

Capitalism's Synergy with Semiology and its Debilitation of Democracy - A View from 1970s

An abridged Extract from John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972), Chapter 7

In the cities in which we live, all of us see hundreds of publicity images every day of our lives. No other kind of image confronts us so frequently.

In no other form of society in history has there been such a concentration of images, such a density of visual messages.

One may remember or forget these messages but briefly one takes them in, and for a moment they stimulate the imagination by way of either memory or expectation. Each publicity image fills a moment whether in the street scene or on a screen.

Publicity images also belong to the moment in the sense that they must be continually renewed and made up-to-date. Yet they never speak of the present. Often they refer to the past but always they speak of the future.

We accept this total system of publicity images. The fact that these images belong to the moment but speak of the future produces a strange effect, one so familiar that we scarcely notice it. Usually it is **we** who pass the image – walking, travelling or reading; on the screen it is somewhat different but even then we are theoretically the active agent – we can look away, turn the sound down. Yet despite this, one has the impression that publicity images are continually passing us. We are static; they are dynamic. And we passively submit our brains to these moments of attention.

Publicity is usually explained and justified as a competitive medium, which ultimately benefits the public (**the consumer**) and the most efficient manufacturers – and thus the national neoliberal economy. It is closely related to certain ideas about freedom: freedom of choice for the purchaser: freedom of enterprise for the manufacturer.

It is true that in publicity one brand of manufacturer, one producer, competes with another; but it is also true that every publicity image confirms and enhances every other. Publicity is not merely an assembly of competing messages: it is a language in itself, which is always being used to make the same general proposal. Within publicity, choices are offered between, say, that car and this car, but publicity as a system only makes a single proposal.

It proposes to each of us that we transform ourselves, or our lives, by buying something more.

This more, it proposes, will make us in some way richer – even though we will be poorer by having spent our money.

Publicity persuades us by showing us people who have apparently been transformed and are, as a result,

envious. The state of being envied is what constitutes glamour. And publicity is the process of manufacturing glamour.

Do not confuse publicity with the pleasure or benefits to be enjoyed from the things it advertises. Publicity is effective precisely because it feeds upon the real. Clothes, food, cars, cosmetics, 'elsewhere' sunshine are real things to be enjoyed in themselves. Publicity begins by working on a natural appetite for pleasure.

Publicity is never a celebration of a pleasure-in-itself. Publicity is always about the future buyer. It offers him an image of himself made glamorous by the product or opportunity it is trying to sell. The image then makes him envious of himself as he might be. Yet what makes this self-which-he might-be enviable? The envy of others. Publicity is about social relations, not objects. Its promise is not of pleasure, but of happiness: happiness as judged from the outside by others. The happiness of being envied is glamour.

Publicity is the culture of the consumer society. It propagates through images that align with society's belief in itself. There are reasons why these images use the language of pre-Post impressionists' oil paintings.

Oil paintings, before it was anything else, was a celebration of private property. As an art-form it derived from the principle that **you are what you have**.

It is a mistake to think of publicity supplanting the visual art of post-Renaissance Europe; it is the last moribund form of that art.

Publicity is, in essence, nostalgic. It has to sell the past to the future. It cannot itself supply the standards of its own claims. And so its references to quality are bound to be retrospective and traditional. It would lack both confidence and credibility if it used a strictly contemporary language.

Colour photography is to the spectator-buyer what oil paint was to the spectator-owner. Both media use similar, highly tactile means to play upon the spectator's sense of acquiring the **real** thing which the image shows.

Yet, the function of publicity is very different from that of the oil painting. The spectator-buyer stands in a very different relation to the world from the spectator-owner.

For the spectator-owner, the oil painting consolidated his own sense of his own value. It enhanced his view of himself as he already was. It began with facts, the facts of his own life.

The purpose of publicity is to make the spectator-buyer marginally dissatisfied with his present way of life. Not

with the way of life of society, but with his own within it. It suggests that if he buys what it is offering, his life will become better. It offers him an improved alternative to what he is.

The oil painting was addressed to those who made money out of the 'market'. Publicity is addressed to those who constitute the market, to the spectator-buyer who is also the consumer-producer from whom profits are made twice over – as worker and then as buyer.

All publicity works upon anxiety. The sum of everything is money, to get money is to overcome anxiety. Alternatively the anxiety on which publicity plays is the fear that by having nothing you will be nothing.

Money is life. Not, perhaps, in the sense that capital gives one class power over the entire lives of another class. But that money appears to be the token of, and the key to, every human capacity. The power to spend money is the power to live. According to the legends of publicity, those who lack the power to spend money become literally faceless. Those who have the power become lovable.

Publicity uses sexuality to sell any product or service which is itself a symbol for something presumed to be larger than it: the good life in which you can buy whatever you want. Usually it is the implicit message, ie. If you are able to buy this product you will be lovable. If you cannot buy it, you will be less lovable.

For publicity the present is by definition insufficient. The oil painting was thought of as a permanent record. Its owner thought that it would convey the image of his present to the future of his descendants. Thus the oil painting was naturally painted in the present tense. The publicity image which is ephemeral uses only the future tense. With this you **will** become desirable, all your relationships **will** become happy and radiant.

Publicity speaks in the future tense and yet the achievement of this future is endlessly deferred. How then does publicity remain credible – or credible enough to exert influence? It remains credible because the truthfulness of publicity is judged, not by the real fulfilment of its promises, but by the relevance of its fantasies to those of the spectator-buyer. Its essential application is not to reality but to day-dreams.

Publicity performs another important social function. The fact that this function has not been planned as a purpose by those who make and use publicity in no way lessens its significance. Publicity turns consumption into a substitute for democracy. The choice of what one eats (or wears, or drives) takes the place of significant

political choice. Publicity helps to mask and compensate for all that is undemocratic within society. And it also masks what is happening in the rest of the world.

Publicity adds up to a kind of philosophical system. It explains everything in its own terms. It interprets the world for the consumer.

The entire world becomes a setting for the fulfilment of publicity's promise of the good life.

The contrast between publicity's interpretation of the world and the world's actual condition is a very stark one, and this sometimes becomes evident in colour magazines which deal with news stories.

Shocking contrasts in imagery can be considerable. Not least because it exposes the cynicism within our culture through the juxtaposition of contrasting images of reality and, even if that quirk of publicity may not be planned, these are produced by the same culture.

Publicity is essentially **eventless**. It extends just as far as nothing else is happening. For publicity all real events are exceptional and happen only to strangers.

Publicity, situated in a future continually deferred, excludes the present and so eliminates all becoming, all development. Experience is impossible within it. All that does happen, happens outside it.

The fact that publicity is eventless would be immediately obvious if it did not use a language which makes of tangibility an event itself. Everything publicity shows is there awaiting acquisition. The act of acquiring has taken the place of all other actions and reality.

Publicity exerts an enormous influence and is a political phenomenon of great importance. But its offer is as narrow as its references are wide. It recognises nothing except the power to acquire. All other human faculties or needs are made subsidiary to this power. All hopes are gathered together, made homogenous, simplified, so that they become the intense yet vague, magical yet repeatable promise offered in every purchase. No other kind of hope or satisfaction or pleasure can any longer be envisaged within the culture of capitalism.

Publicity is the life of this culture – in so far as without publicity capitalism could not survive – and at the same time publicity is its dream.

Capitalism survives by forcing the majority, whom it exploits, to define their own interests as narrowly as possible. This was once achieved by extensive deprivation. Today it is being achieved by imposing a false standard of what is and what is not desirable.