

*Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society*, by Michael Schudson. New York: Basic Books, 1984. 288pp.

In *Discovering The News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (1978), Michael Schudson demonstrated that he is an accomplished social historian, a perceptive student of professionalism, and a skilled wordcrafter. Publication of a new book in which these talents are brought to bear upon an analysis of advertising is therefore an event of considerable interest to students of the American consciousness industry. With characteristic clarity and style, Schudson maps out the territory he intends to cover: "I will perform no high-wire acts of semiotic analysis, no magic tricks to draw out of a hat of commercials a rainbow of cultural messages. My subject is not advertisements but *advertising*: advertising as an institution that plays a role in the marketing of consumer goods, advertising as an industry that manufactures the cultural products called advertisements and commercials, and advertising as an omnipresent system of symbols, a pervasive and bald propaganda for consumer culture" (p. 5).

Schudson takes issue with both apologists of advertising who maintain that it simply supplies information that makes the market work more effectively as well as with critics like Stuart Ewen, Christopher Lasch, and Robert Heilbroner who invest advertising with the power "to deceive and to deflect human minds to its ends" (p. 11). He maintains that the effects of the "promotional culture" are far more subtle, complex, and difficult to assess than such interpretations suggest. Schudson therefore attempts to look at advertising with fresh eyes: eyes that are not jaundiced by "the academy's contempt for business enterprise" (p. xii). Nevertheless he relies on conventional sources to provide this fresh view: interviews with advertising executives and officials at the Federal Trade Commission, graduate courses in marketing, the libraries of the Advertising Research Foundation and Direct Mail/Marketing Association.

Schudson displays the trophies of his expedition into the netherworld of the Ronald McDonald, Marlboro men, Lucky Strike women and their creators in a tightly interwoven series of reflections on the following themes: the advertisers's perspective, what advertising agencies know, the consumer information environment, the anthropology of goods, the historical roots of consumer culture, a case study of cigarette marketing, advertising as "Capitalist Realism," and the sociological and moral implications of advertising. There are many fascinating anecdotes, observations, dialectical low-wire acts, and essays within essays packed into these reflections: a powerful appreciation of Drieser's *Sister Carrie* as document of the nascent culture of consumerism, an insightful evocation of the role of gifts in preserving families, an analysis of the "puritanical bias" of academic attitudes towards material consumption, some rich insider accounts of the folklore of advertising, a thoughtful consideration of advertising as art, and more. But in spite of these achievements, reading most of *Advertising*, like reading most advertisements, is a frustrating, irritating, often involving, sometimes dazzling, but ultimately disappointing experience.

In my judgment the argument developed in the first six chapters of the book – that the "advertising culture" is a marketing and sales industry quite circumscribed" is not

persuasively demonstrated. It is flawed in conception, execution, and documentation. In short, Schudson makes several strategic decisions in designing the scaffolding of his argument that undermine its resonance. First, his determination to look at advertising with a fresh eye leads him to ignore or gratuitously dismiss the contributions of other scholars. Thus he laments that Marx is "a more complex and subtle critic of capitalism than is sometimes appreciated," but critical theorists like Horkheimer, Adorno, Fromm, and Marcuse, who have fully appreciated the subtlety and complexity of Marx's arguments and skillfully applied them to the analysis of the culture industry, do not even make Schudson's footnotes. Contemporaries do not fare much better. Ewen is dismissed as "naive" (conned by the propaganda of early advertising agents who were not only "men of confidence," but "confidence men"). Erick Barnouw is ignored except to point out his alleged error in interpreting the role advertising played in bringing women into the cigarette market. Second, Schudson's decisions to: (a) treat advertising and marketing as discrete enterprises, and (b) examine national product advertising apart from local advertising or couponing, create a remarkably artificial and artificially circumscribed data base for someone who seeks to develop a broadly based sociology of consumption. Schudson himself seems to recognize this toward the end of chapter six when he admits, "I do not think we will come to terms with American consumer habits and consumer values until we recognize advertisements as but one piece in a larger puzzle," and again in chapter eight when he acknowledges, "Advertising and marketing, as part of the cultural complex of materialism, are codefendants" (p. 235). Third, Schudson's embrace of the "two-step model" of mass-media effects leads him to systematically underestimate the power of advertising because the un-reconstructed positivistic bias of this model implicitly assumes that the second party in the communicative process has access to neutral (un-mediated) information. Fourth, Schudson's attempt to counter the bias of the academy against business leads him to an excessive reliance on the verbs, "helps" and "encourages," as well as on promotional adjectives in describing the influence of advertising on the consumer. Schudson does acknowledge that advertising is not equally "helpful" to all consumers. He concedes that highly mobile people, highly immobile people, busy people, children, the poor, and many of the relatively poor and poorly educated people in the Third World are "vulnerable consumers" because of their structural positions. These people (most people?) are more easily exploited by advertisers because they have fewer information sources or less time or opportunity to engage in comparative pricing. And, who does advertising "help"? The "same old gang": up-scale males with educated wives who are not in the labor force and have the time and inclination to function as full-time consumers! Moreover, Schudson's commitment to deal with the advertising business "fairly" leads him to engage in a profoundly anti-sociological line of reasoning: argument by exception, e.g. case studies of sales without advertising and advertising without sales, etc. It also leads him to impute more freedom of inquiry to the advertiser's craft than to the journalist's. Where the journalists studied in *Discovering the News* were constrained by the professional ideology of objectivity, the advertising workers studied in this volume are much more heterodox. They are fragmented. They do not share a common theory, set of values, or concept of their audience. In sum, according to Schudson, advertising unlike the rest of the capitalist world has not been "rationalized." Constructs of pop psychology like "motivation research" may capture advertisers' attention for a while but these codifications eventually give way once

accurate reading! If advertising is the art of industrialism, like other forms of art it *may* resist reduction to rigid formulas. But who are the patrons of this art? Sponsors, not the people! And, whose taken for granted assumptions define the parameters of “the eclecticism of common sense”? Sponsors, not consumers! These are some of the critical dimensions of the power-knowledge of advertising that Schudson fails to dissect in the first six chapters.

But in chapter seven, Schudson’s intellectual powers are reborn in the dialectic empowered by a compelling metaphor: “Capitalist Realism.” This chapter alone is worth the price of the book. Here Schudson stops being a “good old boy” and begins to expose the bare ribs of the capitalist system of propaganda. As he puts it, “I want now to take up the position of the UNESCO MacBride Commission (and many others) that advertising ‘tends to promote attitudes and life-styles which extol acquisition and consumption at the expense of other values’” (p. 210). Here Schudson portrays advertising as capitalism’s structural alternative to Socialist Realism: “American advertising, like socialist realist art, simplifies and typifies.” Like Sociorealism, “It does not claim to picture reality as it is but reality as it should be – life and lives worth emulating” (p. 215). Both CR and SR present simplified social messages that picture people as representatives of larger social categories, and both repress criticism of the system in which their respective messages are embedded: “As Soviet art idealizes the producer, American art idealizes the consumer; their tractor in the fields is matched by our home entertainment center in the den. Our advertising is clearly different from the univocal, centrally organized and tightly controlled Soviet propaganda efforts. But it, too, is socially sanctioned and omnipresent... advertisements often point to middle-class material comfort as an enviable condition... advertisements reproduce and even sometimes exaggerate long-standing social inequalities. Black people are still largely invisible in advertising. Women are depicted as subordinate to men, childlike in both their charm and their dependence. All ideals and values are called into service of and subordinated to the purchase of goods and the attainment of a materially satisfactory style of life... what is also distinctively capitalist is that the satisfactions portrayed are invariably private, even if they are familial or social: they do not invoke public or collective values” (pp. 220–221). In short, “Advertising is capitalism’s way of saying ‘I love you’ to itself” (p. 232). Its pervasive presence in capitalist societies creates socially-structured silences by overpowering alternative articulations of values: “Advertising picks up some of the things that people hold dear and re-presents them to people as *all* of what they value, assuring them that the sponsor is the patron of common ideals” (p. 233).

These things have been said before, but they have not been said as well. Schudson’s love affair with language poses the question of the morality of modern advertising in very compelling terms. His evocation of the parallels between SR and CR is inspired. It provides us with conceptual binoculars that enable us to see farther, and perhaps probe deeper. But, even these marvelous binoculars could have been more precisely tooled if Schudson had done additional homework: if he had combined his study in the graduate school of business with some advanced studies in critical theory. These studies would have led him to discover, via the texts of Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Habermas, and others, the common source of SR and CR in the moral inversion of the Enlightenment: its legitimations of positivism, instrumental rationality, and statist ideologies. This discovery is necessary if we are to recover or

Schudson's jeremiad may not be original, but it is important. For at least a decade Habermas, Chomsky, Sennett, Lasch, O'Neill, and others have engaged in dialogues in search of the epistemological and ethical moorings that can empower a renewal of public morality. These left/liberal thinkers have looked to the people for articulation of a new morality. They have generally viewed the colonization of mind by the consciousness industry as responsible for the decline of the public sphere in western cultures, and they have regarded the tight hierarchical control system of mass media as a primary obstacle to the emergence of a new dialogically based moral consensus. In short, they have seen advertising as a repressive form of communication that negates realization of equalitarian values. In contrast, Schudson believes advertisers could assume a leadership role in developing a new public morality. He maintains that, "Advertising can be, in some measure, an art that enhances human and humane values," and contends that, "Some individual advertising workers would fervently welcome any opportunity to make their craft one they could be proud of, not just aesthetically, but morally" (p. 242). He acknowledges that professional associations in advertising have not been responsive to these concerns, and he doesn't suggest that they are becoming more responsive. He simply poses the Durkheimian option: that professionalism can provide moral leadership in the modern world.

The father of public relations, Edward Bernays, used the same argument. H. L. Mencken dismissed Bernay's "Public Relations Counsel" as just another undertaker pretending to be a mortician. Like Mencken, I would regard an advertiser who presents herself as a moralist as just another snake-oil saleswoman. Moreover, given the structure of the productive system in which that snake-oil must be refined, I think she could only hawk reactionary brands of moralism. Although I share Schudson's conviction that we must replace our disdain for business with analysis of business practices, I believe such analysis must include consideration of the power-knowledge in which these practices are embedded (in the case of national brand advertising, oligopolistic capitalism). Otherwise, we risk producing ideology pretending to be science.

Schudson produces much more than ideology. But his attempt to distance himself from "reflex-like intellectual revulsion at the world of goods" in order to develop a sociology of consumption that would entail "an effort to understand what place material culture might hold in a good world" (p. 243) is a high-wire act after all, and a hazardous one. His essay on Capitalist Realism and his reflections on the amorality of advertising demonstrate that he is capable of the conceptual acrobatics required to negotiate this act. But his effort to be fair to a cultural system that is demonstrably unfair (re: advertising's monopoly of dialogic opportunities in capitalist societies) leads him to ask the wrong questions. And, as Thomas Pynchon has pointed out, "If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about the answers."

Advertising doesn't have to worry about most of Schudson's answers. He let the balance pole slip this time. Nevertheless I strongly recommend *Advertising* as a dialogic bait and as supplement to Ewen's still persuasive *Captains of Consciousness* (1976).

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