

On December 24th, various degrees and generations of my family rejoice to celebrate the spirit of Christmas. I sit on a mountain of colorful wrapping paper that increases exponentially as the night gets older, watching my family pretend to get excited as they gift each other the newest model of the same thing year after year. With over a decade of experience, I have accepted that the only things that will have “Kristina” written on them will either be pink, or like-colored articles of clothing.

My family is spread across three continents. Regardless of location, gender stereotypes have found their way into all of our buying habits. Did we really create the need for a *BIC Cristal For Her Ball Pen*, or did corporations manipulate us into “realizing” our unrecognized longings for gender-specific pens?

We have lost our own identity, and have begun to take on that of corporations. As even groceries can now be ordered online right to our doorsteps, there is no real reason for human contact anymore. Exposure to global economic pressure has turned us into passive consumer machines. Globalization of economic activity has become constant threat to our minds. Our instincts are simple and easy to exploit: we seek acceptance and happiness, both of which we are told we will receive once we own the latest gadget. We have the ability to pick from a list of packaged identities, one of which we will then project into society. We have developed a homogenous way of looking at the world: less person, more machine.

Part II Propaganda : Propagare : |prɒpə'gandə|

“A deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.”

Gath Jowett & Victoria O'Donnell

Propaganda is “an organized effort to persuade a large number of people about the truth of an idea, the value of a product, or the appropriateness of an attitude,” (Cline). It does not seek to inform, but instead manipulates emotion to bring forth a desired mindset.

Although not all propaganda is inherently biased and deceptive, hearing that “the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society,” makes me question whether “whole population governments” ever belonged to the people in the first place (Bernays).

Beginning his work under Woodrow Wilson during World War One by promoting U.S. war efforts abroad, Edward Bernays’ persuasion techniques became so successful, that he soon decided to transfer his efforts into more peaceful fields, eventually earning him the title “father of public relations” (Father of Public Relations' And Leader in Opinion Making, Dies at 103).

In a newly established Industrial America, Bernays thought it possible to manage and alter the way the masses thought and felt through strategic transmission. Relying heavily on the works of his uncle Sigmund Freud, Bernays wrote that “the masses must be controlled for their own good, and in more democratic societies, where force is unavailable, social managers must turn to “A whole new technique of control, largely through propaganda,” (Chomsky). Bernays later employed these tactics, becoming the

faceless man behind several vastly successful marketing campaigns, working on projects from changing America's breakfast habits to enhancing the image of President Calvin Coolidge.

In 1928, the president of the American Tobacco Company hired Bernays to expand sales on Lucky Strike cigarettes. As it was considered inappropriate for women to smoke outside of their homes, cigarette sales faltered in a major part of the market. By utilizing the opportunity presented by the suffrage movement, Bernays consulted the esteemed psychoanalyst A.A. Brill to figure out what smoking meant to women. Dr. Brill concluded that smoking cigarettes expressed dominance, as the shape of cigarettes largely resembled that of a penis. By disguising his marketing ploy as a "feminist promotion of the emancipation of women" (Amos, Amanda), Bernays connected emotional desire to the "torches of freedom" causing an exponential increase in the sale of cigarettes under women.

By 1930, advertisements had been placed in movies whilst chains of department stores were established and doctors were paid to promote product sales. Consumerism had begun to dominate society. People were thought of not as individuals, but by groups of thousands, as public opinions were drained, and we were left in a bubble of superficiality; hungry to interact with anything that seemed even remotely genuine.

By creating desire, and subsequently fulfilling it, the masses had become "constantly moving happiness machines." The key to economic success had become the all consuming self: "happy and docile." Democracy had turned into "feel-good medication" a cover-up for corporate capitalism whose force and power seemed limitless (Century of the Self). We have been led to believe that items manufactured in factories are intrinsically valuable, leaving us bereft of human contact, but with plenty of commodities to suppress that alienation.

Part III **HYPE**

"The objective of advertising is to sell a product, a service or an idea. Accordingly the simplest reaction needed is "I need this." Over the past century, advertising has evolved dramatically, shifting from an emphasis on the efficiency and use of a product to "emotional storytelling" (Darwish, Eslam) in order to ensure an emotional connection between the consumer and the product. For instance, by linking the imagery of civil rights movements to its "Just Do It" campaign, Nike excited a global consumer pool into purchasing running shoes. Symbolic gestures are vastly preferred over structural change, as few corporations follow up on the claims they make in their advertisements. Success in branding can be fleeting, so the attention of the consumer must be maintained in whichever way possible. Market research shows a desire for something more than shopping; so, by tying shopping to outside pleasure factors, like Benetton who connects clothing to radical social movements, emphasis is placed on the connection of a certain product to personal satisfaction. This, in turn, establishes a positive connectedness between the consumer and the brand.

By connecting shopping to an addicting sensation of pleasure that can be attained by the click of a mouse, corporations are in almost full control of our behavior. Trademarking has become so simple that there is no real value in marketing things anymore. Since the average person can process 40 to 50 bits of information at once, we omit 11 million bits of data every second in which we are awake. As the average individual sees approximately 5,000 advertisements a day (Johnson), it is reasonable to assume that we are forced to “make decisions quickly and often superficially instead of logically” (Wikimedia Foundation).

The simplicity, consistency of tone and visual design, along with a clear message and media placement contribute to attaining emotional responses that can easily be revisited when the consumer sees the marketing campaign elsewhere.

President Obama won the 2008 and 2012 elections by maintaining a hip, progressive image and a simple yet effective slogan throughout both presidential campaigns. Employing three esteemed public relations agents, his team suggested that people sought social change, and so “Yes We Can” became a call for action, and Obama “won office by capitalizing on our profound nostalgia for social movements,” (Klein).

The role of mass media and marketing resembles that of religion in the past as “waves of enthusiasm for a given product resulting in moments of fervent exaltation [are] similar to the ecstasies of the convulsion and miracles of the old religious fetishism” (Debord). Religion harbored power that rivaled that of governments, yet with a large increase in atheist movements, the power religion held transferred to corporate capitalism whose adaptability and multitude has made it a far more dangerous enemy to free thought and individualism than religion ever was.

Part IV Subvertising

“The same inventions that promised to educate the world- radio, film, television, web- stupefied us all with a spectacle so wonderful that few cared about the real worlds so long as the channel was clear, the frequency sharp and the TV dinner hot.”

Adbusters

The line between truth and propaganda is thin, as we are left to wonder if “truth” ever exists in reality, or if it is merely a concept that can only occur in a vacuum. Corporate whispers from all directions influence our known realities, skewing our vision, leaving us fetishizing over the newest pair of running shoes, as our minds run empty on knowledge, and we are left wondering how we will best plan out our Cyber Monday shopping. Our lives have become more about having than living, and operating in a world of representation has left us grasping at anything that seems real enough to be anything at

all. Marketing agents have picked up on this trend, and so it is not uncommon to find products marketed as “the real thing” on shelves. Consumer’s hope that by purchasing products marketed as “genuine” or “organic”, they will find themselves closer to something real.

Since brands have failed to fulfill the deep desires their campaigns awaken, consumers hungry for change have sought out alternatives. Social media sites like Tumblr have become internal cultures advocating for genuine social change. Whilst originally established for monetary gain, these platforms have become lively portals to educate consumers on subversive information that does not necessarily cast institutions in a favorable light. As bright imagery portrays honest messages whose sole purpose is not to sell a product “the power of graphic design to cross borders and join cultures in solidarity has never been more pertinent,” (McQuiston, Liz).

Subvertising, or “altering corporate ads to communicate alternate messages” (McQuiston) has become a key aspect to a global social movement critical of the policies of corporate globalization. The anti-globalization movement has thus evoked a new spirit of activism, fuelled largely by DIY culture in which zines, texts, street protests, and dedicated websites, are utilized to promote anti-corporate feelings. The combination of high tech, low tech, and no tech communication has established a powerful global grid of average people fighting passionately for change.

Part V Final

Corporate capitalism has placed an emphasis on creating like-minded, predictable masses of people. As propaganda is an evil yet nonetheless necessary ingredient to maintaining a peaceful democratic society, it is difficult to condemn it fully. No one has a monopoly on the truth, but strikingly efficient and easily comprehensible slogans make it seem far simpler to live a consumerist lifestyle where the rules are already laid out, than to discover one’s own truth.

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