

Advertising, Language, and Meaning

"The craft of advertising today...has ventured, in fact, into the domain of persuasion, and its rhetorical categories have become omnipresent in contemporary social discourse – i.e. in the content and delivery of the meanings that people living in a society exchange on a daily basis." (Beasley and Danesi 1)

Since mass-marketing campaigns began in the nineteenth century, advertising has evolved from simply being a way to announce a new product or create distinction between different brands to something much more complex and indirect. In the last twenty years in particular, advertising has shifted from a focus on the qualities of a company's products to a focus on engaging consumers in an intimate relationship with the intangible *personality* or *soul* of a brand (Klein 5-8). In order to communicate these ethereal qualities, the language used in advertising attempts to persuade us by tapping in to our deepest personal needs and desires. In addition, the rhetoric of corporate messages is crossing over into other areas of our lives (such as news reports and everyday conversation) and becoming embedded in our psychological environment. I am interested in examining the nature of advertising language, how the meaning of corporate messages is constructed, and how these texts reflect and shape our cultural values. I intend to explore these ideas by remixing language and imagery from ads through algorithmic or rule-based processes, resulting in a series of 2-3 new media art projects that examine the semiotics of advertising from a variety of perspectives. I believe that, through deconstruction and recontextualization, the words and phrases we encounter in ads will lose their sense of "naturalness" or inevitability and viewers will be able to see how advertising uses language to create or manipulate meaning.

My interest in this topic grew out of both my obsession with language and my frustration with corporate power. As I began to think about my thesis this past summer, I started with a very vague, yet potent, anger about the state of American culture. I felt angered by the fact that we have so much prosperity and yet, as a society, we seem to be living in ways that keep us isolated, overworked, unhealthy, and unhappy. As this is an *extremely* broad issue, I spent quite a while trying to find a specific root of these problems that I could

feasibly address in my thesis. I began to focus on corporate power – the fact that huge multinational corporations have so much control over our culture and environment, yet their interests (to make profit) are often in conflict with the needs of the average human being. So, how are we convinced that buying material goods (and thereby satisfying corporate interests) will actually fulfill us and satisfy our own needs? To answer this question, I began to look more closely at advertising. I had already created one project last year that focused on advertising (<http://www.adscape.org>), so I knew that there was something compelling about the topic for me.

Through a deeper analysis of my own motivations, I realized that language and semiotics were the aspects of advertising that I found most interesting. I have always been something of a word geek, having had a fascination with language from a young age. Our family arguments were about grammatical rules (my father taught classes in cryptic crosswords, my mother was an English teacher), I rose in the ranks of the New York City-wide spelling bee as a child, and now, as an adult, I do the New York Times crossword puzzles daily and read books about etymology and grammar for pleasure. I love language and find it endlessly interesting. I think that using language well is an art form, and that it can be extraordinarily powerful as both a tool and a weapon. Hence, I believe that the omnipresent rhetoric of advertising strongly influences what we do and how we think. The words used in ads are both deeply meaningful in that they play upon our desires and values, and yet become corrupted and meaningless when they are being used to sell material comforts. A concept like "community", which is about real connections with others in our lives, is diluted when we also understand "community" to be a quality embodied by a cell phone or an insurance company. In my thesis work, I hope to create a means by which I (and others) can understand how this construction and conflation of meaning occurs.

The first project I am developing is a projection piece that dynamically generates fake ads. The slogans are generated by using language and sentence structures from actual corporate slogans and randomly remixing them. These new slogans are then paired with images from Flickr that are tagged with the words in the slogan, thereby creating a completely new ad (current version of this piece is available at <http://a.parsons.edu/~alloyd/adgen2>). My second project will be composed of a bank of televisions. The televisions will be playing a collection or series of related commercials. For example, all of the televisions will play pharmaceutical ads for two minutes, then car ads for two minutes, etc. As the commercials are playing, random words from that collection will be superimposed on the video images.

Through both of these projects, I intend to create a space where viewers can develop a deeper understanding of the messages they consume, the meaning contained in those messages, and how that meaning is constructed. In the first project, I chose to draw upon images in the Flickr database as a way of connecting the language used in advertising with a visual representation of what people understand that language to mean. In the video project, I chose to group the commercials by topic as a way of showing a composite representation of how ideas about themes like illness, beauty, or technology are conveyed in advertising.

I believe that my thesis is of significance for others because vast numbers of people feel frustrated with and bombarded by the number of corporate messages they are exposed to on a daily basis. As advertising seeps into every nook and cranny of our environment, we have less control over when and where we are exposed to ads. That lack of control is exacerbated by the fact that the consumer's relationship with advertising is an entirely passive one. Since language is such a powerful tool, I think that helping people to view advertising messages from a critical perspective will allow them to gain more control over their mental space, and thereby give them a greater sense of agency in their relationship with advertising and corporate media.

Works Cited:

Beasley, Ron, and Marcel Danesi. Persuasive Signs: the Semiotics of Advertising. New York: Mouton De Gruyter, 2002.

Klein, Naomi. No Logo. 1st Picador USA Ed. ed. New York: Picador, 2000.