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Introduction: Why study advertising?

On 20 February 2011 over 15,000 people (by most accounts) lined a train track to celebrate the opening of the Kyushu Shinkansen: the latest section of the Japanese high-speed ‘bullet train’ that was to service the Southern island of Kyushu. Some were dressed in costumes; others took part in synchronised dancing; many simply jumped or waved at the passing train which was recording footage that would later serve as the basis for ‘The 250km Wave’: a commercial to advertise the opening of the new train line. Set to the catchy, upbeat soundtrack of Maia Hirasawa’s ‘Boom’, the commercial presented an endearing image of regional unity and offbeat exuberance. It would eventually go on to win three awards at the 2011 Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity, including a gold ‘Outdoor Lion’ for the use of stunts in an advertisement (Engine Films, 2011).

‘The 250km Wave’ was first broadcast on Japanese television on Friday 9 March, only two days before the Great East Japan Earthquake struck off the coast of Tōhoku. The strongest earthquake ever recorded in Japan, the Great East Japan Earthquake killed over 15,000 people and displaced over 225,000 more. Given the mood of national mourning following the unprecedented natural disaster, the advertisement was pulled from television screens as it was felt that its celebratory tone was inappropriate during that time. However, the commercial was still available online on YouTube and over the following months became the subject of intense online interest. Within three months the Japanese video had logged over two million views (Johnny, 2013), and by the time the official account closed the video had recorded over three and a half million views: more than any other non-music or earthquake-related video (Clegg, 2016). Rather than turn away from the joyful imagery of the commercial, the people of Japan had embraced the advertisement as an ‘uplifting message of national solidarity’ (Creativity Online, 2011). As a result of its popularity in that moment, over the coming years ‘The 250km Wave’ would remain an important cultural touchstone and a message of hope for rebuilding the Japanese nation.

'The 250km Wave' demonstrates the power of advertising to shape and influence our lives in often unexpected ways. Advertising across all media is a vitally important part of our media landscape and we too frequently overlook the ways in which commercials can shape our lives: from the adoption of too-frequently repeated catchphrases and jingles in everyday speech to the wider questions of social values and priorities. That an advertisement could be embraced in this manner shows that advertising is far from a disposable, ephemeral cultural form and can have very real influence upon the wider world. The success of the particular advertisement also speaks to more recent shifts in advertising from historically dominant media forms, such as broadcast television, to the online world of shareable and social media. The story of 'The 250km Wave' could not be told outside the context of new online networks and the associated changes in advertising. At the same time, we should also keep in mind how and why this video was produced: to promote a train service in order to make profits for a company. What does it mean when a private company becomes implicated in public grieving as part of a larger system, the explicit purpose of which is to make money? Finally, we might also want to consider the context of the ad itself: while thousands turned out to joyfully welcome the train and take part in the filming of the ad, thousands also stayed away. The train construction not only cut through existing communities and meant many had to now live in the shadow of the ten-metre-high bridges of the new infrastructure, but also led to concerns that those towns not serviced by stations would suffer economic decline (McMorran, 2013). Thus, while the ad shows us a happy, smiling world (which absolutely contributed to its post-earthquake success), it does so by simplifying and leaving out more controversial elements. All these aspects speak to the vital and complicated role of advertising in our society: its immense creativity, its implication in wider social discussions and debates, its potential to uplift and entertain, its close connection to the profit motive and its particular way of presenting the world. Those issues and more will be the subject of our study in this book.

Why study advertising?

The first question that confronts a student of advertising is as simple as it is important: why study advertising? In comparison to many of the other topics that you may address at university, advertising might appear to be a subject which most of us already know as much about as we might want to. Indeed, many of you might think that you are already experts in advertising whether you wish to be or not. Even compared to other topics in Media and Cultural Studies, let alone subjects like Chemistry or Medieval Literature, advertising is almost certainly a subject with which you are already quite familiar: maybe

even more familiar than you'd like to be! Indeed, advertising may even be a media form that you're accustomed to going some lengths to avoid – through the use of technology such as browser web blockers or through cultivated habits of stubborn avoidance – rather than engaging with in detail. Advertisements, after all, are frequently framed as the bottom of the media hierarchy: brash in their claims, demanding in their tone, unsophisticated in their execution. Understood in this manner, it is fairly obvious why we'd want to steer clear of advertising whenever possible and, conversely, somewhat unclear as to why on earth we would want to pay it the attention that is necessary for detailed study (let alone read a whole book on the subject!) Nonetheless, despite such objections, in this textbook we will be committing ourselves to making sense of what might appear to be the dirty business of advertising. Having picked up this book (or signed up for a class in which you are asked to purchase this book) hopefully you already have some idea as to why – despite its negative profile – you might want to study advertising.

This book is an investigation of what advertising is, what it does and what it means. We'll be particularly concerned with what makes advertising different from other ways of using media and the historical, technical, technological, economic, political, social and cultural roles that it plays as a result. We'll be thinking about why it is that so many people hate advertising and why a few people seem to really love it: what it's meant to do and what it actually does. Along the way, we'll consider whether advertising might be best understood as a form of art or business or just manipulation and how those different ways of making sense of advertising fit with wider beliefs about the world, media, individuals, communities and communication. Moreover, we'll be doing all this in the wholehearted commitment to the idea that advertising is not only possessed of hidden depths of meaning and significance, but also has a lot to teach us about the society we live in: in particular, the media-saturated, money-driven consumer society of the rich countries of the twenty-first century. Consequently, while some of our more dismissive and negative beliefs around advertising are sometimes absolutely justified, we will also consider how they can also be limited and limiting; in almost all instances they can prevent us from properly understanding advertising as a cultural, social, political and economic practice. Therefore, in order to address possible objections and the limitations that can arise from them, in this introductory chapter I will present five key reasons why I think we might want to study advertising in terms of its ubiquity, oddness, economic importance, aesthetic possibilities and political potential. Following the presentation of these different reasons – and hopefully having made a convincing case! – I will then run through some of the particular features that will shape our engagement with advertising and society in this book.

Reason one: Advertising is everywhere

At the most straightforward level, the first reason why we might want to study advertising is relatively simple: it's everywhere. We encounter advertising on our televisions, plastered across the side of buildings, blaring out of radios, embedded in our social media, stuck between the pages of magazines and newspapers, preceding movies, stuffed into every potentially empty space in sports games, popping up and scrolling across webpages, festooning the side of highways, sprawled across the outsides of public transport (and often on the inside as well), emblazoned across our clothing, wrapped around our food and sometimes even dragged across the sky. Advertising is the medium that gets where other media don't. Even as consumers take advantage of new, easier and more efficient ways of avoiding advertisements through the use of technologies such as TiVo devices or Adblock software, advertising manages to remain a persistent part of our everyday existence as advertisers turn to new techniques like viral marketing and colonise social media like Facebook and Instagram. Despite the massive technological and cultural changes in our media over the last century, advertising remains the wallpaper of our lives: the dull background hum of our media culture that teases, teaches, insults, provokes, informs, entertains and annoys in equal measure.

What this means, then, is that even if advertising weren't an interesting cultural form in its own right (which it is!), we'd be almost compelled to study it as a result of the sheer ubiquity of the stuff. Because it's everywhere, advertising has the power to worm its way into the fabric of our everyday lives: its power arises part from the sheer scale of its presence: the repetition, not just of individual ads or campaigns, but of advertising itself which crashes against our brains with the persistent force of waves upon a beach. It would be difficult for something that is so ever-present not to exert some influence upon our beliefs and values (Leiss et al., 2005, pp. 3–4; Wharton, 2015, p. 1). Anything that there is so much of deserves further scrutiny simply by virtue of its ubiquity, its constant presence and the power that it wields as a result of that. Consequently, given this power and influence, advertising is a subject that seems of the utmost importance to understand in order to make sense of how it intervenes in our lives and shapes our beliefs and behaviours. One of the main focuses of this book will be unpacking how advertising might work to shape the way we understand the world, not just on the level of individual purchasing decisions, but on the level of social and cultural beliefs and values.

Reason two: Advertising is weird

One of the major repercussions of the constant presence of advertising is that we all seem to have developed a blind spot regarding how absolutely bizarre it is. We don't appreciate this often enough. This is true at the level

of individual advertisements – surreal tapestries of talking animals, cartoon jack-hammers pounding diagrams of distressed human heads, quick-cut montages of ludicrously jubilant young people chewing gum or slugging back sugar water – but also at the level of wider practice. Advertising is a massive system of global production, distribution and consumption based around the counter-intuitive idea that with the right combination of design and market research, hundreds of thousands of people can be convinced to part with their money to purchase goods that they possibly don't even want. Even more unlikely, advertising is produced by corporations at great expense and then distributed for free: hundreds of thousands of stories in miniature and spectacular images, prepared using countless interviews with focus groups and studies of demographics, so carefully studied as to put Hollywood to shame. And finally, despite all this effort, the dirty, half-kept secret of advertising is that nobody is actually sure if it works. As the early advertiser John Wanamaker is sometimes reported to have said, 'half the money I spend on advertising is wasted; the trouble is I don't know which half' (Keyes, 2006, p. 2).

This fairly odd state of affairs is the result of a highly contingent set of historical, economic and social circumstances, which is to say: things didn't have to be this way. If anyone were to create a society from scratch, it is highly unlikely that they would come up with the idea of advertising, nor assign such a prominent role to it. Advertising didn't have to be a central ever-present aspect of our mediated existence, advertising didn't have to underwrite a large section of our entertainment media and advertising didn't have to be an essential and unquestionable part of providing or even selling goods and services. It's very important to remember this over the course of this book: advertising isn't a fundamental part of human existence, but it has come to function as one in the rich Western countries of the twenty-first century. The way in which advertising works in our society isn't the only way advertising can or has worked, and we should never be satisfied with something just because that's the way it is, but instead should always wonder why it's this way instead of any other. Therefore, in this book we'll be looking at not only the history of advertising, in order to get a sense of how things came to be this way, but also tracing how advertising continues to reproduce the conditions of its own justification and legitimation in our current moment.

Reason three: Advertising is where the money is

The third reason advertising is fascinating is because of the money. There's no denying that advertising is a big business: the global advertising industry employs hundreds of thousands of people around the world and does about

\$500 billion worth of business a year (Economist 2014). However, in economic terms, advertising is even more important than such a dollar value might suggest. This is because advertising doesn't just work as an economic entity in its own right: it also functions as an essential part of our capitalist economy. The economics of advertising are therefore always about more than just the money that changes hands with the production and distribution of advertising messages; they are also about the role that advertising plays in keeping the rest of the economy humming along (Hardy, 2015, p. 65). Without advertising (or at least the half that works...), there would be a chance that our economy would begin to slowly grind to a halt.

This is because advertising is more than just the means by which we learn about different products and services; it is also a constant reminder that as good consumer-citizens of the twenty-first century we should keep on buying things. Shampoo. Fast food. Cars. Prescription medication. Advertising is at the heart of what we refer to as consumer society: a way of living organised around the purchasing and accumulation of things, where it seems unquestionably obvious that the best way to obtain the things that sustain and bring meaning to our lives is to acquire them through the exchange of currency. Joseph Turow and Matthew McAllister describe consumer culture as the symbols and messages that surround people about products and services that they buy and use (that is, consume). Consumer culture also involves how people make meaning from these messages: how we understand ourselves and our lives through consumer messages (2009, p. 4). Much has been written about the consumer society: some have suggested that the ascension of consumerism has robbed our lives of purpose, beauty and authenticity, while others have argued that consumer culture provides new means for us to express and articulate ourselves in the world with a new-found sense of freedom. We will consider the arguments in support of both of these positions in this book, and the consequences of both for assessing the cultural, social and political roles of advertising in the wider context of consumer society.

In addition, the economic importance of advertising means that it is a rich site through which to examine and debate the role of capitalism in our society more broadly: what does it mean to live in a society where economic growth is understood as the central guiding value of government, rationality is understood in terms of profit motive and money is often the final determining mark of value? How does advertising both rely on such capitalist ideas and contribute to their reinforcement? And how might we understand these ideas in relation to media and culture – not least advertising – which has been historically denounced as a source of false information regarding the capacity of capitalism to meet social desires (Williams, 2005, pp. 184–186), as an aesthetic of alienating glamour that substitutes consumption for democracy (Berger,

1974, p. 149) or even as ‘a pure representation of social power’ (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972, p. 163). We’ll be exploring some of these ideas in the second part of the book through an engagement with Marxist and post-Marxist approaches to advertising, consumerism and capitalism as a means to consider how advertising produces particular forms of engagement, understandings and impressions of the economic relations that structure our lives. This involves much more than simply denouncing advertising as something ‘bad’ or manipulative, but instead trying to untangle its central role in our capitalist economy and consumerist society.

Reason four: Advertising is beautiful, inspiring and entertaining

The fourth reason I think we should study advertising is because of its aesthetic aspects: its ability to move us, thrill us, entertain us and inspire us. In a way, this fourth reason is almost the opposite of reason three, because it encourages us to consider advertising as more than just a sales pitch and instead appreciate it as a form of art. While much of the advertising we encounter is relatively straightforward in its appeal, and unsophisticated in its construction and presentation, advertising can also be stunningly inventive in its formal presentation and in its ability to create emotionally resonant narrative or visually striking imagery (McStay, 2011, pp. 1–3). I imagine almost all readers will be able to recall at least one example of an advertisement that they found unexpectedly moving, captivating or at least entertaining (if you have trouble thinking of any examples then I encourage you to seek out Sony’s visually spectacular 2005 ‘Bouncy Ball’ ad for Bravia televisions, or John Lewis’ surprisingly emotional 2014 Christmas ad, ‘Monty’s Christmas’!) In fact, even those apparently simple advertisements – ads for big box furniture stores where a voice-over shouts about bargains, or an item of junk mail detailing the specials for the week at the local supermarket – are highly complex combinations of sound and colour that are specially designed to foster particular responses. We would be doing advertising a great disservice if we were to think about it only in terms of its brute purpose and thereby overlook the ways in which it reaches out to us through stories, songs, images and experiences.

In fact, at least one commentator has gone so far as to declare advertising to be not just artistic, but an actual form of art. The early media theorist Marshall McLuhan, who was famed for making over-the-top proclamations, declared that ‘Advertising is the greatest art form of the twentieth century’ (Gettins, 2005, p. 117). While we don’t want to get bogged down in the potential details of McLuhan’s claim – after all, what makes one art form ‘greater’ than another? – we will explore what it would mean to take seriously his central

claim that advertising is a form of art. One way we can approach this claim is to think about how the forms of advertising might be interpreted in terms of art: this doesn't mean that advertising should be hung in a gallery necessarily, but how the use of aspects such as colour and movement might transform everyday spaces and lead us to think about the world in new and different ways. When we try to think about the similarities between art and advertising this can complicate our ideas about the status and role of art, and potentially present advertising in a more positive light than that in which it usually appears. Approaching advertising as art can also lead us to think about the people who make advertisements as more than just faceless drones, but as passionate, creative people with different politics and who want to tell stories and create meaningful impressions and interventions in the world. Thinking about advertising in relation to art opens up new ways of explaining the appeal of advertisements and forces us to acknowledge its wider cultural role.

Reason five: Advertising is political

My final and most important reason for studying advertising is that it is tied up in questions of politics. By this, I don't mean the role of advertising in the service of party politics and electioneering, or the manner in which political campaigns are increasingly run as if they were advertising campaigns for competing brands of toothpaste. These aspects of political advertising are certainly fascinating, but are relatively narrow in their application. Instead, what I'm referring to here is the wider point that advertising, like all forms of media, produces and reproduces certain ways of understanding the world. In his 1917 novel, *South Wind*, Norman Douglas famously suggests that 'You can tell the ideals of a nation by its advertisements' (1917, p. 55). There is little to suggest that much has changed since then, except that we now have many more advertisements, so there is arguably much more raw material from which we can read those national ideas. Advertisements present us with an easily accessible and always updating archive of a society's desires, fears, wants and anxieties as well as a range of stock characters and short repeated narratives. In the process of selling us running shoes and tea bags, advertising thus presents us with insights into what makes a society tick. So long as we pay enough attention and know where to look, we can find in advertising a wealth of material about the construction and dissemination of our values, ideas and ideals in our societies (Wernick, 1991, pp. 24–25). Such concepts are inherently political because they play a fundamental role in teaching us about the roles and functions available to us, the ways we can express ourselves and solve our problems, and therefore provide a way of making sense of how power and resources are distributed in our society. Advertising arises at the conflux of

the most crudely economic demands and the loftiest cultural aspirations of our media landscape: it is simultaneously one of the most debased and one of the most creative cultural forms. As a consequence, advertising expresses some of the thorniest and most interesting dilemmas surrounding economics and politics in our society and is one of the most productive sites at which to consider some of the defining tensions of contemporary cultural production. Provided we have the right tools for the job, advertising can tell us much about how the world works.

What this book is about

These, then, are my five reasons why we would want to study advertising in detail and why I think you should take the time to read a book on the subject. Hopefully, some, if not all, of these reasons align with your own interests in advertising. In this book I'll be exploring, expanding and complicating these different approaches as well as ideally providing opportunities for you to contemplate your own interests in advertising. In order to accomplish these ends, this book is structured according to three sections that provide opportunities to pursue contrasting perspectives towards advertising. The first section will set you up with the fundamentals you'll need to study advertising; the second section will focus upon advertising as an economic form tied up with capitalism and consumerism that trains us to seek pleasure and purpose in purchases; and the third section will present a counter-argument for understanding advertising as a complicated, creative form that can serve a variety of social and cultural purposes. By the end of this book you will therefore be familiar with the two central competing models for analysing the social, cultural and political work of advertising and be able to assess the various claims of those two approaches and how they challenge and complicate one another in challenging and productive ways.

The foundations of studying advertising

The first section comprises this introduction and chapters on the formal analysis and history of advertising. The purpose of this first section is to provide you with the basic methods and knowledge needed to make sense of advertising. In Chapter 2, I will guide you through a quick history of advertising through a focus upon four key historical moments: the development of advertising in the context of the industrial revolution; the professionalisation of the industry at the turn of the twentieth century; the reinvention of advertising as a creative practice in the 1950s; and the rise of digital advertising in the twenty-first century. A familiarity with both the changing style of

advertising and the different ways that the practice of advertising has been understood will enable you to place its current forms in context. Chapter 3 complements this historical account by providing a range of approaches to analysing advertisements in terms of semiotic and ideological methods, as well as making sense of how the different media and codes and conventions of the industry can contribute to the final form of advertisements. The intention of this chapter is to provide you with a basic toolkit for explaining the key features of individual examples and the fundamental concepts for talking about the construction and communications of meaning in ads. The reason we begin with this material is so that you have the ability to ground the larger theories of the later chapters in specific examples and therefore will have the means to evaluate how those arguments apply to your own advertising environment. You'll be able to practice and develop the skills introduced in this chapter throughout your studies of advertising.

Advertising and capitalism

The second section of the book will advance an argument that advertising can be best accounted for in relation to the economic context of capitalism. The three chapters in this section address key aspects of Marxist and post-Marxist approaches to advertising that have traditionally been the dominant means for making sense of advertising in Media and Cultural Studies. Chapter 4 begins by introducing the key concepts of 'capitalism' and 'ideology'. After an explanation of why capitalism is absolutely central to any attempt to understand advertising, we will address how the notion of ideology connects the economic idea of capitalism with a wider analysis of society and culture. This connection will be illustrated through the analysis of several examples that illustrate how advertising works as a way to think through our relationship to capitalism and how capitalism is usually presented as a natural and desirable way of life. Chapter 5 develops this mode of analysis further through a sustained engagement with the idea of the 'commodity'. In the context of Marxist approaches to capitalism and advertising, the term 'commodity' refers to a particular understanding of goods that have been separated from their conditions of production. We will consider how advertising functions to inject new meanings into products that are frequently far and beyond any qualities that the objects themselves possess: for example, Coca-Cola ads usually suggest that drinking Coke will lead to happiness. We will then consider how the transformation of goods into commodities sets up the conditions in which the meanings attached to products play a more influential role in purchase decisions than the actual physical qualities of the product involved. Finally, in Chapter 6, we will think about how advertising audiences are construed

in this economic model. This will involve an examination of how audiences for advertising are effectively bought and sold by media producers and how the economic logic of the mass audiences might lead to conservative and conformist media content. Complicating that model, we will also look at the historical segmentation of audiences, as advertisers aspire to reach ever more precise demographic groups for their products to the extent that contemporary advertising is increasingly targeted at individuals using advanced online monitoring technologies. Overall, the Marxist approaches to advertising that inform the chapters in this section contribute to a bleak picture of advertising as a powerful cultural form that uses its ability to persuade the population to produce a profit at the expense of social and cultural awareness.

Art, agency and other complications

In contrast, the third section of this book will take up approaches to advertising informed by cultural industries and cultural studies traditions in order to challenge and complicate those conclusions we draw from the Marxist model alone. The introduction of these alternate perspectives is not meant to be a dismissal of those critical Marxist methods, but rather should be understood as part of a dialectical model: this means that rather than attempt to resolve the contradictions between these competing interpretations, such that one is right and one is wrong, we need to try to hold both in our heads simultaneously. The conflict between the two models speaks to the fact that not just in theory, but also in its actual existence and practice, advertising is a complicated and even internally contradictory practice. In the first chapter of this section, Chapter 7, we will examine the production of advertising from the perspective of those who actually produce it: rather than the faceless monolith that emerges out of Marxist accounts, we will consider the inner complexity, organisational structure and self-perception of the agencies and agents that make advertising. Chapter 8 will expand on this approach to advertising by considering the social status and critical perspective of the advertisements themselves. This will involve an interrogation of the idea of 'creativity' in the context of advertising and the possibilities and limitations of that concept. Building on that discussion, we will investigate the relationship between advertising and art, ask what it is that separates the two categories and explore what it might mean if we were to classify advertising as a form of art with the ability to offer meaningful and critical comment on the world. Chapter 9 closes off this section by taking into account the goals and gratifications that the advertising audience seeks and obtains from advertisements. Looking at the ways that audiences not only interpret advertising, but also use it as a resource for their own ends and even help produce it, this chapter

leads us towards a more nuanced understanding of the audience as active participants, rather than naive dupes. The brief final chapter of the book will then offer an overview of the different arguments and positions staked out in the previous chapter, with a particular emphasis on how the prior material can be considered 'political' and what that means for the study of advertising in a wider social context.

What this book is not about

That then is a quick summary of what this book is about and the different topics that will be touched upon in more detail in the later chapters. However, given the potential for misunderstanding that often arises in the study of advertising, it is also important to clearly state what this book is not about so as to ensure we're all on the same page. First, if it were not already clear from the chapter summaries, this is not a book about how to make ads, at least not in any direct way. While some of the material addressed in this book might very well assist you in the production of advertising, such an outcome is very far from the primary goal of this book, which is really about understanding the role of advertising in wider social and cultural contexts. Moreover, while this book is certainly interested in taking into account how those who make advertising understand what they are doing, this does not mean that we will be beholden to industry-driven perspectives on advertising. For example, in the context of Marketing Studies there are often divisions between mass media advertising and other forms of promotion, such as branding and publicity. Rather than adhering to such distinctions as they are produced and reproduced in industry-led accounts, we will instead be following a more everyday definition of advertising. John Sinclair sums up this position well when he argues that 'when we talk about advertising in everyday life ... we don't bother drawing a line between advertising and other forms of promotion, nor do we distinguish between, say, TVCs [television commercials] and sponsored search results on the internet – it's all just advertising' (Sinclair, 2012, p. 3). As such we will be casting our net more widely than might be common practice in the context of a Marketing or Advertising Studies programme in order to make sense of advertising in the wider context of our media environment and consumer culture.

However, and this is the final point of clarification, this is also not a book about advertising as a generic media form, or a way to approach wider issues in Media and Cultural Studies. Instead, this is a book that aims to address what is most specific to advertising as a form of media and those topics that are most salient to advertising rather than other forms of cultural production. Accordingly, advertising won't be treated as the excuse or the substrate for

other analyses: this means that we won't be looking at wider issues – such as the representation of gender and race, celebrity culture, music, globalisation or humour – as they emerge in advertising. While these are valid and important topics, we'll be focusing on what is particular to advertising: the concerns and questions that are central to advertising or arise with respect to advertising in a particularly pointed way compared to other media forms: these include the imperative to sell, the relation between media and economics, ideas of manipulation and persuasion and the intersection between art and commerce. Advertising is the reason we're here, not a way into other debates and discussion, and so our focus will always be on what is particular to advertising as a medium and cultural form.

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