

Jesus Is a Brand of Jeans

JEAN KILBOURNE

Author, lecturer, filmmaker, and educator Jean Kilbourne is internationally recognized for her work on the impact of advertising on women and the culture at large. Born in Junction City, Kansas, in 1943, Kilbourne received her B.A. from Wellesley College, followed by a doctorate in education from Boston University. Kilbourne's seminal study of the adverse affects of advertising on women, *Deadly Persuasion: Why Women and Girls Must Fight the Addictive Power of Advertising* (1999), won the Distinguished Publication Award from the Association for Women in Psychology. It was re-released in paperback in 2000 with the title *Can't Buy My Love: How Advertising Changes the Way We Think and Feel*. Her latest book, coauthored with Diane E. Levin, is *So Sexy So Soon: The New Sexualized Childhood and What Parents Can Do to Protect Their Kids* (2008). Kilbourne's award-winning educational films include *Killing Us Softly: Advertising's Image of Women*, followed by *Still Killing Us Softly* and *Killing Us Softly 3*; and a series of videos on alcohol and smoking: *Deadly Persuasion: The Advertising of Alcohol & Tobacco*; *Spin the Bottle: Sex, Lies & Alcohol*; *Slim Hopes: Pack of Lies*; and *Calling the Shots*. A recognized expert on gender issues, addictions, and the media, Kilbourne has advised two surgeons general and served on both the National Advisory Council on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism and the Massachusetts Governor's Commission on Sexual and Domestic Violence. Her many articles have appeared in the *International Journal of Advertising*, *Journal of Media Literacy*, *Media and Values*, *USA Today*, and the *New York Times*, among other publications.

Her essay "Jesus Is a Brand of Jeans" was first published in the *New Internationalist* in September 2006. In it, she dissects what she refers to as advertising's "giant propaganda effort" that includes thousands of messages that "link our deepest emotions to products, that objectify people and trivialize our most heartfelt moments and relationships—just to sell us something."

WRITING TO DISCOVER: *Think about what kind of advertising attracts you most. What are your favorite ads? What makes those ads stand out from all of the others? Do they usually result in your making a purchase?*

A recent ad for Thule car-rack systems features a child in the backseat of a car, seatbelt on. Next to the child, assorted sporting gear is carefully strapped into a child's carseat. The headline says: "We Know What Matters to You." In case one misses the point, further copy adds: "Your gear is a priority."

Another ad features an attractive young couple in bed. The man is on top of the woman, presumably making love to her. However, her face is completely covered by a magazine, open to a double-page photo of a car. The man is gazing passionately at the car. The copy reads, "The ultimate attraction."

These ads are meant to be funny. Taken individually, I suppose they might seem amusing or, at worst, tasteless. As someone who has studied ads for a long time, however, I see them as part of a pattern: just two of many ads that state or imply that products are more important than people. Ads have long promised us a better relationship via a product: *buy this and you will be loved*. But more recently they have gone beyond that proposition to promise us a relationship with the product itself: *buy this and it will love you*. The product is not so much the means to an end, as the end itself.

After all, it is easier to love a product than a person. Relationships with human beings are messy, unpredictable, sometimes dangerous. "When was the last time you felt this comfortable in a relationship?" asks an ad for shoes. Our shoes never ask us to wash the dishes or tell us we're getting fat. Even more important, products don't betray us. "You can love it without getting your heart broken," proclaims a car ad. One certainly can't say that about loving a human being, as love without vulnerability is impossible.

We are surrounded by hundreds, thousands of messages every day that link our deepest emotions to products, that objectify people and trivialize our most heartfelt moments and relationships. Every emotion is used to sell us something. Our wish to protect our children is leveraged to make us buy an expensive car. A long marriage simply provides the occasion for a diamond necklace. A painful reunion between a father and his estranged daughter is dramatized to sell us a phone system. Everything in the world—nature, animals, people—is just so much stuff to be consumed or to be used to sell us something.

The problem with advertising isn't that it creates artificial needs, but that it exploits our very real and human desires. Advertising promotes a bankrupt concept of *relationship*. Most of us yearn for committed relationships that will last. We are not stupid: we know that buying a certain brand of cereal won't bring us one inch closer to that goal. But we are surrounded by advertising that yokes our needs with products and promises us that *things* will deliver what in fact they never can. In the world of advertising, lovers are things and things are lovers.

It may be that there is no other way to depict relationships when the ultimate goal is to sell products. But this apparently bottomless consumerism not only depletes the world's resources, it also depletes our inner resources. It leads inevitably to narcissism and solipsism. It becomes difficult to imagine a way of relating that isn't objectifying and exploitative.

TUNED IN

Most people feel that advertising is not something to take seriously. Other aspects of the media are serious—the violent films, the trashy talk shows, the bowdlerization of the news. But not advertising! Although much more attention has been paid to the cultural impact of advertising in recent years than ever before, just about everyone still feels personally exempt from its influence. What I hear more than anything else at my lectures is, “I don’t pay attention to ads . . . I just tune them out . . . they have no effect on me.” I hear this most from people wearing clothes emblazoned with logos. In truth, we are all influenced. There is no way to tune out this much information, especially when it is designed to break through the “tuning out” process. As advertising critic Sut Jhally put it: “To not be influenced by advertising would be to live outside of culture. No human being lives outside of culture.”

Much of advertising’s power comes from this belief that it does not affect us. As Joseph Goebbels said: “This is the secret of propaganda: those who are to be persuaded by it should be completely immersed in the ideas of the propaganda, without ever noticing that they are being immersed in it.” Because we think advertising is trivial, we are less on guard, less critical, than we might otherwise be. While we’re laughing, sometimes sneering, the commercial does its work.

Taken individually, ads are silly, sometimes funny, certainly nothing to worry about. But cumulatively they create a climate of cynicism that is poisonous to relationships. Ad after ad portrays our real lives as dull and ordinary, commitment to human beings as something to be avoided. Because of the pervasiveness of this kind of message, we learn from childhood that it is far safer to make a commitment to a product than to a person, far easier to be loyal to a brand. Many end up feeling romantic about material objects yet deeply cynical about other human beings.

UNNATURAL PASSIONS

We know by now that advertising often turns people into objects. Women’s bodies—and men’s bodies too these days—are dismembered, packaged and used to sell everything from chainsaws to chewing gum, champagne to shampoo. Self-image is deeply affected. The self-esteem of girls plummets as they reach adolescence partly because they cannot possibly escape the message that their bodies are objects, and imperfect objects at that. Boys learn that masculinity requires a kind of ruthlessness, even brutality.

Advertising encourages us not only to objectify each other but to feel passion for products rather than our partners. This is especially dangerous when the products are potentially addictive, because addicts do feel they

are in a relationship with their substances. I once heard an alcoholic joke that Jack Daniels was her most constant lover. When I was a smoker, I felt that my cigarettes were my friends. Advertising reinforces these beliefs, so we are twice seduced—by the ads and by the substances themselves.

The addict is the ideal consumer. Ten percent of drinkers consume over sixty percent of all the alcohol sold. Most of them are alcoholics or people in desperate trouble—but they are also the alcohol industry’s very best customers. Advertisers spend enormous amounts of money on psychological research and understand addiction well. They use this knowledge to target children (because if you hook them early they are yours for life), to encourage all people to consume more, in spite of often dangerous consequences for all of us, and to create a climate of denial in which all kinds of addictions flourish. This they do with full intent, as we see so clearly in the “secret documents” of the tobacco industry that have been made public in recent years.

The consumer culture encourages us not only to buy more but to seek our identity and fulfillment through what we buy, to express our individuality through our “choices” of products. Advertising corrupts relationships and then offers us products, both as solace and as substitutes for the intimate human connection we all long for and need.

In the world of advertising, lovers grow cold, spouses grow old, children grow up and away—but possessions stay with us and never change. Seeking the outcomes of a healthy relationship through products cannot work. Sometimes it leads us into addiction. But at best the possessions can never deliver the promised goods. They can’t make us happy or loved or less alone or safe. If we believe they can, we are doomed to disappointment. No matter how much we love them, they will never love us back.

Some argue that advertising simply reflects societal values rather than affecting them. Far from being a passive mirror of society, however, advertising is a pervasive medium of influence and persuasion. Its influence is cumulative, often subtle and primarily unconscious. A former editor-in-chief of *Advertising Age*, the leading advertising publication in North America, once claimed: “Only eight percent of an ad’s message is received by the conscious mind. The rest is worked and re-worked deep within, in the recesses of the brain.”

Advertising performs much the same function in industrial society as myth did in ancient societies. It is both a creator and perpetrator of the dominant values of the culture, the social norms by which most people govern their behavior. At the very least, advertising helps to create a climate in which certain values flourish and others are not reflected at all.

Advertising is not only our physical environment, it is increasingly our spiritual environment as well. By definition, however, it is only interested in materialistic values. When spiritual values show up in ads, it is only in order to sell us something. Eternity is a perfume by Calvin Klein,

Infinit is an automobile, Hydra Zen a moisturizer, and Jesus is a brand of jeans.

Sometimes the allusion is more subtle, as in the countless alcohol ads featuring the bottle surrounded by a halo of light. Indeed products such as jewelry shining in a store window are often displayed as if they were sacred objects. Advertising co-opts our sacred symbols in order to evoke an immediate emotional response. Media critic Neil Postman referred to this as “cultural rape.”

It is commonplace to observe that consumerism has become the religion of our time (with advertising its holy text), but the criticism usually stops short of what is at the heart of the comparison. Both advertising and religion share a belief in transformation, but most religions believe that this requires sacrifice. In the world of advertising, enlightenment is achieved instantly by purchasing material goods. An ad for a watch says, “It’s not your handbag. It’s not your neighborhood. It’s not your boyfriend. It’s your watch that tells most about who you are.” Of course, this cheapens authentic spirituality and transcendence. This junk food for the soul leaves us hungry, empty, malnourished.

SUBSTITUTE STORIES

Human beings used to be influenced primarily by the stories of our particular tribe or community, not by stories that are mass-produced and market-driven. As George Gerbner, one of the world’s most respected researchers on the influence of the media, said: “For the first time in human history, most of the stories about people, life and values are told not by parents, schools, churches, or others in the community who have something to tell, but by a group of distant conglomerates that have something to sell.”

Although it is virtually impossible to measure the influence of advertising on a culture, we can learn something by looking at cultures only recently exposed to it. In 1980 the Gwich’in tribe of Alaska got television, and therefore massive advertising, for the first time. Satellite dishes, video games and VCRs were not far behind. Before this, the Gwich’in lived much the way their ancestors had for generations. Within 10 years, the young members of the tribe were so drawn by television they no longer had time to learn ancient hunting methods, their parents’ language or their oral history. Legends told around campfires could not compete with Beverly Hills 90210. Beaded moccasins gave way to Nike sneakers, and “tundra tea” to Folger’s instant coffee.

As multinational chains replace local character, we end up in a world in which everyone is Gapped and Starbucked. Shopping malls kill vibrant downtown centers locally and create a universe of uniformity internationally. We end up in a world ruled by, in John Maynard Keynes’s phrase,

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the values of the casino. On this deeper level, rampant commercialism undermines our physical and psychological health, our environment and our civic life, and creates a toxic society.

Advertising creates a world view that is based upon cynicism, dissatisfaction and craving. Advertisers aren’t evil. They are just doing their job, which is to sell a product; but the consequences, usually unintended, are often destructive. In the history of the world, there has never been a propaganda effort to match that of advertising in the past 50 years. More thought, more effort, more money goes into advertising than has gone into any other campaign to change social consciousness. The story that advertising tells is that the way to be happy, to find satisfaction—and the path to political freedom, as well—is through the consumption of material objects. And the major motivating force for social change throughout the world today is this belief that happiness comes from the market.

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT THE READING

1. Kilbourne points out two ads in the beginning of her essay that she sees as part of a pattern of how we relate to advertising and the products that are being pitched. What is that pattern? Discuss the difference between “buy this and you will be loved” and “buy this and it will love you.”
2. The problem with advertising, according to Kilbourne, “isn’t that it creates artificial needs, but that it exploits our very real and human desires” (6). How does she think ads accomplish this kind of exploitation? What examples does she use? (Glossary: *Examples*)
3. In her view, how does advertising promote a “climate of cynicism that is poisonous to relationships” (10)?
4. In what context does Kilbourne introduce the ideas of Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels? Why does she do so?
5. Advertising is often accused of turning people into objects. What is the danger in this objectification? How does Kilbourne link such objectification to addiction?
6. Explain what Kilbourne means when she states that advertising and religion share a belief in transformation. What kind of transformation is she referring to?
7. How did the introduction of advertising, via television, change the Alaskan Gwich’in tribe? What can we learn from the tribe’s experience?

LANGUAGE IN ACTION

Take a look at the following image, along with its caption, from the *New York Times*.

(continued)