

13 How to Read an Ad: Learning to Read between the Lies

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"Why do you spend money for that which is not bread, and the fruit of your labor for that which does not meet your needs?" This question, as timely as one's latest trip to the supermarket or political rally, is also timeless, for it was posed not by Vance Packard or David Horowitz or Joe McGinnis but by the prophet Isaiah over 2,600 years ago. The implicit answer in the eighth century B.C. may have been: "Because you are dim of sight, dull of hearing, and slow of wit." For the modern buyer the answer might simply be: "Because a fool and his money are soon parted." Or it might be phrased as follows: "You spend your hard-earned money on illusory commercial promises just as you `buy' deceptive political propaganda because you are functionally illiterate, never having learned to `read' an ad."

"The public buys its opinions as it buys its meat or takes its milk, on the principle that it is cheaper to do this than to keep a cow," Samuel Butler wrote. "So it is," he concluded, "but the milk is more likely to be watered" (Keynes and Hill 1951, 221-22). In order to avoid getting watered milk or unwholesome bread substitutes, it may be impossible to keep a cow or flour mill and bakery. The solution lies rather in learning to read and discern so as to counter the manipulative effects of Reality Control and Newspeak.

I. A. Richards purported to teach us "how to read a page," John Ciardi "how to read a poem," Mortimer Adler "how to read a book," Caroline Gordon "how to read a novel," Ronald Hayman "how to read a play," and Ezra Pound simply "how to read"-but who has taught us how to read an advertisement?

But who ever reads an ad? Who needs to be told how to read what we never bother to read? Those who respond in this way should be

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reminded of Daniel Boorstin's conclusion that "advertisement is our most popular reading, listening, and watching matter" (1962, 223), and of the recent estimate that "average" U.S. adults are exposed to over five hundred advertising messages daily, of which they consciously perceive perhaps around seventy-five (Key 1974, 80). Malcolm Muggeridge has coined the term *newsak* "to characterize this advertisement bombardment that harries one even when one seeks blessed tranquility in the car or bathroom" (1969, 69). The total volume of this propaganda blitz has been estimated conservatively by Alvin Toffler to be ten to twenty thousand words in print and twenty thousand words of radio and television "ingested" daily by the "average" U.S. adult (1971, 166). Wilson Bryan Key has set the total at more than "100,000 carefully edited, slanted, and skillfully composed words-words which sell, propose, and plead for [our] attention, [our] sympathy, [our] loyalty, and most of all, [our] money" (1974, 81).

And yet despite the further estimate that by the age of eighteen the modern American youth has watched 350,000 TV commercials, these young people, as Aldous Huxley pointed out in the late 50s, "are nowhere taught, in any systematic way, to distinguish true from false, or meaningful from meaningless, statements" (1958, 106). Surely one of the great inadvertences of our educational system has been our willingness to subject young people to the onslaughts of advertisement-both commercial and political-without equipping them with the abilities of advertence, that is, the keen awareness of words as symbols, and their persuasive and pervasive power.

In the late 19th century, Samuel Butler noted that "the most important service rendered by the press and magazines is that of educating people to approach printed matter with distrust" (Keynes and Hill 221). Today, nearly a century later, in the lengthening shadow of 1984, the need for such education is even more pronounced, but the press and magazines, apprehensive about loss of subscriptions and advertising revenue, are surely not interested in arousing any distrust in printed matter. The task of teaching how to read an ad, though it is the English teacher's by default, is closely related to our job of teaching how to read a poem, a story, a play, or a novel-and it's about time we got down to the business of getting the job done. As that patron saint of Romantic poetry, William Blake, expressed it in two poems,

They ever must believe a lie
Who see with, not through, the eye.'

Blake's notion of seeing *through* the eye, of intensely engaging the imagination, is obviously different from Butler's notion of casting a

jaundiced eye, of regarding all printed matter skeptically. Yet the two share common ground in their attempts to get through illusion to reality. Similarly, the effective reader of advertisement will not only see through the eye but see through the propaganda; he will become less gullible but not at the cost of becoming totally cynical. It may be true, as someone has said, that perceptive reading is "eye and ass power," but not merely in the sense of training the former and taxing the latter. Reading is eye and ass power also in the sense of sharpening the focus of the eye in order to avoid being made an ass.

Just as there are different kinds of levels of reading, so there are different ways of reading an ad. Charles Walcutt has specified four kinds of reading:

1. *guessing*, that is, making assumptions about meaning of words by looking at pictures;
2. *stumbling*, getting fragmented understanding here and there;
3. *skipping*, getting the gist of meaning only; and
4. *skimming*, making one's way through the material swiftly and getting a general understanding of its meaning. (1962, x)

It seems fair to say that advertisers and their clients benefit most when our reading consists of guessing, stumbling, and skipping, for when we simply make assumptions on the basis of pictures, fragmented understanding, and general "gists" of meanings, the door is wide open for the subtleties of associations, diversion, and subliminal seduction.

Mortimer Adler's four levels of reading are perhaps even more apropos of advertisements (1967, 16ff.). The first level is *elementary, rudimentary, basic, or initial* reading, perhaps a combination of Walcutt's "guessing" and "stumbling." Even otherwise highly-educated, sophisticated individuals may read ads in this way simply because of lack of time or refusal to devote time to careful reading of ads as one peruses a magazine or newspaper. This kind of rudimentary reading suits the advertiser's purpose of communicating false generalizations, half truths, and appeals to the subconscious mind.

Adler's second level, *inspectional* reading, is generally the equivalent of Walcutt's "stumbling" and "skimming." The reader, conscious of limited time, seeks to answer questions prompted largely by curiosity, questions which are typically general and superficial, such as "What is this ad about?" or "Why is that seductive girl staring at me from this page?"

The third level of reading according to Adler, the *analytical*, involves a careful, systematic analysis of the entire book (or ad) and its symbols, with the reader asking many pertinent questions.

The fourth and highest level of reading Adler calls *syntopical* or *comparative* reading, which, when applied to advertisements, would involve not only an analysis of the ad and its parts, but also a comparison-contrast of the ad and its symbols with other ads and their use of symbols.

At this point there can undoubtedly be heard a round of demurrers expressing something like this: "Surely you don't think anybody actually reads ads analytically or syntopically or even inspectionally, except maybe ad writers or people who write papers about ads. And surely you aren't suggesting anything so preposterous and impracticable as the notion that we *should* take time to read ads in such a sophisticated way and teach students to do so, are you?"

A suitable response might be: "Yes, we have no bananas today, but, no, we do have some very nice carrots." They are electric carrots dangling out there in front of us on sticks, for as J. B. Priestley put it, "Admass is a consumer's race with donkeys chasing an electric carrot" (1957, 219).

It is obvious that most people read ads only on Walcutt's elementary, cursory levels of guessing and stumbling, as evidenced by the fact that advertising in North America is a flourishing \$27 billion a year business. The ad writer wants us to "read" the ad, but only on a superficial level. Sometimes the writer even admonishes us to "Read This," as an ad for Korbel brandy does, just as one friendly hometown mortuary urges us to "Read this and a very difficult thing may become a little less difficult." It is unlikely, however, that *read* in such cases is intended in the sense of the Old English source of the *term-raeden*: to consider carefully; to discern, peruse, inspect, deliberate, interpret. (Few people realize that one of the obsolete denotations of "read" was the fourth stomach of ruminant.) In this connection, it may be pertinent to paraphrase Francis Bacon's famous statement about tasting some books, swallowing others, and chewing and digesting some few others. All ads are to be tested, none to be simply swallowed, some to be chewed and spit out, and some few to be ruminated.

Meticulous reading of any material demands time and effort, but once a workable strategy is developed, both time and effort can be minimized. Such a strategy must be based on certain deliberate assumptions, whether one is reading commercial, social, or political propaganda. (Hitler in *Mein Kampf*, we should remember, defined propaganda as "political advertising" [1942, 1931. The methodology of the two is strikingly similar.)

The first basic assumption takes the form of a prerequisite condition to be met by the reader. Just as the reading of literature requires a

willing suspension of disbelief, so a perceptive reading of advertisement requires a willed suspension of belief. Both the belletrist and the ad writer are fabricators; the significant difference is that whereas the former presents heightened truth through the openly acknowledged illusion of art, the latter often misrepresents as truth what is subtly concealed illusion-for nakedly commercial purposes. Readers must therefore devise what someone has called a "system of discounts"-not a blanket cynicism but a discriminating analysis that enables one to discount half-truths, innuendoes, and blatant falsehoods.

Other basic assumptions essential to the perceptive reading of ads involve the recognition of certain dichotomies almost always present in advertisement ipso facto. One set of dichotomies is that of the projected voice and the real one, the ostensible purpose and the real one. Perhaps the most common pseudovoice in advertisement is that of the avuncular public servant personally concerned about the welfare of each one of us. Such a voice conveys the common ostensible purpose of improving our lives, meeting all our needs, assuring our comfort and security, and making us perfectly happy and content. How could one possibly question such honorific motivation when we hear from "The Good Guys at Kalil Bottling Company," or from "Farmer's Insurance Group-with good guys to look after" us or when we're told that "Metropolitan really stands by" us and that we're "in good hands with Allstate"; that United States Steel is "helping to rebuild the American Dream," that Buick Opel is "dedicated to the free spirit" in all of us and Oldsmobile Omega wants to build one "just for us" while Jack Daniels in the homey hills of Tennessee lovingly, patiently charcoal-mellows whiskey "drop by drop" and Juan Valdez in Colombia picks out the very finest coffee beans just for us? Lane Furniture tells us, "We're made with love"; a commercial for a dental clinic assures us in song, "The difference, my friend-we care about you"; Gerber products come to us with "fifty years of caring" and Pampers are made with "tender, loving care." Failure to resist this avuncular voice may result in our forgetting that the real motivation is, after all, Mammon.

Another common pseudovoice in advertisement is that of eternal youth, either in the form of seductive femininity or male machismo. Such archetypes are widely used for purposes of *adverting*, that is, drawing or turning the reader's attention from the real business at hand (a sale) by associating the product with an illusion. Many ads for health spas and automobiles, for example, advert(ise) the illusion; not the product. At other times, the pseudovoice takes the form of a testimonial from a popular entertainment figure or sports idol. The disparity lies, of course, in the fact that success and popularity in one

field do not necessarily qualify one as an expert in another; moreover, many celebrities very likely have never even used the products that they are paid so handsomely to endorse.

Besides pseudopurpose and pseudovoice, there is pseudologic: the dichotomy between specious reasoning and valid, sound logic, or between irrational propaganda and the pseudorational guise in which it is presented. Consider the *fabulous*, the *sensational Mark Eden Mark II Bust Developer with IVR*, an ad which appeared in a recent issue of *Mademoiselle*.

Now with IVR, no matter what your bust problem--whether you are flat-chested and want to quickly add 3, 4, 5, 6, or more shapely inches--or whether you want to firm *up*, fill out your cup size and develop rounded shape and glorious high cleavage--only Mark II does it all--the world's most totally effective bust developer! ... Now a woman can actually see her bust become rounder and fuller before her very eyes. First a gentle flush across the bosom and then, incredibly enough, inches actually added to the bust from the very first day.... The ultimate bustline with IVR.

The reader might well imagine that "IVR" is an amazing new scientific elixir, perhaps resembling that which Hawthorne's Aylmer concocted to remove a birthmark from his wife's cheek. But in small print at the bottom we are told that IVR--"exclusive with Mark Eden Mark II," stands for *Infinitely Variable Resistance*. The discerning reader might well say, "What a bust!"--and turn the page, richer by at least \$10.95 and considerably wiser.

Perhaps the greatest dichotomy in advertisement is that between language and reality. In his book *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin alludes to the "trend of the times in the workaday world of the man in the street." Esslin writes:

Exposed to the incessant, and inexorably loquacious, onslaught of the mass media, the press, and advertising, the man in the street becomes more and more skeptical toward the language he is exposed to. The citizens of totalitarian countries know full well that most of what they are told is doubletalk, devoid of real meaning. They become adept at reading between the lines; that is, at guessing at the reality the language conceals rather than reveals. In the West, euphemisms and circumlocutions fill the press or resound from the pulpits. And advertising, by its constant use of superlatives, has succeeded in devaluing language to a point where it is a generally accepted axiom that most of the words one sees displayed on billboards or in the colored pages of magazine advertising are as meaningless as the jingles of television commercials. A yawning gulf has opened between language and reality. (359)

Similarly, Leo Spitzer, in an essay entitled "American Advertisement Explained as Popular Art," notes that "the public accepts

willingly the hypocrisy" of the commercial artist (1962, 253). And in regard to political advertisement, poet John Berryman said: "From public officials we expect lies, and we get them in profusion" (Kostelanetz 344). The evidence surely indicates that Esslin, Spitzer, and Berryman are correct about the disparity between the language of propaganda and reality, between words and referents.

But perhaps they overestimate the perception and sophistication of the "average" U. S. reader of ads. Wasn't it H. L. Mencken who said somewhere that nobody ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of the American public? It may be true, as Spitzer says, that "the advertiser does not ask that his words be taken completely at face value" (253). But it is also true that he knows full well that the success of his ad depends upon its being read just superficially enough to permit its seductive, associative archetypes to lodge in the subconscious and its illusory promises to appeal sufficiently to one or more of the Seven Deadly Sins to bear the desired fruit of Mammon. As Aldous Huxley noted in his essay "The Arts of Selling," advertisement "depends for its effectiveness on a general failure to understand the nature of symbols" (1958, 50).

It is necessary, then, for the reader to approach an ad with the basic assumption that the copywriter uses language less to *express* than to *impress*, less to *illuminate* than to *manipulate*, less to *win* with *reason* than to *baffle* with *bull*. Like the perceptive reader of belleslettres, the reader must read not only the declarations but also the implications; not only the denotations but also the connotations. The reader must be alert not only to what the "voice" means to say but also to what the voice says without meaning to-and to what is left unsaid. The reader must assume that more often than not the voice, the persona, the narrator is unreliable. To echo Will Rogers, the copywriter is, in a sense, archetypal con artist persuading readers to buy something they don't need with money they don't have.

Perhaps the most effective counterstrategy-which, in a sense, is what reading an ad entails-is to pose a series of pointed questions, as Adler has for evaluating books, and then attempt to answer them.² For advertisements, think VAPID-an acronym formed by the following questions about the voice, audience, purpose, idea and devices of any ad we read:

Voice

What *voice* is speaking in this ad? Is it an authentic, credible and creditable one?

Audience

What *audience is* the ad directed toward? And why?

Does the ad writer take unfair advantage of the reader or viewer, as in the case of print ads and commercials, especially those for cereals, directed toward children? Another kind of ad with special appeal to a particular audience-and by reverse psychology making an appeal to those not in the category explicitly addressed-is the cigarette or liquor ad which assures smokers and drinkers that it is perfectly acceptable to indulge, as long as it's *their* product. An ad for Vantage cigarettes is addressed

to the 56,000,000 people who smoke cigarettes. A lot of people have been telling you not to smoke, especially cigarettes with high "tar" and nicotine. But smoking provides you with a pleasure you don't want to give up.... But there is one overriding fact that transcends whether you should or shouldn't smoke and that fact is that you do smoke, and what are they going to do about that?

Purpose

What is the *purpose* of the ad-both the ostensible one and the real one?

The question is especially pertinent, for example, in relation to ads that purport to have great humanitarian concern; a concern that is undercut by the product itself or by the company's unscrupulous activity. What *really is* the purpose of this ad from the Distilled Spirits Council of the U.S.?

It's all right to offer someone a drink. It's all wrong to insist. If you choose to drink, drink responsibly.

Or what about the so-called "public service" ads by gas companies in relation to the energy crisis, or the propaganda for nuclear energy, or an ad from the American Electric Power Company assuring us that America's coal resources "won't come near short supply for over 500 years"?

Idea

What is the central *idea* of the ad, its thesis or hypothesis, its focus both ostensible and real?

Ordinarily the central focus can be analyzed in terms of the appeal to one or more of the Seven Deadly Sins: pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth. If we were not motivated by silly vanity, vainglory, and conceit, would such ads as this one for Volvo be effective? *Drive a car that impresses people who aren't easily impressed.*

Further understanding of advertisement's central appeal is conveyed in:

The Advertiser's Decalogue

1. Thou shalt indulge thyself and never feel guilty.
2. Thou shalt take unto thee graven images of standard brands and be taken in by their promises of gratification and glory.
3. In the name of independence thou shalt do thine own thing, eschewing all authority and restriction. 4. Remember popular opinion, taste, and current fads to serve them wholly.
5. Seven days a week shalt thou demand instant ease, relief, satisfaction and luxury, eschewing any discomfort as evil.
6. Honor Scientism as Savior, that thy days may be long and prosperous in the land which advertising hath made the wealthiest on earth.
7. Thou shalt pursue happiness, pleasure, and thrills as the ultimate end of life.
8. Thou shalt seek to live by bread alone, for man's life consisteth in the abundance of Mammon.
9. Thou shalt live wholly for the here and now.
10. Thou shalt covet thy neighbor's possessions and satisfy thy animal urges at any cost.

And the common appeals of advertisement can be summarized in:

The Advertiser's 23rd

The Adman is my Shepherd,
I shall ever want.
He maketh me to walk a mile for a Camel;
He leadeth me beside Crystal Waters in the High Country of Coors.
He restoreth my soul with Perrier. He guideth me in Marlboro Country For Mammon's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the
Jolly Green Giant,
In the shadow of B.O., halitosis,
indigestion, headache pain, and
hemorrhoidal tissue,
I will fear no evil,
For I am in Good Hands with Allstate;
Thy Arid, Scope, Turns, Tylenol, and
Preparation H—
They comfort me.
Stouffer's preparest a table before the TV
In the presence of all my Appetites;
Thou anointest my head with Brylcream;

My Decaffeinated Cup runneth over.
 Surely surfeit and security shall follow me
 All the days of Metropolitan Life,
 And I shall dwell in a Continental Home
 With a mortgage for ever and ever.

Devices

Having asked and answered questions about voice, audience, purpose, and key idea or appeal, one is then ready to pose what is perhaps the most important question of all: What are the specific *devices* or techniques used? This question can, in turn, be broken down into the following categories.

- What is the overall design or structure of the ad?
- What "advertising" or attention-getting ploys are used?
- What place do nonverbal symbols play?
- What information is provided and support given?
- What does the language convey denotatively? Connotatively? Objectively? Subjectively?
- What kind of rhetoric does the ad employ?

The Rhetoric of Cow and Bull

The rhetoric of advertisement can be analyzed according to two general categories: the rhetoric of *cow* and the rhetoric of *bull*.³ Ads that present "cow" are those which list impressive-sounding data, scientific or pseudoscientific facts, and all the latest "test evidence"-but with no indication of contexts, frames of reference, and points of observation which necessarily determine the origin, nature, meaning, and relevance of the facts. There is no indication of control factors, applicability, or relevance.

Ads that present "bull," on the other hand, are those which discourse *generally* but with no factual data.

The copywriters of Cow are the shysters, attempting to cow the reader, to overawe or intimidate with technical-sounding data from the sacred cow of Scientism. They parade their *advanced, new, improved breakthroughs*, their *ultra-advanced, new, double-protection formula*, and their unpronounceable, cryptic "active ingredients" like *sodium monofluorophosphate* and *monosodium glutamate, nonoxynal 9* and *Superorb 7*. Or they provide irrelevant personal data as in this ad for Dewar's Scotch:

Sharon Miller

Home: Salmon, Idaho

Age: 36

Profession: White-water guide

Hobbies: Skiing, kayaking, horseback riding, yoga

Most Memorable Book: *Thomas Wolfe's Letters to His Mother*

Scotch: Dewar's White Label

The details are apparently intended to convince us, by association, to buy Dewar's because such a wholesome, all-American, clean-cut, adventuresome woman like Sharon Miller prefers White Label.

The copywriter of Bull is the bullster, attempting to persuade through bluster, bluff, and blather. The common method is overstatement; the popular form, the superlative. One of the greatest bullsters in the Southwest is "Tex" Earnhardt, "Arizona's Largest Ford Dealer," whose print ads announce "No bull since 1951" and whose TV commercials, featuring Tex straddling a Brahma bull, conclude with the statement, "And that ain't no bull." Bullsters, it seems, typically feel the need to insist that they are *not* bulling us.

The shysters of Cow have recently adopted new strategies using "health fears," misinformation, and innuendoes to confuse and mislead the public by claiming that one product is "safer" than another. For example, one popular soft drink is advertised as being caffeinefree with the strong suggestion that the substance is unhealthy, a conclusion that has not been borne out by scientific studies, according to the American Council on Science and Health. Similar fear tactics intended to cow us are used in advertising decaffeinated coffee despite the fact that it has been proven that such coffees contain only a little less caffeine than do regular coffees. Similarly, ads for filter cigarettes have engaged in cowing with their claims of low tar and nicotine, but what they do not say-and what studies presented at the 55th Scientific Session of the American Heart Association have shown-is that filter cigarettes are no better at reducing carbon monoxide, a substance linked to heart disease, than nonfilter cigarettes.

Still other cowing (fear) tactics concern the use of artificial sweeteners despite the fact that new research has shown that normal use of the sweeteners does not cause cancer as previously reported. Further, some food company advertisers talk out of both sides of their mouths, in true doublespeak fashion, in claiming that some of the products contain no preservatives or other chemicals while, at the same time, advertising other products that *do* contain them. Similarly, advertisers

for one brand of mayonnaise warn prospective purchasers not to buy any products "with ingredients you can't pronounce" but fail to mention that their brand of mayonnaise contains *phosphatidyl cholines and glycerol esters of linoleic acid*. That nice little boy named Baby Tuckoo had better watch out for the moocow coming down the road!

Occasionally the cow and the bull get together in the same ad and produce either a variant of the all-too-familiar cock-and-bull or yet another Golden Calf venerated in modern America no less fervently than was its ancient prototype. If the Israelites needed to learn to read and heed what was written on those tablets of stone, modern Americans need to learn to read not only those ancient precepts but also what is written in ubiquitous ads. For if we fail to master the eye and ass power of discriminating reading, we are likely to be cowed and bulled until we find ourselves asses chasing electric carrots.

Notes

1. The two poems are "Auguries of Innocence" and "The Everlasting Gospel." Perhaps Blake was influenced by Plato's *Theaetetus*, in which Socrates asks the question, "Which is more correct, to say that we see or hear with the eyes or the ears, or *through* the eyes or ears?" and to which Plato responded: "I should *say through*, Socrates, rather than *with*."

2. Adler has suggested these four questions one must ask about any book:
(1) What is the book about as a whole? (2) What is being said, in detail, and how? (3) Is the book true, in whole or part? (4) What of it?

3. The terminology is borrowed from William G. Perry's essay "Examsmanship and the Liberal Arts: A Study in Educational Epistemology." In *Examining in Harvard College: A Collection of Essays by Members of the Harvard Faculty*. Cambridge: Faculty of Arts and Sciences, 1963: 125-135. See my essay "The Rhetoric of Cow and the Rhetoric of Bull" *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 14 (Summer-Fall 1984): 129-38.

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