

“But First, A Word From Our Sponsor”

Advertising, the author argues, has become the single most important manufacturer of meaning in America today.

by James B. Twitchell

Whenever a member of my paunchy fiftysomething set pulls me aside and complains of the dumbing down of American culture, I tell him that if he doesn't like it, he should quit moaning and go buy a lot of Fast-Moving Consumer Goods. And every time he buys soap, toothpaste, beer, gasoline, bread, aspirin, and the like, he should make it a point to buy a different brand. He should implore his friends to do likewise. At the same time, he should quit giving so much money to his kids. That, I'm sorry to say, is his only hope.

Here's why. The culture we live in is carried on the back of advertising. Now I mean that literally. If you cannot find commercial support for what you have to say, it will not be transported. Much of what we share, and what we know, and even what we treasure, is carried to us each second in a plasma of electrons, pixels, and ink, underwritten by multinational advertising agencies dedicated to attracting our attention for entirely non-altruistic reasons. These agencies, gathered up inside worldwide conglomerates with

weird, sci-fi names like WPP, Omnicom, Saatchi & Saatchi, Dentsu, and Euro RSCG, are usually collections of established shops linked together to provide “full service” to their global clients. Their service is not moving information or creating entertainment, but buying space and inserting advertising. They essentially rent our concentration to other companies—sponsors—for the dubious purpose of informing us of something that we've longed for all our lives even though we've never heard of it before. Modern selling is not about trading information, as it was in the 19th century, as much as about creating an infotainment culture with sufficient allure to enable other messages—commercials—to get through. In the spirit of the enterprise, I call this new culture Adcult.

Adcult is there when we blink, it's there when we listen, it's there when we touch, it's even there to be smelled in scent strips when we open a magazine. There is barely a space in our culture not already carrying commercial messages. Look anywhere: in schools there is Channel One; in movies there is product placement; ads are



Barbara Kruger's "Untitled" (1984)

in urinals, played on telephone hold, in alphanumeric displays in taxis, sent unannounced to fax machines, inside catalogs, on the video in front of the Stairmaster at the gym, on T-shirts, at the doctor's office, on grocery carts, on parking meters, on tees at golf holes, on inner-city basketball backboards, piped in along with Muzak . . . ad nauseam (and yes, even on airline vomit bags). We have to shake mag-

azines like rag dolls to free up their pages from the "blow-in" inserts and then wrestle out the stapled- or glued-in ones before reading can begin. We now have to fast-forward through some five minutes of advertising that opens rental videotapes. President Bill Clinton's inaugural parade featured a Budweiser float. At the Smithsonian, the Orkin Pest Control Company sponsored an exhibit on exactly what it

advertises it kills: insects. No venue is safe. Is there a blockbuster museum show not decorated with corporate logos? The Public Broadcasting Service is littered with “underwriting announcements” that look and sound almost exactly like what PBS claims they are not: commercials.

Okay, you get the point. Commercial speech is so powerful that it drowns out all other sounds. But sounds are always conveyed in a medium. The media of modern culture are these: print, sound, pictures, or some combination of each. Invariably, conversations about dumbing down focus on the supposed corruption of these media, as demonstrated by the sophomoric quality of most movies, the fall from the golden age of television, the mindlessness of most best-sellers, and the tarting-up of the news, be it in or on *USA Today*, *Time*, ABC, or *Inside Edition*. The media make especially convenient whipping boys because they are now all conglomerated into huge worldwide organizations such as Time Warner, General Electric, Viacom, Bertelsmann, and Sony. But, alas, as much fun as it is to blame the media, they have very little to do with the explanation for whatever dumbing down has occurred.

The explanation is, I think, more fundamental, more economic in nature. These media are delivered for a price. We have to pay for them, either by spending money or by spending time. Given a choice, we prefer to spend time. We spend our time paying attention to ads, and in exchange we are given infotainment. This trade is central to Adcult. Economists call this “cost externalization.” If you want to see it at work, go to McDonald’s. You order. You carry your food to the table. You clean up. You pay less. Want to see it elsewhere? Buy gas. Just as the “work” you do at the self-service gas station lowers the price of gas, so consuming ads is the “work” you do that lowers the price of delivering the infotainment. In Adcult, the trade is more complex. True,

you are entertained at lower cost, but you are also encultured in the process.

So far, so good. The quid pro quo of modern infotainment culture is that if you want it, you’ll get it—no matter what it is—as long as there are enough of you who (1) are willing to spend some energy along the way hearing “a word from our sponsor” and (2) have sufficient disposable income possibly to buy some of the advertised goods. In Adcult you pay twice: once with the ad and once with the product. So let’s look back a step to examine these products because—strange as it may seem—they are at the center of the dumbing down of American culture.

Before all else, we must realize that modern advertising is tied primarily to things, and only secondarily to services. Manufacturing both things *and* their meanings is what American culture is all about. If Greece gave the world philosophy, Britain drama, Austria music, Germany politics, and Italy art, then America gave mass-produced objects. “We bring good things to life” is no offhand claim. Most of these “good things” are machine made and hence interchangeable. Such objects, called parity items, constitute most of the stuff that surrounds us, from bottled water to toothpaste to beer to cars. There is really no great difference between Evian and Mountain Spring, Colgate and Crest, Miller and Budweiser, Ford and Chevrolet. Often, the only difference is in the advertising. Advertising is how we talk about these fungible things, how we know their supposed differences, how we recognize them. We don’t consume the products as much as we consume the advertising.

For some reason, we like it this way. Logically, we should all read *Consumer Reports* and then all buy the most sensible product. But we don’t. So why do we waste our energy (and billions of dollars) entertaining fraudulent choice? I don’t know. Perhaps just as we drink the advertising, not the beer, we prefer the illusion of

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choice to the reality of decision. How else to explain the appearance of so much superfluous choice? A decade ago, grocery stores carried about 9,000 items; they now stock about 24,000. Revlon makes 158 shades of lipstick. Crest toothpaste comes in 36 sizes and shapes and flavors. We are even eager to be offered choice where there is none to speak of. AT&T offers “the right choice”; Wendy’s asserts that “there is no better choice”; Pepsi is “the choice of a new generation”; Taster’s Choice is “the choice for taste.” Even advertisers don’t understand the phenomenon. Is there a relationship between the number of soft drinks and television channels—about 27? What’s going to happen when the information pipe carries 500?

I have no idea. But I do know this: human beings like things. We buy things. We like to exchange things. We steal things. We donate things. We live through things. We call these things “goods,” as in “goods and services.” We do not call them “bads.” This sounds simplistic, but it is crucial to understanding the power of Adcult. The still-going-strong Industrial Revolution produces more and more things, not because production is what machines do, and not because nasty capitalists twist their handlebar mustaches and mutter, “More slop for the pigs,” but because we are powerfully attracted to the world of things. Advertising, when it’s lucky, supercharges some of this attraction.

This attraction to the inanimate happens all over the world. Berlin Walls fall because people want things, and they want the culture created by things. China opens its doors not so much because it wants to get out, but because it wants to get things in. We were not suddenly transformed from customers to consumers by wily manufacturers eager to unload a surplus of products. We have created a surfeit of things because we enjoy the process of “getting and spending.” The consumption ethic may have started in the early 1900s, but the desire is ancient. Kings and princes once thought they could solve problems by amassing things. We now join them.

The Marxist balderdash of cloistered

academics aside, human beings did not suddenly become materialistic. We have always been desirous of things. We have just not had many of them until quite recently, and, in a few generations, we may return to having fewer and fewer. Still, while they last, we enjoy shopping for things and see both the humor and the truth reflected in the aphoristic “born to shop,” “shop ‘til you drop,” and “when the going gets tough, the tough go shopping.” Department store windows, whether on the city street or inside a mall, did not appear by magic. We enjoy looking through them to another world. It is voyeurism for capitalists. Our love of things is the *cause* of the Industrial Revolution, not the consequence. We are not only *homo sapiens*, or *homo ludens*, or *homo faber*, but also *homo emptor*.

Mid-20th-century American culture is often criticized for being too materialistic. Ironically, we are not too materialistic. We are not materialistic enough. If we craved objects *and* knew what they meant, there would be no need to add meaning through advertising. We would gather, use, toss out, or hoard based on some *inner* sense of value. But we don’t. We don’t know what to gather, we like to trade what we have gathered, and we need to know how to evaluate objects of little practical use. What is clear is that most things in and of themselves simply do not mean enough. In fact, what we crave may not be objects at all but their meaning. For whatever else advertising “does,” one thing is certain: by adding value to material, by adding meaning to objects, by branding things, advertising performs a role historically associated with religion. The Great Chain of Being, which for centuries located value above the horizon in the world Beyond, has been reformed to settle value into the objects of the Here and Now.

I wax a little impatient here because most of the literature on modern culture is downright supercilious about consumption. What do you expect? Most of it comes from a culture professionally hostile to materialism, albeit secretly envious. From Thorstein Veblen on there has been a palpable

sense of disapproval as the hubbub of commerce is viewed from the groves of academe. The current hand-wringing over dumbing down is not new. It used to be Bread and Circuses. Modern concepts of bandwagon consumption, conspicuous consumption, keeping-up-with-the Joneses, the culture of narcissism, and all the other barely veiled reproofs have limited our serious consideration of Adcult to such relatively minor issues as manipulation and exploitation. People surely can't want, ugh!, things. Or, if they really do want them, they must want them for all the wrong reasons. The idea that advertising creates artificial desires rests on a profound ignorance of human nature, on the hazy feeling that there existed some halcyon era of noble savages with purely natural needs, on romantic claptrap first promulgated by Rousseau and kept alive in institutions well isolated from the marketplace.

We are now closing in on why the dumbing down of American culture has occurred with such startling suddenness in the last 30 years. We are also closing in on why the big complainers about dumbing down are me and my paunchy pals. The people who want things the most and have the best chance to acquire them are the young. They are also the ones who have not yet decided which brands of objects they wish to consume. In addition, they have a surplus of two commodities: time and money, especially the former. If you can make a sale to these twentysomethings, if you can "brand" them with your product, you may have them for life. But to do this you have to be able to speak to them, and to do that you have to go to where you will be heard.

The history of mass media can be summarized in a few words: if it can't carry advertising, it won't survive.

Books are the exception that *almost* proves the rule. Books used to carry ads. Initially, publishing and advertising were joined at the press. Book publishers, from William Caxton to modern university presses, have advertised forthcoming titles on their flyleaves and dust jackets. No doubt publishers would have been willing

to bind other material into their products if only there had been a demand. While we may have been startled when Christopher Whittle marketed his *Larger Agenda* series of books ("big ideas, great writers, short books") by inserting advertising into what was essentially a long magazine article bound in hardcover, he was actually behaving like a traditional book publisher. When Whittle published William Greider's *Trouble with Money*—94 pages of text and 18 pages of Federal Express ads—book reviewers turned away, aghast. But when Bradbury & Evans published Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit* in 1857, no reviewer or reader blanched at seeing the bound-in ad section touting Persian parasols, smelling salts, portable India-rubber boots, and the usual array of patent medicines.

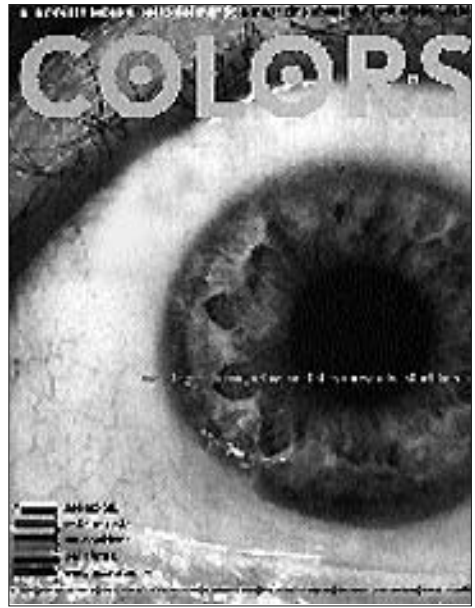
The reason why books were not an advertising medium is simple: there wasn't much to advertise, and once there was a surplus of machine-made parity items, there was a cheaper medium—the magazine. The death knell of book advertising is still being rung not by publishers but by the postal service. Put an ad in a book and it no longer travels at fourth-class book rate but at third-class commercial rate. A prediction: advertising will return to books. UPS, Federal Express, and the other commercial carriers make no such distinction about content, only about weight and size. In addition, since Dr. Spock fought Pocket Books to have cigarette ads removed from his baby-care book in the late 1940s, the Authors' Guild has advised writers to have a no-advertising clause inserted in the boilerplate of their contracts with publishers. What would it take to reverse this? Not much, I suspect. Put a few ads in, drop the price 10 percent, and most people would accept it. Of course, the real reason books are currently ad free is that the prime audience for advertisers, namely the young, is functionally illiterate.

Here is the history of magazine and newspaper publishing on a thumbnail. All the innovations in these media were forced on them by advertisers. You name it: the appearance of ads throughout the pages, the "jump" or continuation of a story from page to page, the rise of section-

alization (as with news, cartoons, sports, financial, living, real estate), common page size, halftone images, process engraving, the use of black-and-white photography, then color, sweepstakes, and finally discounted subscriptions were all forced on publishers by advertisers hoping to find target audiences.

From the publishers' point of view, the only way to increase revenues without upping the price, or adding advertising space, is to increase circulation. First-copy costs in magazine and newspaper publishing are stupendous. Ironically, the economies of scale are such that to increase the "reach" of this medium and lower your last-copy cost, you must also run the risk of alienating core readership. This is not advertising-friendly. What amounts to a Hobson's choice for the publisher has proved a godsend for the advertiser. It means that papers and magazines will tend to self-censor in order to provide a bland and unobtrusive plasma as they, on their own, seek to maximize their profits. They dumb down automatically. Look at the *New York Times* and you can see this operating in slow motion. The increase of infotainment and the presence of movie ads, the jazzy "Style" section of Sunday, and, of course, the use of color, to say nothing of the appearance on the front page of stories that used to be deemed tabloidlike and were therefore relegated to the back sections—were attempts to find the "proper" readership, not to find all that is "Fit to Print." If newspapers want to survive, they will have to think of themselves not as delivering news or entertainment to readers but delivering readers to advertisers.

One might even see newspapers and magazines, in the current bafflelab, as members of a "victim" class. They are remnants of a print culture in which selling was secondary to informing. To survive, they had to replace their interest in their reader as reader with the more modern view of the reader as commodity. Still, print media might have maintained their cultural standards, had not radio and television elbowed them aside. Ironically, print had



to conglomerate, to fit itself into huge oligopolies such as Scripps-Howard, the Tribune Company, the New York Times Company, Gannett, the Washington Post Company, Times Mirror, Meredith, and the rest, in order to sell advertising space profitably. As advertising will flow to that medium which finds the target audience cheapest, the demographic specialization of print is a direct result of the rise of Adcult.

This struggle to find targeted audiences has led to two interesting extremes. On one extreme are magazines that are pure advertising, such as *Colors from Benetton*, *Le Magazine de Chanel*, and *Sony Style*, which erase the line between advertising and content so that you cannot tell what is text and what is hype. At the other extreme are magazines such as the reincarnated *Ms.* or *Consumer Reports*, which remain ad free for political or economic reasons. Meanwhile, the rest of magazine culture aspires to the condition of women's magazines, in which the ratio of advertising space to print space is about 10 to 1, and to the editorial condition of newspapers, which is as bland as vanilla.

The electronic media have turned the screws on print, have made it play a perpetual game of catch-up, have forced it into niches so that only a few national magazines and newspapers have survived. Broadcasting has forced print to narrow-



This March 1925 Radio Broadcast magazine posed the key question facing the nascent medium: who is to pay?

cast. Television is usually blamed, but the real culprit is radio. Radio started with such high hopes. It has achieved such low reality. Rush Limbaugh and Howard Stern are not stars of this medium by accident.

After World War I, Westinghouse found itself with a surplus of tubes, amplifiers, transmitters, and crystal receivers. So in November 1920, it started KDKA in Pittsburgh on the Field of Dreams principle ("If you build it, they will come"). It worked. Once transmitters were built, Westinghouse receiving apparatuses could be unloaded. You could make them at home. All you needed was a spool of wire, a crystal, an aerial, and earphones—all produced by Westinghouse. Patience and a cylindrical oatmeal box were supplied by the hobbyist. By July 1922, some 400 stations had sprung up.

Rather like users of the Internet today, no one then seemed to care "what" was on as long as they were hearing something. When stereo-

phonic sound was introduced in the 1950s, at first the most popular records were of the ordinary sounds of locomotives and cars passing from speaker to speaker. People used to marvel at the test patterns of early television as no doubt monks stood in awe before the first printed letters. However, in the 1920s, great plans were being hatched for radio. Universities would take advantage of this new way to dispense their respective cultures by building transmitters. The government would see to this by allocating special licenses just for universities. This medium would never dumb down, it would uplift.

The problem was that everyone was broadcasting on the same wavelength. When transmitters were placed too close together, the signals became mixed and garbled. AT&T suggested a solution. It would link stations together using its existing lines, and soon everyone would hear clearly. AT&T envisioned tying some 38 stations together in a system it

called "toll broadcasting." The word "toll" was the tip-off. Someone was going to have to pay. The phone company suggested that time could be sold to private interests, and it called this subsidy "ether advertising." The suggestion was not an immediate success. Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, considered a presidential possibility, warned that it was "inconceivable that we should allow so great a possibility for service . . . to be drowned in advertising chatter," and that if presidential messages ever "became the meat in a sandwich of two patent medicine advertisements it would destroy broadcasting." Such Cassandras were uniformly ignored. This would never happen. The universities would see to it by their responsible use of the medium.

In 1922, AT&T started WEAJ (for wind, earth, air, fire) in New York. The station tried all kinds of innovative things, even broadcasting live from a football stadium. It tried letting companies buy time to talk about their prod-

ucts. Such talk was always in good taste: no mention of where the products were available, no samples offered, no store locations, no comparisons, no price information—just a few words about what it is that you offer. At 5 P.M. on August 28, the station manager even let a Mr. Blackwell step up to the microphone and say his piece about a housing development. He spoke only once. This is what he said, and it is every bit as important as “Mr. Watson, come here, I want you,” only a bit longer. It was to be the Mayday distress call of high culture:

It is 58 years since Nathaniel Hawthorne, the greatest of American fictionists, passed away. To honor his memory the Queensboro Corporation has named its latest group of high-grade dwellings “Hawthorne Court.” I wish to thank those within sound of my voice for the broadcasting opportunity afforded me to urge this vast radio audience to seek the recreation and the daily comfort of the home removed from the congested part of the city, right at the boundaries of God’s great outdoors, and within a few miles by subway from the business section of Manhattan. This sort of residential environment strongly influenced Hawthorne, America’s greatest writer of fiction. He analyzed with charming keenness the social spirit of those who had thus happily selected their homes, and he painted the people inhabiting those homes with good-natured relish. . . . Let me enjoin upon you as you value your health and your hopes and your home happiness, get away from the solid masses of brick, where the meager opening admitting a slant of sunlight is mockingly called a light shaft, and where children grow up starved for a run over a patch of grass and the sight of a tree. Apartments in congested parts of the city have proved failures. The word “neighbor” is an expression of peculiar irony—a daily joke. . . . Let me close by urging that you hurry to the apartment home near the green fields and the neighborly atmosphere right on the subway without the expense and trouble of a commuter, where health and community happiness beckon—the community life and the friendly environment that Hawthorne advocated.

Three weeks later, the Queensboro

Corporation had sold all its property in Hawthorne Court (named for “America’s greatest writer of fiction,” who clearly had never been read by Mr. Blackwell) in Jackson Heights, Queens. The genie was out of the bottle.

Giving the public what it wants had its price. Like television today, the messenger was soon being blamed for the message. Commercial radio broadcasting was “dumbing down” American culture with its incessant repetition of mindless humor, maudlin sentimentality, exaggerated action, and frivolous entertainment. Proving yet again the power of Gresham’s Law when applied to culture, radio programming by the 1930s was selling out to the lowest common denominator. Typical of highcult outrage was James Rorty, erstwhile advertising copywriter turned snitch for such leftward-leaning periodicals as the *New Republic*:

American culture is like a skyscraper: The gargoyle’s mouth is a loudspeaker [the radio], powered by the vested interest of a two-billion dollar industry, and back of that the vested interests of business as a whole, of industry, of finance. It is never silent, it drowns out all other voices, and it suffers no rebuke, for is it not the voice of America? That is this claim and to some extent it is a just claim. . . . Is it any wonder that the American population tends increasingly to speak, think, feel in terms of this jabberwocky? That the stimuli of art, science, religion are progressively expelled to the periphery of American life to become marginal values, cultivated by marginal people on marginal time?

But wait! What about those universities? Weren’t they supposed to make sure the airwaves would be full of “the best that had been thought and said”? While there were more than 90 educational stations (of a total 732) in 1927, by the mid-1930s there were only a handful. What happened? Surely, the universities would never participate in any dumbing down. Alas, the universities had sold their radio licenses to the burgeoning networks—called “nets” or, better yet, “webs”—emanating from Manhattan. In one of the few attempts to



*A selection from Jenny Holzer's Survival Series (1986)
displayed in Times Square*

recapture cultural control from commercial exploitation, the National Education Association (NEA) lobbied Senators Robert Wagner of New York and Henry Hatfield of West Virginia to reshuffle the stations and restore a quarter of them to university hands. These stations would forever be advertisement-free, making “sweetness and light” available to all. The lobbying power of the NEA met the clout of Madison Avenue. No contest. The Wagner-Hatfield bill died aborning, defeated by a margin of almost two to one.

One of the reasons the Wagner-Hatfield bill floundered so quickly was the emergence of a new cultural phenomenon, the countrywide hit show. Never before had an entertainment been developed that an entire nation—by 1937 more than three-quarters of American homes had at least one radio—could experience at the same time. “Amos ‘n’ Andy” at NBC had shown what a hit show could do. NBC thought a “hit” was the way to sell its RCA receivers, and the network was partially right—more than 100,000 sets were sold just so people could hear the minstrel antics of “The Mystic Knights of the Sea.” But CBS knew better. Hits could make millions of dollars in advertising revenue. Although they were not yet called “blockbusters” (that would come with the high-explosive bombs of World War II), the effect of hits was already acknowledged as concussive. One could support hundreds of programming failures.

In truth, CBS or not, television never had a chance to be anything other than the

consummate selling machine. It took 25 years for radio to evolve out of wireless; it took much less time for television to emerge. And while it took a decade and an economic depression for advertisers to dominate the radio spectrum, it took only a few years and economic expansion for them to do the same with television. Advertisers had rested during the war. They had no product to sell. No surplus = no advertising.

Even though radio not only survived but prospered during the war, the new kid on the block was too tough to beat. From the first narrow broadcast, television was going commercial. The prophetic Philo T. Farnsworth presented a dollar sign for 60 seconds in the first public demonstration of his television system in 1927. Once Hazel Bishop became a million-dollar company in the early 1950s based on television advertising, the direction of the medium was set. It would follow radio. Certain systemic changes in both broadcast media did occur, the most important being the networks’ recapture of programming from the agencies. Although this shift away from agency control took scandals to accomplish (notably, the scandals involving quiz shows rigged under pressure from ad agencies), it would have happened anyway. Simple economics made it cheaper to sell time by the ounce than by the pound. The “nets” could make more by selling minutes than by selling half- or full hours. Magazines maximized ad revenues by selling space by the partial page; why not television? The motto of this new medium became, “Programs are the scheduled interruptions of marketing bulletins.” How could it be otherwise?

We need not be reminded of what is currently happening to television to realize the direction of the future. MTV, the infomercial, and the home-shopping channels are not flukes but the predictable continuation of

this medium. Thanks to the remote-control wand and the coaxial (soon to be fiber-optic) cable, commercials will disappear. They will become the programming. Remember, the first rule of Adcult is this: given the choice between paying money or paying attention, we prefer to pay attention.

What all this means is that if you think things are bad now, just wait. There are few gatekeepers left. Most of them reside on Madison Avenue. Just as the carnival barker doesn't care what is behind the tent flap, only how long the line is in front, the poobahs of Adcult care only about who's looking, not what they are looking at. The best-seller lists, the box office, the Niensens, the various circulation figures for newspapers and magazines, are the meters. They decide what gets through. Little wonder that so much of our popular culture is derivative of itself, that prequels and sequels and spin-offs are the order of the day, that celebrity is central, and that innovation is the cross to the vampire. Adcult is recombinant culture. This is how it has to be if advertisers are to be able to direct their spiels at the appropriate audiences for their products. It's simply too expensive to be any other way.

Will Adcult continue? Will there be some new culture to "afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted"? Will advertising, in its own terms, lose *it*? Who knows? Certainly, signs of stress are showing. Here are a few: (1) The kids are passing through "prime-branding time" like a rabbit in the python, and as they get older things may settle down. The supposedly ad-proof Generation X may be impossible to reach and advertisers will turn to older audiences by

default. (2) The media are so clogged and cluttered that companies may move to other promotional highways, such as direct mail, point-of-purchase displays, and couponing, leaving the traditional avenues targeted at us older folks. (3) Branding, the heart of advertising, may become problematic if generics or store brands become as popular in this country as they have in Europe. After all, the much-vaunted brand extension whereby Coke becomes Diet Coke which becomes Diet Cherry Coke does not always work, as Kodak Floppy Disks, Milky Way Ice Cream, Arm & Hammer antiperspirant, Life Saver Gum, and even EuroDisney have all shown. And (4)—the unthinkable—mass consumption may become too expensive. Advertising can flourish only in times of surplus, and no one can guarantee that our society will always have more than it needs.

But by no means am I predicting Adcult's imminent demise. As long as goods are interchangeable and in surplus quantities, as long as producers are willing to pay for short-term advantages (especially for new products), and as long as consumers have plenty of disposable time and money so that they can consume both the ad and the product, Adcult will remain the dominant meaning-making system of modern life. I don't think you can roll this tape backwards. Adcult is the application of capitalism to culture: dollars voting. And so I say to my melancholy friends who bemoan the passing of a culture once concerned with the arts and the humanities that the only way they can change this situation is if they buy more Fast-Moving Consumer Goods, change brands capriciously, and cut the kids' allowances. Good luck.