

**Advertising and consumer culture.  
Symbolic interpretation and cultural trends**

Arthur Asa Berger, *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture: Advertising's  
Impact on American Character and Society*  
(Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Maryland, 2011)

Andrei-Alexandru IGNIA

Known today as one of the leading scholars in the field of American popular culture, Arthur Asa Berger is one of the first students of the field and his work helped shape the thinking of an entire generation of academics.

Arthur Asa Berger is Professor Emeritus of Broadcast and Electronic Communication Arts at San Francisco State University, where he taught between 1965 and 2003. He has published more than 100 articles, numerous book reviews, and more than 60 books. Among his latest books are: *What Objects Mean: An Introduction to Material Culture* (2009), *The Objects of Our Affection: Semiotics and Consumer Culture* (2010) *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture: Advertising's Impact on American Character and Society* (2011). Arthur Asa Berger manages to translate difficult theories and models into accessible and understandable terms, combining knowledge with personal examples, but also belonging to popular genres film and television.

The first edition of the book *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture* published in 2000 is a criticism of the manner in which advertising influences society. Having been updated to a fourth edition in 2011 rived in 2011 to the fourth edition, the book reaches a significantly improved form Arthur Asa Berger keeps the same structure for reprinting, but each new edition adds information and examples by which to argue and better illustrate his own views.

*Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture* is structured in three main parts, the first part provides information about the transmitter – the advertising agency (budget, organization), the second part – information about receiver – the consumer, and in the third part information about how the message is created and what elements should contain – commercials. This book provides sufficient information to introduce a

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\* Universitatea „Al. I. Cuza”, Iași.

beginner in advertising. To make a complete and comprehensive analysis of an ad, is needed much more information than the author provides.

However, some information is irrelevant. Political advertising treated by the author is not closely related to the subject of the book, and the election campaigns, offered as examples, they cannot show that their success is due solely to political advertising.

“Advertisements sanctify, signify, mythologize, and fantasize” – Katherine Toland Frith, *Undressing the Ad* opens the first chapter with a sentence that manages to describe the whole work of the scholar.

The author analyzes the mechanisms of advertising without assessing if they succeed or not, to influence the average consumer, offering only examples and applied theories, leaving the reader to decide whether advertising has any effect on him. The impact of advertising is well captured by the author, in the fictional story "Lisa's Morning", presented in Chapter 4. A.A. Berger describes a fictional normal day in the life of Lisa, a character that can stand as a benchmark for many young people, who, from the moment she wakes up, starts using several brands but at the end of the day she says that she is not influenced by advertising.

The whole work is built on a metaphor that has a separate meaning and is found in various situations even when the author talks about fashion advertising or political advertising. This metaphor is "Running It Up the flagpole to See the If Anyone Salutes" and the author assigns a chapter to analyse the investment and effort of advertising agencies to "run up the flagpole" and the expectations of consumers. The same simplistic scheme applies to product advertising, they expect that when they advertise it, "people will salute" – by purchasing the product. Even in political advertising, when advertisers pay to have something, "run up a flagpole", they always expect large numbers of people to "salute", to vote.

To understand the effect of advertising, one has to look at each component, which is why Arthur Asa Berger calls into question the work of advertising agencies, functions and salaries of agents, marketing strategies used, use of sex in advertising, neuromarketing or political advertising. Chapters are structured in a pyramidal fashion and provide sufficient information to lead the reader to understand the two case studies of advertising campaigns for Macintosh and Fidji.

The ads or as the author calls them "texts", analyzed at the end of the book are not new. Hundreds, even thousands of ads are produced daily, ads that use advanced techniques, which makes it impossible to analyze what is new. No campaign is designed to have a long life, it suffices if it lasts for a few months, while broadcast space is paid. A

notable exception is perhaps the campaign to "Absolut" which lasted twenty-five years before being changed. The ad for Fidji and Macintosh 1984, are classic reference in the history of advertising because they were very successful and replete in "cultural symbols."

Arthur Asa Berger had developed in his previous book, *Media Analysis Techniques* (1998) a technique for analyzing advertising from four different perspectives. A semiotic interpretation of signs and symbols present in advertising, a psychoanalytic interpretation of the manner in which advertising appeals to the id / ego / superego, a sociological interpretation and Marxist interpretation that seek explanations in terms of capitalism. He applies this type of combine analysis on The Fidji ad, discussed in *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture*, providing academics with an in-depth analysis instrument. For video, the author prefers a different approach and does a frame-by-frame analysis by focusing on a semiotic and psychoanalytic interpretation of the elements used in advertising.

These two examples show how much information, somewhat hidden at first sight, a commercial can have. Although all consumers deny that are influenced by advertising and its effects are hardly measurable, products are bought and investments in advertising are increasing.