

Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1997)

American advertising has reinvented itself, no once but twice. It began as the domain of the peddler and the huckster, who according to Jackson Lears (*Fables of Abundance*) fashioned a carnivalesque discourse that celebrated plenty, the exotic and the sensual, magic and transformation. The corporate advance at the turn of the century subjected advertising to the discipline of a managerial ethos that honoured science, employed reason-why, and promised personal efficiency. By the 1920s, indeed, admen had become the counsellors of modernity, as Roland Marchand (*Advertising the American Dream*) would have it, who supplied guidance and therapy to a distraught populace. Yet the carnivalesque was only contained, driven to the margins, always threatening a return in moments of crisis or despair (as in the Depression). It did return with a vengeance, though in a new guise, during the 1960s when the masters of advertising tried to make their publicity a brand of popular culture. And the instruments of their design? A strategy of irony, a rhetoric of rebellion, talking young, and the sexual sell. Campaigns for Pepsi, Volkswagen, or Virginia Slims, among the most famous of the frenzied decade, offered consumers meanings and identities galore. This, the so-called Creative Revolution of Madison Avenue, set advertising on a new course which persists into the 1990s.

Thomas Franks' *The Conquest of Cool* chronicles that revolution, investigates related upheavals in management theory and the fashion industry, and explores what he touts as a reshaping of capitalism. "What happened in the sixties is that hip became central to the way American capitalism understood itself and explained itself to the public." (26) The counterculture and business culture shared values and purposes. Of course business came out on top, the managers and the ad-makers finding "...the magical cultural formula by which the list of consumerism could be extended indefinitely, running forever on the discontent that it itself had produced." (68) Here we have the New Left vision of business villainy and omnipotence recast for our postmodern age — but in a fashion much more elegant and sophisticated than was common back in the glory days of the 1960s.

Frank's account makes for fascinating reading, whatever doubts one may have about his hypothesis. The Creative Revolution, like the counterculture, was a similar response to a much wider sense of malaise that afflicted American society by the late 1950s. Adorno, Horkheimer, and C. Wright Mills were not alone in their aversion to mass culture and mass society: "...the mass culture critique was, if not populist, enormously popular." (11) So he points to the works of Galbraith and Mailer (or rather his essay, "The White Negro," 1957), to the more popular books of William Whyte and Vance Packard, even to *Fortune* magazine and a couple of management books. He leaves the impression that youth in particular was chaffing at the bit, just waiting to escape the tedium of the fifties,

although he doesn't delve into the birth of rock and roll which would have lent support to his claims. In any case all sorts of people turned to rebellion, to versions of hip to escape conformity and discover new freedoms in the next decade.

This includes ad-makers. The gods of Madison Avenue in the fifties had been Rosser Reeves and David Ogilvy who preached the virtues of a scientific advertising that sought to order the buying habits of the public. Many of the resulting tableaux in *Life* and *Look* portrayed America as a utopia of abundance, where obedient and ever-smiling consumers happily purchased an array of marvels that made ordinary living so much more convenient and pleasant. But in the sixties a new generation of ad-makers threw away the rule books to indulge in an orgy of creativity. The leader was Bill Bernbach, "an ideologue of disorder" (56), whose agency (DDB) used humour, scepticism, and populism in a famed campaign that turned Volkswagen, once the Nazi car, into the love bug, wheels for the thrifty individualist. Other shops, and Frank places special emphasis on Wells, Rich, Greene, transformed that ironic tone into a celebration of transgression, if not rebellion, with marvellous ads for Alka-Seltzer, Benson & Hedges, or Love Cosmetics. Indeed Frank takes the reader through a dizzying array of campaigns and ads — one full chapter is devoted to the career of the "Pepsi Generation" — which show how ad-makers employed hip talk and youth culture to sell all manner of goods. What he doesn't discuss, though, is the sexual sell, the increased use of the alluring or torted-up body, to push a vast array of products: in the case of *Chatelaine*, to get Canadian for a moment, everything from bras and girdles, to Tex-Made sheets, to Air Canada tickets. It is a strange absence because the strategy expressed the general effort to liberate the body and sexuality, surely one of the major themes of the counterculture and attendant phenomena in the 1960s.

Along the way Frank takes to task the present craze for Cultural Studies, singling out for special notice John Fiske who has argued that popular culture is fundamentally subversive: we, the subordinate, contest hierarchy and authority by fashioning dissenting meanings out of what they, the power-bloc, manufacture. Most of the talk about transgression, empowerment, and the like Frank thinks is overdone because it neglects the dimension of business power. First, such rhetoric posits an opposition between capitalism and dissent which misses the reality that business, or at least advertising and fashion, worked to sponsor or channel dissent. Second, such rhetoric masks the ongoing power of business to determine the terrain upon which culture happens. The crucial failure of Cultural Studies, in short, is that its adherents focus on consumption when they should worry much more about Production. So *The Conquest of Cool* is a welcome rebuttal to what has become the idealization of the consumer.

But Frank also commits the sin of exaggeration. His version of the 1960s is as selective as the myths that he ascribes to the Republican Right or Cultural Studies. The claim that by the end of the decade "...hip became virtually hege-

monic...” (133) is, well, silly. He won’t recognize that the counterculture was not just about dressing different or drinking the right pop. He seems to forget, for example, that the hipsters, “the cynosures of cool,” were also junkies — the “very essence” of hip was doing drugs (see the obituary of a hip idol, Anton Rosenberg, in the *New York Times*, 22 February 1998). He doesn’t care that some advertising consciously avoided talking young: that was true of the extraordinarily successful Marlboro campaign where the cowboy was older, weathered, a “real” man who had experienced life to the fullest. Square reigned supreme in this fantasy West. Frank takes no account of the publicity for mundane products, say the plethora of goods manufactured by Proctor & Gamble, which at a later date still employed reason-why to convince consumers how to cleanse and order their lives. The fact is that the Creative Revolution of the 1960s never worked a complete reshaping of advertising. (Frank admits that fashion’s Peacock Revolution ultimately failed.) Just as the carnivalesque had lingered on throughout the first half of the twentieth century, so too the gospel of personal efficiency persisted in the second half. Hip, however defined, was never hegemonic. His last comment, “Hip and square are now permanently locked together...,” (232) seems more appropriate, perhaps only in the world of advertising though. In any case, after 1970 it was the gathering strength of marketing, as philosophy and as discipline, both in the private and the public spheres, which served well the interests of authorities in the state and business in the never-ending struggle to ensure dominance.

There is much to admire about *The Conquest of Cool*, not least that it is written in such an engaging and provocative fashion. Frank tells a very good tale. You might cavil at his generalizations and question his enthusiasms, but you will enjoy the journey. And that’s no hype.

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