outrageous they can be in their self-reflexive acknowledgments.

CULTURAL CRISIS AND CONTRADICTION

Where does this conversation about advertising culture fit in relation to changes in culture, the economy, and society? How are the spirals of speed, referential density, and media reflexivity related to the larger goings-on of our culture? We have previously argued that advertising has upheld culturally predominant ways of seeing things. Predominant ways of seeing are, however, almost always being contested or stretched by opposing social forces and relations. For example, in American society, patriarchy's long hegemony has recently been effectively contested by women who find patriarchal ways of seeing as too confining and repressive to meet their interests.

Saying that advertising tends to further the hegemony of commodity and market relations does not mean that advertisers are a wily ideological bunch intent on manipulating us politically. When we look at ads as an ideological site, we see ads as ideological in all the following senses: (1) as discourses that socially and culturally construct a world; (2) as discourses that disguise and suppress inequalities, injustices, ir-

rationalities, and contradictions; (3) as discourses that promote a normative vision of our world and our relationships; and (4) as discourses that reflect the logic of capital. In this sense, ideology refers to the "meaning made necessary by the conditions of our society while helping to perpetuate those conditions."¹⁸ Ads are ideological insofar as they construct socially necessary illusions and normalize distorted communication.¹⁹ We are studying ads, then, because we think ads reveal some inner cultural contradictions of a commodity culture.

Advertisements offer rich social texts for investigating the socially constructed nature of hegemony because they are situated at the intersection of conflicting economic and cultural demands: on the one hand, advertisements must devote themselves to reproducing commodity relations (selling more products); on the other hand, they must engage the attention and interpretive participation of consumers by hailing them with images of their own "alreadyness." Ads thus can be made to reveal not only a dominant mode of representation, but also the self-contradictory representations of commodity culture.

We have focused on two sides of the same coin: on sign wars, battles over the currency of images, and on the cultural contradictions of a political economy of sign value. As ideological discourses for understanding these cultural contradictions, ads can be made to speak a certain kind of truth about the commodity culture that produces them. To the extent that ads must give us back some sense of ourselves, they also unintentionally capture our cultural contradictions. Insofar as advertisers today feel the pressure to efficiently hail finely targeted audience segments, they must include signifiers of the self-contradictions manifested by this or that target group "persona" in their representations. In the last few years, in addition to the many ads that either try to suppress or disguise contradictions, we now have ads that literally swim in their self-reflexive awareness of issues of domination and power in commodity culture. Indeed, some ads now flaunt their own contradictoriness, or that of our culture, to gain attention for themselves. Today the practice of cultural criticism seems to be sponsored by commodity interests.

Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*, written in 1964, is the classic statement of the culture industry's capacity for containing opposition.²⁰ Marcuse argued that when culture was turned into commodity form it could contain contradictions and blunt critical alternative ways of seeing. He felt the process of commodifying language purged the vernacular of "class" from mass-mediated discourses, even though it remained an animating force in the landscape of everyday work life. Thirty years later, class has indeed been erased from public discourse, supplanted by the category of individual life-style; but the culture industry's capacity to contain crisis and contradiction has become disengaged from its capacity to redirect the language of resistance and opposition. While the evidence is compelling that advertising is able to

appropriate and incorporate the language and visual representations of resistance, we are less convinced by the capacity of advertising to contain crisis tendencies.

Ironically, in a world where advertisers are forever struggling to stylistically differentiate themselves, more than ever before they depend on symbols of cultural opposition to drive the sign-value circuit. In fact, we have come to believe that while some advertising is aimed at containing contradictions (e.g., the environmental consequences of capitalist growth), advertising has itself become the site of new cultural crisis tendencies and emergent cultural contradictions, not the least of which is a profoundly privatized cynicism.

Advertising is in crisis, yet somehow it remains the voice of commodity hegemony. Its formulas have antagonized viewers. Its cultural products no longer merely incorporate opposition to produce images of harmony, although god knows there are plenty of advertisers who still try. While the advertising form has historically functioned as a site for ideologically masking social and cultural contradictions, the neat, clean, and tidy categories of the past have been sublated.

Our argument emphasizes not the particular ad, but the system of ads—the sheer abundance of ads driven by the logic of capital and the reproduction of commodities. As a system, advertising produces sign wars, and sign wars will have real cultural consequences. Indeed, perhaps we should begin by asking what collective crises of meaning lie in store for a culture and society characterized by an increasing circulation velocity of images made necessary by sign wars.

ENDNOTES

1. Berger, John (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. New York: Penguin, p. 134.
2. Williamson, Judith. (1978). *Decoding Advertisements*. London: Marion Boyars; see also Hall, Stuart. (1980). "Encoding/Decoding." Pp. 128–138, in Stuart Hall, et al. (eds.), *Culture Media and Language*. London: Hutchinson & Co.
3. Williamson, 1978, p. 43.
4. Fischer, P.M., M.P. Schwartz, J.W. Richards Jr., A.O. Goldstein, T.H. Rojas. (1991). "Brand logo recognition by children aged 3 to 6 years. Mickey Mouse and Old Joe the Camel," *JAMA*. Dec 11, 266 (22): 3145–8.
5. Semiotics is well suited to the tasks of both constructing and deconstructing sign values because it mimics the structural mechanics of both the commodity form and the advertising form. The "preferred" interpretive conventions of the advertising form reproduce the logic of the commodity form. The latter consists of three intertwined moments: (1) abstraction, the removal of a meaningful action or relationship from its context; (2) equivalence exchange, the formal relation of universal exchangeability between items that are otherwise not comparable; and (3) reification, the conversion of human attributes and relations into the characteristics of objects or things. Advertisements routinely abstract meaning systems from their contexts, place them into relations of formal exchange, engineer a transfer of meanings to construct an equivalency, and propose a reified commodity sign. In this sense, we see the advertising framework replicating the logic of the commodity form.

6. Moore, Martha T. "Visual Overload: Fleeting ad images catch viewers," *USA Today*, June 15, 1993, p. 1B.
7. Baker, Nena. "If Nike lost a shoe, it'd still have T-shirt for its back," *The Oregonian*, April 28, 1991, p. K1, 5.
8. Barthes, Roland. (1972). *Mythologies*. New York: Hill and Wang.
9. Baker, Nena. "Nike's ready to go all out to promote latest sneaker," *The Oregonian*, March 14, 1992, p. B1.
10. Elliott, Stuart. "Hey, Dude, That's One Serious Pitch," *The New York Times*, May 10, 1991, p. D1.
11. "'93 Camaro Advertising Arrives with Rock 'n' Roll Beat," *PR Newswire*, March 29, 1993.
12. See Adorno, Theodor. (1941). "On Popular Music," *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, (9): 117-148; Gendron, Bernard. (1986). "Theodor Adorno Meets the Cadillacs," pp. 18-36 in Tania Modleski (ed.) *Studies in Entertainment*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
13. Sennett, Richard and Jonathan Cobb. (1972). *The Hidden Injuries of Class*. New York: Vintage.
14. Hebdige, Dick. (1979). *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Methuen.
15. See Goldman, Robert and Steve Papson. (1991). "Levi's & the Knowing Wink." *Current Perspectives in Social Theory*. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, pp. 69-95.
16. Horovitz, Bruce. "Cost-conscious agencies turn to rental photos," *Los Angeles Times*, July 16, 1991, p. D6.
17. Hebdige, Dick. (1998). *Hiding in the Light: on images & things*. London: Routledge, p. 237.
18. Williamson, p. 13.
19. See Eagleton, Terry. (1991). *Ideology, an introduction*. New York: Verso, p. 1.
20. Marcuse, Herbert. (1964). *One Dimensional Man*. Boston: Beacon.