

Stuart Ewen

MEMOIRS OF A COMMODITY FETISHISM

Forty-three years ago, when I was a freshman history major at the University of Wisconsin, consumerism, the mass media, and the commercial culture more generally were not yet included within the liberal arts curricula of most colleges and universities. Though these institutions had been leaving tractor marks across the American social landscape for over a century, few historians saw advertising, consumerism, or the apparatus of mass impression as subjects worthy of serious inquiry. Quite the contrary. For many in academia, ignorance about such matters was regarded as a litmus test of intelligence.

This scholastic blind spot posed a problem for me. I was, after all, a child of post-World War II America, a time and place where economic prosperity and television were turning citizens into consumers, living rooms into salesrooms, and advertising into the prevailing vernacular of public address. As a participant-observer at the postwar barbeque, I was both assailed and seduced by a burgeoning visual culture, intimately aware of the ways that it was reshaping the topography of aesthetics and desire. I had seen it first hand. I grew up in a middle class suburban family in a town where competitive consumption was elevated to an art form. Finding a social identity, being "popular" in a peer group determined, in large part, by Papagallo™ shoes and Impala convertibles, was an often anxiety-ridden rite of passage. I had, and still have, a love-hate relationship with consumption.

From early on, even before college, I had an interest in learning of the history that stood behind the emergence of this now familiar new world. Writers, for decades, had criticized and bemoaned the unsettling invasions of commercial culture, but nothing that I learned in school provided me with a tangible interpretation of how twentieth century consumer culture had come into being.

My historical interest in media, consumer culture, and the shadowy arts of persuasion, then, was not the outcome of formal learning. If anything, it was the result of visceral experience. Though—like many of my generation—my social panorama was framed by television, comics, rock and roll, and by the overheated commercialism of the fifties, the sensibilities and aspirations of my parents and grandparents derived from different origins.

Immigrants from Poland and Latvia, my grandparents never fully relinquished their village mentality. They simply relocated it in New

York City. Despite their tenacious bonds with an older world, however, the boil of modernity touched their lives. The last time I saw my mother's father, when I was four, he was working as an usher/ticket taker in an old movie theater. Though scarcely a modern man, he drew his last paychecks from a decidedly modern job. My paternal grandmother never discarded her commitment to an old world, I could smell it when I entered her apartment, but my other grandmother, Anna Scott, was a big movie fan, able to recite the intimate details of Robert Taylor's life from movie magazines that she had read. Still, for all of them, they were grounded in the old neighborhood, in a world of familiars.

My parents, the children of these immigrants, worked hard and successfully to escape their working class roots. Both went to college and both, throughout my childhood, repeatedly declared their scornful aversion for popular culture. My cultural interests, such as they were, were foreign to them, a disappointment. Given their efforts to assume the attributes of "middle class culture," they couldn't help but be mortified by a son whose cultural tastes seemed to have regressed, who watched TV, listened to loud music, and who seemed perfectly satisfied paging through magazines looking at comely sirens, two-tone cars, and other commercial attractions. Whatever ambivalence I might have been developing amidst all of this "time wasting," wherever I might be going with my fascinations, it appeared to them—and to the only grandmother who survived into my teenage years—that I was lost, swallowed up by something awful.

Even before I began to think critically about it, the generational dynamics of my family indicated that the world I was born into—the allurements that seized my attention—had not always been. Arriving at college in 1963, I encountered little in the classroom that offered me details of how the modern "mass culture" had come into being.

The years in Madison, however, were a time of awakening. In and out of the classroom I encountered new ideas, and a world stirred by social activism. History, as a subject, had never really interested me before. At Wisconsin, however, radiant teachers like George Mosse, Harvey Goldberg and William Appleman Williams showed me, along with a whole generation of galvanized students, that the past was more than the names and dates of dead presidents.

Studying history provided me with an opportunity to identify and interpret the forces at play within the world, even those that may not be readily discernible at ground zero. I learned about the power of money, and of global capital, in the making of modern life. I also learned how the lives of ordinary people, though often invisible in the historical record, have played a powerful role in social movements and in the dynamics of great and horrifying social changes. I studied the power of ideology, of systems of belief so compelling, so all-encompassing, that they constitute, for people under their sway, reality. I learned of the political consequences of the cultural realm, of the irrational, and the ways that myths and images may assert a power so great that people, against all reason, may revel in human destruction.

Beyond the classroom, the politics of everyday life were becoming an

issue as well. Mobilized by an expanding civil rights movement, and later by the war in Vietnam, I was becoming an activist. After leaving college for a year, to work as an organizer with the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Mississippi, I returned to Madison in 1965 with a growing sense that commercial culture, and the mass media that trumpet its values, served as a foundation for an increasingly undemocratic political system. In Mississippi, where the people I worked with lived in shacks, the television, and its redundant portrayals of the good life, offered an eloquent picture of the stark contradictions that mired The American Century.

Back in Wisconsin, as IT. S. involvement in Vietnam was escalating, the ideological bent of the commercial media, their role as instruments of consent, became increasingly palpable. The media, I came to believe, needed to become an arena of contestation. I became involved in alternative journalism, publishing an underground newspaper—called Connections—in which the critiques of the consumer culture, and the renunciation of spectatorship, were defining themes. On its masthead was the phrase "dedicated to remaining underground rather than being buried above ground," affirming the conviction that the "spectacular commodity society," as Guy DuBord termed it, was a barrier to participatory democracy. Reading Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man*, which dissected the ways that corporate capitalism infused every aspect of daily life, down to the language we speak, only invigorated this view. In my activities as a new left pamphleteer, and in my ongoing study of history, these were the issues that shaped my intellectual development.

At the same time, however, there was something about Marcuse and the Frankfurt School that disturbed me. Despite their profound critique of American mass culture, there was a decidedly European and elitist quality to their writings. While many of my history student friends in Wisconsin pursued advanced degrees in European intellectual history, connecting to the world of Marcuse and his peers, I was committed to engaging the American experience more directly. As I began graduate school at the University of Rochester, American history, and the history of American consumer culture became my passion.

Two teachers, very different in outlook, informed my work. One was Herbert Gutman, an avuncular social historian who, in his studies of working people in slavery and freedom, saw ordinary people as the authors of their own lives. While he found my perspective on the ways that corporate ideology leavened the popular imagination to be misguided, his insistence that society is a battleground, not an iron cage, has stayed with me. Gutman also introduced me to E. P. Thompson's "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," a brilliant essay that highlighted the extent to which nineteenth century capitalism, more than an economic system, encompassed a new perceptual universe that sought to eradicate earlier ways of seeing. This essay left a deep mark on me, and I continue to assign it to my own graduate students.

The other was Loren Baritz, whose interest in the history of American elites supported my research into the ideas of the men and women who

pioneered in the creation of a twentieth century merchandising culture. Tips from Baritz led me to *Printers' Ink*, the advertising trade journal, also to the writings of Edward Bernays, as well as many other sources that still haunt the bibliographies of my writings.

Baritz also encouraged me to reject many of the rules that shaped graduate studies in history at the time and, to a large extent, continue to. One was the "fifty year rule," which advised historians against approaching subjects that were too contemporary. Another was the canon directing graduate students to write "small" doctoral dissertations, narrowly focused monographs that began with a review of existing literature and which, in the pages that followed, made an original, if usually minor, contribution to the history of an already existing field. Big books were for senior historians, people who had earned their stripes. A third injunction was against "popularizing," writing for a general audience. Academic history, at its best, should be of interest primarily to other historians. Most importantly, Baritz was enthusiastic about my interest in studying the history of mass consumption and advertising, fields that did not yet exist. My approach, questioning the ruling faiths of American society and exploring advertising as an instrument of power, was connected to issues he had written about in his book *Servants of Power*.

For his research seminar in 1969, I wrote a paper entitled "Advertising as Social Production," a paper that delved into the ways that a number of early twentieth businessmen—forward-thinking capitalists like Edward Filene, along with architects of modern advertising—looked to "consumptionism," as business strategist Christine Frederick termed it, as the salve that would tranquilize working class militancy while, at the same time, expanding the prosperity of business. This paper eventually became the first part of *Captains of Consciousness*.

While many of the professors in the history department thought I was smart but loony—a perception fortified by my involvement in a guerrilla theater stunt wherein General Maxwell Taylor, of the Joint Chiefs, was presented with a pig's head—I was energized by the enthusiastic response of many fellow graduate students. The paper caused a stir for its novel subject matter and for its critical approach, *Beyond Rochester*, it was being read, and was soon published, and then anthologized. I was twenty-four and, with the help of my most influential teacher, Elizabeth Ewen, I was ready to write, not a dissertation as usually conceived, but a book about a subject that—at least outside of the academy—was of undeniable interest.

Doing research in the Widener Library and the Baker Business Library (both at Harvard), I felt like a spy, following a mass consumer culture, and the commercial propaganda machinery that propelled it, in the making. What blew me away, what still blows me away, was the extent to which the people I was uncovering—who never expected their words to be scrutinized except by their peers—were remarkably candid about their thoughts and intentions. As innovators, people formulating ideas and inventing practices that only in time would become routine, many were also exceptionally conscious of their moment in history, and of their

objectives in relation to that history. Writing from the vantage point of the early nineteen seventies, where psychologically charged advertising was an unequivocal fact of life, one needed to look backward, to a period of origination, in order to better understand the present.

Oddly, given the ubiquity of its subject matter, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*, published in 1976, became the first scholarly history to critically evaluate advertising and consumer culture as defining forces in American life. In three sections, the book examined the roots of modern advertising in the early twentieth century, and explored the social, intellectual and economic forces that propelled its development. Rather than looking at advertisements one by one, individual attempts to sell a product or service, the book approached advertising overall, as a widely iterated commentary on issues of want and desire, a new philosophical system, a pivotal medium by which a new, consumerist way of life was shaped, depicted, communicated, and sold.

It also looked at advertising as it embodied more expansive business goals, as a pivotal way that American corporations responded to, adjusted to, and exploited the social conditions, economic consequences, and new ways of seeing that emerged with the rise of a mass production system. Mass production required mass consumption and a growing number of businessmen, I found, were beginning to speak of the ways that human instinct needed to be mobilized to turn consumption into an inner compulsion. The extent to which mass consumption and advertising were seen as a business response to the perceived threat of socialism was also explored.

Advertising also provided a fascinating window through which one could see capitalism shifting from an economy defined primarily by production, as it was in the nineteenth century, to one that over the course of the twentieth would increasingly be defined by consumption. The virtual disappearance of the factory from corporate imagery, and the conscious cultivation of emotional links between corporate goods and the personal lives of consumers, provided a clairvoyant snapshot of the world to come. The book also posed questions about the ways that advertising helped to establish prevailing models of the self, the family, and the "good life" in American consumer society. The ways that advertising helped to alter customary notions of truth and public expression were also probed. Though research for the book was limited, for the most part, to the years between 1900-1930, its thesis, and my conscious intent, was to explore the dream life of the twentieth century. Unlike much historical writing, *Captains* was audacious, impassioned, overtly political, and—in ways that implied where I would need to go in future research and writing—unfinished. It also quickly gathered an audience.

Attacked by editorials and articles in *Advertising Age*, the book was widely reviewed and became an academic best seller. Cutting across disciplines it was adopted as a required text in classes ranging from history to sociology, to communications and marketing. As people in the visual arts became increasingly conscious, and uneasy, about advertising as the preeminent public art form, art and art history

programs also assigned the book.

From the time it was published, *Captains of Consciousness* attracted both notice and controversy. It was praised in *Newsweek* and other prominent newspapers and magazines, but it was also widely denounced. It received a "Best Business Book" award from the *Library Journal* which, only a few issues before, had savaged the book. It was named an "Outstanding Academic Book" by *Choice* magazine, while its objectivity was questioned and its "Marxist" disposition was often cited as grounds for immediate dismissal. Marshall McLuhan sent passages to Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, while *The Birmingham News* reviewer declared that "the book is mostly junk."

Captains clearly resonated for many people. Though a book about history, it was recognizable, offering a look at some of the ideas and actions that had given rise to a world that they knew. Though I did not expect this book, written while I was in my twenties, to install me as a founder of the field, I was not completely shocked by people's interest. In spite of inbred academic evasions, its subject was conspicuous, in need of a history. At a moment when the prevailing structures of American power were widely being questioned, and sacred cows were on the dinner menu of a generation, its combative sensibility was also faithful to its time.

In staking out an academic subject matter of wide interest, and offering a critical perspective about a subject that people tend to have strong feelings about, *Captains of Consciousness* had the salutary effect of countenancing a generation of young—and a few older—scholars to address the questions that it had opened. In universities, and other public forums, advertising and the paradigms of consumer ideology were becoming central to the ways that American society was being interpreted and understood. Fortuitously, *Captains* was among the first books to bring these issues to the stage of intellectual life, something that has often made it an underpinning, or a target, for subsequent work.

In the late 1970s and early eighties, a body of historical and sociological writing on advertising and consumer culture began to appear. Judith Williamson's *Decoding Advertisements*, published in England in 1978, used semiotics to explore the construction of meaning in contemporary advertising. In 1983, *The Making of Modern Advertising* (1983), by Daniel Pope, offered a more detailed picture of the industry than I had drawn. An anthology, *The Culture of Consumption*, edited by Richard Fox and Jackson Lears, also appeared in 1983. Throughout the 1980s, the literature on advertising grew. Roland Marchand's *Advertising the American Dream*, an excellent book, Bill Leiss, Stephen Kline and Sut Jhally's *Social Communication in Advertising*, and Michael Schudson's *Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion*, all appeared between 1984 and 1986. AH cited *Captains*, but Schudson's was a rancorous counterattack. Arguing that *Captains* was "naive" and "without... historical foundation," Schudson's was a syrupy polemic on behalf of advertising and—at the same time—an argument that advertising has had little influence on American society. The public differences between us comprised one of the first academic debates over the role of advertising in American life.

Less venomous than Schudson's in its assault, Lears' opening essay in *The Culture of Consumption*, subtitled "Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture," may have appropriated its cadence from the subtitle of *Captains*, "Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture," but also took time to elevate itself above the erroneous assumption that I and historian Daniel Boorstin, in his book *The Image*, brought to the subject of advertising:

The few historians who have addressed the subject in recent years tend to fall into two opposing camps, best represented by Daniel Boorstin and Stuart Ewen. Boorstin thoughtfully sketches some moral and emotional dilemmas in the culture of consumption, but he ignores power relations. . . . Ewen, on the other hand, can see nothing but power relations. To him the consumer is the product of a conspiracy hatched by corporate executives in the bowels of the Ministry of Truth, then imposed with diabolical cleverness on a passive population. Neither Ewen nor Boorstin grasps the complex relationship between power relations and changes in values—or between advertisers' changing strategies and the cultural confusion at the turn of the century.

When one looks beneath such protests, much of Lears' work on advertising has been an offshoot of my own, but his characterization of *Captains* as "conspiracy" theory, an accusation that has been reiterated by some others, merits a brief response. I am not one to assume that conspiracies have played no role in history, or that propagandists have never been involved in them, but what I presented in *Captains of Consciousness* was not the story of a conspiracy. Rather it was a review of business thinking during the time that mass production was taking hold and modern advertising was being developed, and it revealed the extent to which a broad number of business leaders were harboring similar thoughts. This is not conspiracy, it's the history of ideas. The book simply recorded the evolving consciousness of a number of American business people, in different quarters, during a period of social, economic and strategic transition. That their conceits dovetailed is not because they plotted in some Ministry of Truth. It only indicates that they faced common problems and, using available tools, were conceiving congruous responses to their world. The innovations of individuals seldom occur in a vacuum.

That their inventions were spontaneously "imposed on a passive population" was never my argument, and the overtly political disposition of my book, and of my later writings, assumes that the population is not only capable of resisting, but must resist the miasma of commercialism when it threatens to inundate other ways of seeing and imagining. It also assumes that, at times, people are capable of being persuaded, or seduced, even against their own best interests.

Captains of Consciousness was, without question, a spiritual child of 'the sixties.' The passion as well as the attacks it attracted cannot be divorced from the fervent feelings are still inspired by that time. This intrinsic connection to arguments that continue to define American social, cultural and political life may explain why it has remained of interest to readers. A new edition is currently in preparation. In an age where the shelf life of books is most often brief, this endurance is gratifying, but it

is also a testament to the fact that its subject matter has become an increasingly pervasive and, for many, problematic element of life.

While my interest in commercial culture, and in the dynamics of power, perseveres, I've undergone a number of intellectual changes since *Captains* first appeared. In terms of research and writing, I've become more and more interested in the question of visual eloquence, the ways that images—even in silence—converse with people, and vice versa. *Channels of Desire* (1982; 1992), a book of essays written with my running mate Liz Ewen, took us beyond advertising, into people's encounters with a range of visual media (movies, fashion, even labels on cans of evaporated milk) to better understand the social and psychological meaning of consumption. *All Consuming Images* (1988; 1999) investigated architecture, corporate logos, industrial design, product packaging and body ideals as historical focal points, places where complex issues of social power—in different ways in different times—take on the apparent simplicity of beauty. In *PR! A Social History of Spin*, I revisited some concerns addressed in my first book, focusing on the rise of public relations which is closely connected to advertising.

Some of what I learned researching *PR!* would have made *Captains of Consciousness* a more complete and, perhaps to its detriment, much longer book. My readings into the rise of social psychology, commencing with Gustave LeBon's *The Crowd*, would have provided me with a more penetrating picture of what advertising people of the twenties meant when they spoke of their desire to organize the instincts. Research into the propaganda bureau established during the First World War, the Committee on Public Information, would have explained how a national persuasion industry was jump-started, and why advertising specialists of the twenties were so at ease with the idea of molding other people's minds. My investigation of the National Association of Manufacturers' "American Way" campaign, or of the 1939 World's Fair, would have added strength and depth to my section on the political ideology of consumption.

Since the mid-seventies, when *Captains* was published, the global reach of American commercial culture has only accelerated. In the eighties, commercialism mushroomed into as a vehement global religion. Where advertising once inhabited circumscribed arenas—television, radio, newspapers, magazines, billboards—today nearly every moment of human attention is being converted into an occasion for a sales pitch, while notions of the "public interest" and non-commercial arenas of expression are under assault.

In the wake of these developments, it is encouraging that a growing number of people, crossing disciplines, are making various aspects of media and popular culture the subject matter of study. While much in the fields of media and cultural studies fails to address the dynamics of corporate power in the modern world, students today are more likely than in the past to be learning about the social history of the mass media and the elements of cultural experience—commercial and otherwise—that mark life at the onset of the twenty-first century. Within such inquiries, issues such as the consolidation of media ownership, the powerful role of perception management in today's society, and the steady

commercialization of nearly every human experience will, by force of circumstance, increasingly come to the fore.

These developments, corresponding with my experiences as a teacher, have had a deep effect on how I think about the work I do, and about the issues and politics of culture. If, in the seventies, the critical exegesis of consumer society seemed an appropriate response to the world, from the early eighties onward I've become increasingly concerned with the pivotal importance of reinvigorating the public sphere, moving beyond the boosterism of a business-driven culture and deepening the possibility of meaningful public discussion.

I am convinced that for us, and for our students, the critical study of media and society needs to be integrated with strategies for enriching and broadening the quality of public expression. In many ways this fusion is a descendent of objectives that have been central to the rise of democratic movements over the past couple of centuries, those of universal literacy and public education.

Historically, links between literacy and democracy are inseparable from the notion of an informed populace, conversant with the issues that touch upon their lives, enabled with tools that allow them to participate actively in public deliberation and social change. Nineteenth century struggles for literacy and education were never limited to the ability to read. They were also about learning to write, and thus about expanding the number and variety of voices heard in published interchanges and debates. Literacy was about crossing the lines that had historically separated "men of ideas" from ordinary people, about the social enfranchisement of those who had been excluded from the compensations of citizenship.

This is palpable in the life of Frederick Douglass who repeatedly recounted an incident from his childhood, where the mistress of the plantation where he was a slave carelessly began teaching him to read. When discovered, she was severely reprimanded by her husband. She had, as Douglass explained it, violated "the true philosophy of slavery, and the peculiar rules necessary to be observed by masters and mistresses, in the management of their human chattels." From this episode a "painful mystery" was unravelled for Douglass, it explained to him the way that enforced illiteracy buttressed "the white man's power to perpetuate the enslavement of the black man." Douglass took this lesson and, running away from slavery to the North, became not only a reader but, more importantly, a writer, the leading black abolitionist. The written word was the primary tool of public knowledge and, in the 19th century, literacy was essential for the voices of African-Americans became part of the anti-slavery debate. Today these issues remain, yet the terrain of literacy has significantly changed. Those of us engaged in media education need to take the lead in rethinking and regenerating the demand for universal literacy. In the final chapter of *PR! "The Public and Its Problems: Some Notes for the New Millennium,"* I addressed this concern directly.

In a society where instrumental images are employed to petition our

affections at every turn—often without a word—educational curricula must...encourage the development of tools for critically analyzing images. Going back some time, the language of images has been well known to people working in the field of opinion management. For democracy to prevail, image making as a communicative activity must be understood by ordinary citizens as well. The aesthetic realm—and the enigmatic ties linking aesthetic, social, economic, political, and ethical values—must be brought down to earth as a subject of study.

The development of curricula in media and visual literacy will not only sharpen people's ability to decipher their world, but it will also contribute to a broadening of the public sphere. Literacy is never just about reading; it is also about writing. Just as early campaigns for universal print literacy were concerned with democratizing the tools of public expression—the written word—upcoming struggles for media literacy must strive to empower people with contemporary implements of public discourse: video, graphic arts, photography, computer-assisted journalism and layout, and performance. More customary mainstays of public expression—expository writing and public speaking—must be resuscitated as well.

Media literacy cannot simply be seen as a vaccination against PR or other familiar strains of institutionalized guile. It must be understood in an education in techniques that can democratize the realm of public expression and will magnify the possibility of meaningful public interactions. Distinctions between publicist and citizen, author and audience, need to be broken down. Education can facilitate this process. It can enlarge the circle of who is permitted—and who will be able—to interpret and make sense of the world.

Practically, such concerns have become central to my creative work and my teaching over the past twenty years. As a kid, and into my twenties, I passed a good deal of time making pictures. It was something we did in my family. In the mid-sixties, my belief in the need to work and experiment with visual form affected the look and feel of the underground newspaper *Connections*. As I pursued and completed my graduate work, however, and in my early years of teaching, I put this part of me aside, focusing on critical writing and research, and preparing new courses.

By the early eighties, however, I felt compelled to return to a more multi-media approach to expression. Partly it was therapeutic. I found, and find, image-making, and the creative blending of word and image, more pleasurable than the austere activity of writing. But the shift was also a result of my first decade of teaching, where I observed the ways that critical analysis, in the absence of alternative media making, often left students feeling cynical and voiceless.

On a personal level, I dreamed up an alter ego, Archie Bishop, whose work as a graphic artist, photographer, pamphleteer, multimedia prankster, and political situationist has occupied a good part of my life since 1980. It began with an individual political art project, called *Billboards of the Future*, weekly photocopied flyers, handed out on the street, posted on walls, distributed by mail, offering visual commentary

on the mental and political afflictions of Reaganism.

My penchant for visual recreation carried over to book-writing as well. Starting with *All Consuming Images*, my books have included a number of Archie's visual pieces, though within their pages I never acknowledged the extent to which he and I were related. A current book project that I'm working on with Liz Ewen, a social history of stereotypes in 19th and 20th century America, will be even more visual in nature.

By the mid-1990s, Billboards of the Future became more collective and, together with students and assorted friends, I began organizing large-scale street installations, about one a year, beginning with "Gravestones for Democracy" in 1995. That exhibit turned a city block into a spooky visual springboard for a month and a half of demonstrations against budget cuts that were hitting the City University of New York (Hunter College and The CUNY Graduate Center), where I teach.

For me, the line separating classroom from society, interpretation from activity, needs to be broken down. Done from the armchair or the ivory tower, media study can be a frustrating journey. It wanders, for the most part, along two meandering roads.

Along one, a fixation on the power and seductions of the commercial media system inflames a sense of impotence and paranoia. Along the other, which eulogizes the pleasures and routines of media reception, a way of seeing has emerged that confuses individual interpretations of media "texts" with the exercise of creative freedom. At day's end, both roads retreat from the notion of informed public discussion as a fundamental democratic objective.

My intellectual and creative ventures, as well as my concerns with contemporary media scholarship, are mirrored in my undergraduate and graduate teaching. In both arenas, I work to couple thoughtful social analysis with assignments that are designed to hone students' capacity to communicate ideas eloquently and publicly in a variety of media. This is little more than a small-scale attempt to educate twenty-first century pamphleteers, people who are conscious of the issues of their time, committed to enlivening public awareness, and pragmatically familiar with the contemporary tools of public address.

Although the preceding narrative has taken the form of an abbreviated intellectual autobiography, it cannot be understood as simply a personal story. I was part of the first generation of students who felt urgency around the need to face the media question.

Our intellectual and creative choices reflected the social facts of the second half of the 20th century and the fateful challenges posed for those who, in a world where more and more people are touched by the media yet fewer and fewer control the pipelines of persuasion, ponder the fate of democracy. That the issues of advertising and consumer culture, along with politics and economics of modern media systems, have become so paramount as subjects of study is an unavoidable consequence of our time. How we continue to respond to these issues, critically and through social action, provides a compelling agenda for the future.

Memoirs of a commodity fetishism. Forty-three years ago, when I was a freshman history major at the University of Wisconsin, consumerism, the mass media, and the commercial culture more generally were not yet included within the liberal arts curricula of most colleges and universities. Though these institutions had been leaving tractor marks across the American social landscape for over a century, few historians saw advertising, consumerism, or the apparatus of mass impression as subjects worthy of serious inquiry. Quite the contrary. For many in academia, ignorance about such matters was rega Commodity Fetishism is the tendency to attribute to commodities (including money) a power that really inheres only in the labor expended to create commodities. Karl Marx turns to fetishism to make sense of the apparently magical quality of the commodity: "A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" (1867: 163). What is, in fact, a social relation between people (between capitalists and exploited laborers) instead assumes "the fantastic form of a relation between things" (165). This situation occurs because in a capitalist society the real producers of commodities remain largely invisible.