

prétexte à une analyse plus vaste des transformations des modes de vie et de l'expérience ouvrière durant les années vingt, il ne fait cependant aucun doute qu'elle propose des pistes de recherches et de réflexions fort stimulantes.

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Paul Rutherford, *The New Icons?: The Art of Television Advertising* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1994).

Intellectuals have traditionally viewed advertising with a measure of suspicion due to its manipulative nature and the acquisitive ethic which it often promotes. Contemporary periodicals such as *Adbusters* have repeatedly drawn attention to the misleading images often projected by advertisers both in print and on television. Rather than further underlining the dangers of advertising, Paul Rutherford's *The New Icons?* takes a considerably less incendiary approach. Examining the aesthetic qualities of a wide array of award-winning television commercials produced between the 1950s and the early 1990s, the author contends that television advertising has emerged as a distinctly postmodern and increasingly global form of artistic expression. In an interesting and often amusing account of the evolution of commercials, Rutherford characterizes this ubiquitous element of popular culture as "the art of our times."<sup>(5)</sup>

As they emerged in the 1950s as a widespread mode of advertising, commercials remained relatively unsophisticated by contemporary standards. Rutherford notes that admakers relied primarily on "reason-why" sales tactics which "treated the viewer as a rational consumer who liked argument or proof."<sup>(17)</sup> This preference is evident in the popularity of rather blunt testimonials and demonstrations in award-winning commercials of that decade. Television advertising bloomed artistically in the 1960s, however, amid a "creative revolution" on Madison Avenue. As the arrival of color television and the trend toward thirty-second spots placed greater emphasis upon symbols rather than words, advertisers

employed increasingly sophisticated techniques to promote their products and services. Assessing commercials produced during and after the “creative revolution,” Rutherford remarks: “The most intriguing ads are marvels of compression, chock full of nuance, allusions and illusions, stereotype and stimuli.”(68) Lifestyle advertising, which associates products with values and qualities close to the hearts of consumers, proved particularly successful, as the author demonstrates by documenting famous campaigns created for Marlboro, Coca-Cola and Pepsi between the 1960s and 1980s. The rugged individualism of the Marlboro Man, the traditional ‘American’ values associated with Coca-Cola, and the vibrancy of Pepsi’s ‘New Generation’ all struck a chord with potential customers.

The author follows the ‘creative revolution’ through the 1980s as it took on new forms overseas. While American admakers reined their creative impulses in favor of more economical commercials, their European counterparts took creativity to new heights. British advertisers “revitalized that pose of ironic celebration which had surfaced during the ‘creative revolution.’”(81) In the process they accumulated a growing share of Cannes Lions, awarded for creativity, if not effectiveness, in advertising. The British taste for irony has been taken even further by the French, who in Rutherford’s words, “offer up large doses of peculiar and even baffling advertising.”(145)

While advertisers throughout the world employ somewhat different approaches to their art, the author contends that ‘national’ idiosyncrasies are becoming increasingly blurred. The most important common trait of commercials, he argues, is their reflection of distinctly postmodern values. Rutherford contends that at basis, television commercials represent “the confusion of art and commerce,”(102) a characteristic appropriate to ‘the postmodern moment.’ This inclination is further evident in the spread of the French affinity for the bizarre as well as the growing use of satire and parody in commercials made in both Europe and North America. Even the relatively staid Canadian advertising community has begun recently to employ greater displays of excess and exaggera-

tion. All of these tendencies, the author argues, are symptomatic of "that postmodern taste which relishes the play of signs: a visual extravaganza, unusual images and weird juxtapositions." (151) However peculiar they may be, Rutherford argues that commercials constitute an international mode of communication. As part of an emerging global "Superculture," much of the symbolism and imagery of television advertising transcends linguistic boundaries, making it a form of art comprehensible throughout the world.

Although the bulk of the book is devoted to documenting the history of television advertising, the author concludes by reflecting briefly on the ways in which viewers respond to commercials. While Rutherford notes that ads can be "an especially potent agent ... of the gospel of consumption," (194) he remains convinced of the critical capabilities of the viewer. As he states: "I think that people often 'read' these ads in ways that resist or undo the preferred meanings and purposes of their makers, and even contradict the expectations of worried critics of advertising." (8) In the Appendix, "How To View Commercials," he offers instructions on how to detect these preferred meanings and purposes and further appreciate television commercials as "fine art."

To a reader reasonably familiar with the subject under discussion, Rutherford's account of the evolution of television commercials is both informative and entertaining. The author is also quite successful in identifying the "postmodern" aesthetic qualities evident in the ads which he examines. The scope of the study, however, is somewhat confined by the tastes of the author. Rutherford, a self-described "aficionado of fine commercials," (8) focuses almost entirely on ads which have earned critical acclaim, in the process overlooking trends in television advertising contrary to his argument. In North America, if not elsewhere, the relentless and unfortunate rise of home shopping and the "infomercial" in recent years would seem to represent a retreat from postmodern sophistication to the "reason-why" testimonials of the 1950s. Indeed, if an advertising strategy built around fading Hollywood stars extolling the virtues of dubious consumer products exhibits any elements of irony, juxtaposition, or peculiarity, it is probably quite uninten-

tional. It would thus appear that while Rutherford's conclusions can be applied to the very best ads, it remains arguable whether or not much of television advertising can be characterized as either "postmodern" or even as "art."

In addition, readers may find *The New Icons?* somewhat dismissive of the effects of television advertising. Although Rutherford's focus on the artistic merit of commercials is perfectly acceptable, he perhaps attributes too much sophistication to the average viewer. To cite one example, while the author can observe dispassionately the artistry evident in a spot for Nike Air Jordans, not everyone is as impervious to the "gospel of capitalism." Nike's award-winning ads undoubtedly play a role in compelling some young North Americans to extreme and even tragic measures to obtain the popular basketball shoes. Commercials are by no means the only cause of our society's fascination with material goods, but their role in promoting this fascination among viewers deserves greater recognition than Rutherford seems willing to acknowledge. All in all, the author provides an enjoyable account of the development of television advertising and highlights the often subtle artistic conventions evident in some of its most sophisticated ads. Unfortunately, he does so at the cost of downplaying its less benign intentions.

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Roger Magraw, *A History of the French Working Class*,  
Volume I & II (Oxford: Blackwell 1992).

Roger Magraw does not consider himself a Marxist-Leninist; rather, he claims to be a luddite, "an unreconstructed follower of Ned Ludd." (1: xi) He unfortunately never explains what he means by this. In fact, however, Magraw is quite evidently a Marxist humanist in the tradition of Edward Thompson. He wears his ideological heart boldly on his sleeve, and nowhere more ostensi-