PROMOTIONAL CULTURE

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> The division of labour, from which so many advantages are derived...is the necessary, though very slow and gradual,consequence of a certain propensity in human nature which has in view no such extensive utility; the propensity to truck, barter and exchange.
>
> Adam Smith

> The wealth of modern societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an immense collection of comodities.
>
> Karl Marx

> In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.
>
> Guy Debord

1: Promotion and culture

With the industrialisation of publishing in the late nineteenth century, "writing" wrote Innis "becomes a device for advertising advertising."[1] Most immediately, the great Canadian media historian was thinking of newspapers, circulation wars, and the role of Hearst-type journalism in promoting ads for industrialism's new consumer goods. But he also had in mind the growth of the publishing industry's own promotional needs, by virtue of which even serious and seemingly autonomous forms of writing became deeply tangled up in the advertising function as well. Hence the enhanced

"importance of names" a marked tendency in all corners of the literary market towards topicality, faddism, and sensation.

Nor was Innis only concerned with print. As scattered references to other media make clear,[2] his aphorism was intended as a broader comment on the fate of commercialised "writing" in all its forms. In that light, the (Victorian) assimilation of literature to advertising on which he focussed can be read as a figure for a longer-term structural tendency — one that culminated in his own day with the rise to cultural power of a multi-media communications complex that was more saturated with promotion than the one it had technologically surpassed.

The main purpose of the following reflections that follow is to see to what extent Innis's point can, in fact, be pushed. Summarily expressed, the thesis I want to explore is that North American culture has come to present itself at every level as an endless series of promotional messages; that advertising, besides having become a most powerful institution in its own right, has been effectively universalised as a signifying mode; and that this development goes far to explain such characteristic features of the contemporary ("post-modern") cultural field as its pre-occupation with style, its self-referentialism, its ahistoricity, and its vacuous blend of nihilism and good cheer.

So totalistic a formulation, in line with the exhausted character of our age, may seem to imply historical closure. If so, that is not my intent, which is simply to disentangle one aspect of modern society's culturo-economic logic, and, for the moment, leave other levels of determination (and contradiction) to one side. Even in itself, moreover, the rise of a promotionally dominated culture has not been exactly conflict free. As the "ideological" revolt of the sixties attests, the structural shift in the relation of culture to economy with which the rise of promotion has been associated has brought new tensions and, indeed, new opportunities for the formation of an emancipatory will.

It would be wrong, at the same time, to overcorrect. Movements can die from the attention they seek. Where all the channels have been colonised by exchange, the most oppositional discourse gets easily blunted and the Novum itself ("the Revolution," as we used to say) rapidly becomes just one more (self-)promotional sign.[3] What is true for radical action, moreover, is truer still for radical thought. Publication means publicity, and these very words, in being published, cannot avoid being part of what they seek to overcome.

One last opening remark. In contemporary usage, "advertising," "publicity," and "promotion" have become virtually interchangeable. But if their referents are the same their ways of grasping the concepts are not, and for present purposes, as the title of this piece indicates, I have a marked preference for the latter of these terms.

"Advertising" is literally the act of catching someone's attention; and "publicity" (Berger's term from the French[4]) emphasizes the quality of ob-

trusive visibility. Both are descriptive labels that approach the phenomenon from the concept of reception — without reference to the whole backstage circuitry of distribution and exchange to which its existence, as a prominent form of communication, is fundamentally tied. The word "promotion," by contrast, is abstractly operational and in its derivation (from the Latin *pro-movere*) conveys very precisely the sense of what promotion/advertising/publicity actually does: it at once anticipates, stands for and propels forwards those other circulating entities to which its messages severally refer.

In addition, more than in the case of its terminological rivals, modern usage has stretched "promotion" to cover not just ads as such but the whole field of public relations, including religious and political propaganda, as well as the more informal kinds of boosterism practiced in everyday life. In an analysis concerned with stressing the growth of salesmanship not just within but beyond the strictly commercial sphere, this greater generality provides a second ground of choice.

The enlarged referential meaning of "promotion" corresponds, in short, to the phenomenon's real expansion in the world, which in turn corresponds to "the penetrative powers of the price-system"[5] and to the spread of analogous relations into every aspect of social life. The end result has been the emergence of an all-pervasive configuration that might fittingly be called promotional culture. In posing the question of this complex's meaning, logic, and constitutive power let me now retrace the movement that brought it into being, along with the ever more convoluted forms of expression to which the extensions of promotion have cumulatively given rise.

2: Commodities and Communication

The spectacular development of advertising as a distinct apparatus, and the wider permeation of culture by promotion ultimately derive from the primordial characteristic of commodity that its classical theorists, from Adam Smith to Karl Marx, tended to overlook: the dependence of any money-mediated market on a functionally specific type of communication. For goods and money to exchange, information must be exchanged also. Buyers must know what is for sale, when, where, and at what price, and sellers must know what goods can be marketed and on what terms.

In the pre-capitalist case, where production and distribution are local and communication is face-to-face, this double exchange of commodities and information takes place all at once, at the point of sale. The designated site for such activity — the Roman forum, the Turkish bazaar, the Medieval fair — typically has the added character of a public institution for general social intercourse. But this coincidence of functions should not be misread. Whether it is street vendors crying their wares or ancient textile traders haggling over price and supply, the informational aspect of the

market always has its own modalities and represents a form of social practice in itself.

The second circuit, like the first, is formally constituted as a system of exchange, but there is also a crucial difference. For even in the primitive case, where the two processes overlap, each act of money/goods exchange is consummated at once, whereas the two moments of information exchange are typically separated in time. Information about supply precedes purchase, but information about demand remains incomplete until the purchase is complete. Besides making it possible for each half of the information transaction to go its own specialised way(in modern parlance: advertising and market research), this difference also means that, however perfect the market, the communicative relation will tend to favour the vendor. For the latter gives mere assurance, but on completion of the sale gets hard data in return. The old tag "buyer beware" signposts this inequality, whose significance is not exhausted by the bad deals to which it may evidently lead.

From the earliest days of capitalist development, as commodity production begins to expand, ousting natural economy and involving local markets in a far-flung nexus of trade, the communicative activity associated with it not only expands as well but also undergoes a number of qualitative changes whose effect is to actualise the latent imbalance just sketched out.

First, the greater the distance of goods from their market the more that information about them has likewise to be communicated from afar. While this by no means abolishes either retail activity or the face-to-face ("oral") culture that surrounds it, the more geographically extended the market the more such direct forms of information exchange become only the endpoints in a chain of communication whose decisive links are anything but face-to-face. In the Old World the steady displacement of localised culture began in the "age of discovery" with printing and the port town shipping manifests that were the forerunner of the modern newspaper. Since then, the ever-widening market has stimulated technical improvements in communications to the point where, with telegraph and telephone, the movement of information has become materially independent of the movement of people and tangible goods.[6] But even at an earlier stage — where information had to travel via ship, horse, and handbill — the impact of geographically extended trade on commercial communication was rupturable. Gone was the simple overlap of commodity and information exchange, leaving the latter free (within the limits of its economic function) to develop a luxuriant life of its own.

As a further consequence of de-localisation the two halves of the information transaction — that is, from the sides of demand and supply — themselves begin to split, and in doing so their social character as communication likewise begins to diverge. The largerand more dispersed the market, the more that sales information, as advertising, becomes anony-

mously public. Information provided by the buyer, on the other hand, in the first instance as raw sales data, increasingly comes to have a private character as privileged communication within and between the profit-making enterprises involved.

With this step, finally, the whole circuit of commercial communication comes under the singular control of those who control supply — wherewith its very quality as exchange begins to disappear. No doubt the reception of print-age advertising, as of commercial broadcasting later on, was never wholly passive; and, on the other hand, the acquisition of demand information must always start with the consumer's own wants and needs. But a system in which data about the latter is appropriated by the same agency which transmits the self-interested messages constituting the former is clearly unilateral, implying a monopoly of knowledge where it does not, in any case, rest on a monopoly in the goods being sold.

At the level of media history it was the establishment of the popular press (the first regular American daily was the New York Sun in the 1830s) combined with the growing use of social statistics[7] which first brought such a system into being, paving the way for the more general establishment in this century of a media environment that has been flatly described as "speech without response."[8] Response, in the dialogical sense, has in effect now been replaced by feedback which, at the alienated limit — in the mute and automatic form of sales curves, product testing, and polls — merely registers the effects of a promotional monologue spoken from elsewhere into the dispersed vacuumland of mass opinion and taste.

3: Mass Production and Managed Demand

The precondition for this and the more general emergence of promotion as a distinct cultural force was industrialisation, or more precisely: the development of a capital intensive manufacturing sector, corporately organised and oriented to the mass-production of finished consumer goods.

Beginning in the early nineteenth century with food, clothing, and patent medicines, and then moving on to furniture, kitchen appliances, cars, and leisure goods, mass production methods swept through the capitalist economy like a wave, each advance representing at once a new incursion of standardised production into the needs structure of everyday life, a new substitute for domestic labour, and a new way to capitalise on the demands and desires (e.g., for relief from stress and for perpetual youth) created by the exigencies of industrial re-organization itself. Setting aside other dimensions of this complex shift to consumer capitalism,[9] its most important implications for the development of promotion can be summarized as follows.

First, (and most obviously,) mass production, implies mass consumption which, in turn, implies mass distribution and mass marketing. In this new ensemble, advertising in fact comes to play a strategic economic role.

For if industrial technology vastly increases the productivity of labour it also increases competitive risk by tying up the larger amounts of capital that have to be invested in each phase of the production cycle. Capitalists in the industrial age have thus become faced with a recurrent problem of surplus realisation; and this has required a sustained effort, on their part, to ensure that the ever greater abundance of manufactured goods gets to market and then actually gets to be sold.[10]

The obstacles to be overcome are both physical and cultural. Concerning the former, distribution and marketing must be organized on a trans-regional scale. Concerning the latter, the demand for what is being mass-produced must be continuously cultivated among the population reached by the manufacturer. Hence with mass production not only does the information circuit associated with commodity exchange undergo a prodigious expansion — to the point where it becomes a major industry in itself — but it is also forced to become pro-active. Manufacturers must survey consumers to know what they are likely to buy before production begins; and for the flow of any existing product, the requisite demand must be created or at least channelled so as to absorb available supply.

The cybernetic circularity of advertising and market research, each systematically complementing the other in the manipulative practices of the modern advertising agency, is a familiar target of humanist critique.[11] But questions of freedom aside, the paradox represented by the very existence of such a system for demand management is also worth pondering.

In effect, the larger our productive capacity, the higher the proportion of resources that have to be devoted to the "non-productive" domains of distribution and exchange. According to Stuart Ewen,[12] over 40% of the cost of producing assembly-line automobiles in the boom years of the twenties was spent on the dealerships and advertising campaigns used to market them once they left the plant. In the contemporary fragrance industry, this figure rises to over 90 per cent. Overall, in consequence, an obsessively productivist form of economy has made consumption its most salient objective, while the enhanced power of its productive apparatus has been expressed in the even greater development of its communications apparatus which, though parasitic on profits of the former, has in fact become the most mass-productive sector of all.

A second cluster of implications concerns the nature of advertising itself, both with respect to its rhetorical mode and in the changed relation ads have come to bear to the goods they are meant to promote.

The fact that mass produced consumables have to be continually offloaded, that they must compete with the virtually identical products of their rivals, and that product promotion and innovation, the conquest of new markets, requires constant consumer education to break the hold of old habits, all mean that advertising in the age of mass production must go far beyond the mere provision of notice and information if those products are to sell. This excess of meaning primarily condenses in that

panoply of images commodities are laboriously given to maximise their consumer appeal.

This is not to say that earlier forms of advertising were always purely and neutrally informative. Sales talk, however simple, immediate, and low-key, has always had a demonstrative element (Hey you! This is for sale...), and the practice of hyping and profiling the wares had its origins in the street cries, store signs, and carnival pitches of petty commodity traders long before J. Walter Thompson turned it into a corporate art.[13] The pre-industrial Molly Malone, we may recall, sang — sang! — about her shell-fish and took good care,as in any modern jingle, to emphasise their saleable quality of praeternatural freshness.

The specific novelty of modern advertising lies not in its mere departure from some foresaken rationalist norm but, first, in the way that its demonstrative function has expanded to the point where buy-me signs get to be posted not just at the point of sale but everywhere; and, secondly, in the particular kind of non-reason to which these signs make appeal. In the image-making companies of Madison Avenue, advertising moves beyond hard sell insistence on the product's performative qualities, beyond even simile (Bovril: as strong and nutritious as the ox from which it is supposedly made) to the stage of outright symbolic identification. It follows that a cultural threshold is also reached: by representing the product as the embodiment of some existing cultural or psychological value — Coke is it; Pepsi the choice of a new generation — modern mass promotion at once etherealises the product and turns it into a cultural totem.

From this momentous change in advertising technique a number of consequences follow. At a textual level, advertising messages have become less verbal, discursive, and argumentative, and more figurative, allusive, and pictorial. Without discounting radio (whose use of narrative word-pictures allows it to function as a kind of visual medium at one remove), the most prominent advertising media have therefore been visual — from bill-boards and magazines to TV — for which the crucial technical breakthrough, more than a century and a half ago, was the development of photography, together with related improvements in the capacity of printing to mass-reproduce graphic design.

The visual ad, at once a mirror and a screen for the consumer's own projections, achieves a power and economy that the abstractions of verbal language can never match. Its main trope is metaphor, and its motivational force relies less on persuasion than on mimetic magic: we are invited to want the product as a way to re-unite with our fantasy selves. To gain this effect, the visual ad places at its signifying centre a euphoric, connotationally saturated image of the product proferred for sale; an image that is at once naturalistic (or at least set among images we will recognise as "real") and symbolically endowed, so that we will read the verbal and pictorial references to the product as signifiers in turn for the myth or desire the product is made to connote.[14]

Multiplied a million-fold and considered at the level of the whole culturescape, the effect has not only been our ubiquitous encirclement by messages enjoining us to buy, but our sensory implication in a fantastic web of signification which, before our very eyes, duplicates and reduplicates the very commodities it presents for sale. Everyday life, without the exertion that a trip to the stores would normally involve, has in this way come to resemble one long and semi-continuous round of window-gazing. And overall, to use Situationist phraseology, advanced capitalism has given rise to a "society of the spectacle," culturally constituted by that "immense flotation of signs" which the machinery of commercial promotion has been driven to generate and set into general circulation.[15]

The signs which so circulate, be it noted, are themselves signs of signs. For the commodity which industrial promotion insistently represents as the image of a myth becomes mythic in the actually imagined relation the purchasing consumer has with it. What this means is that modern promotion effectively joins together two distinct signifying chains — those denoting products and those connoting values — and that both of these domains, stylised and conventionalised to render them fit for mainstream consumption, come to circulate via the same messages and the same media channels.

Advertising thus comes to serve as a major transmission belt for ideology. But ideology itself undergoes an important change to the same extent. The closed system of loaded concepts is replaced by the moving code of the ultra-conventional; and in the discontinuous kaleidescope of endless ads the components of this normality-based value system are shredded into little stereotypical bits. These too, like the commodities they help circulate, and precisely because of their placement in promotional messages, become exchangeable tokens in a world where value of all kinds is being undermined by the inflation of hyper-productivity.

The conjunction in the imagistic advertising of ideology and product signification also changes the character of commodities themselves. To the extent that such promotion succeeds, the mythic, psychological, or status-related meaning that ads associate with the commodities they depict becomes transferred to them, so that from the standpoint of consumption the ads merely reflect (and reinforce) what has actually become the case: that to its users Chanel No.5 is not just a sweet-smelling transparent liquid but bottled Parisian chic, that Smirnoff really does "mean friends," and that Marlboroughs, over and above their quality as addictive carcinogens, are the very embodiment of Frontier toughness.

Only a lingering nostalgia for what Veblen called "the instinct for workmanship"[16] could lead us to imagine that the use-value of commodities has ever been reducible to their practical function. Apart from the fact, however, that human goups always attach symbolism to things, the exigencies of mass marketing such marginally differentiated (and similarly priced) products as shoe polish, beer, or soap make their mere performance characteristics recede even more as a mark of identifiable difference while their

immaterial features as tokens of status, ideology or desire, become ever more pronounced.

As an important corollary, the initially distinct worlds of promotion and production begin to intersect, wherewith the relation between them begins to undergo a strange reversal. Promotion feeds back into the product's concept and design so that what is produced has already been conceived from the vantagepoint of the campaign wherein it will be promoted. Conversely: the campaign to promote the product, far from being a mere add-on, becomes itself the main productive activity at the centre of the whole commodity process.[17]

Roland Barthes provides a classic instance in his celebrated analysis of the Citroen DS, designed in shape and appurtenaces to resemble the seductive goddess of technology that its name (De-esse) punningly connotes.[18] A more contemporary example is provided by all the ballyhoo surrounding Coca Cola's ill-considered 1985 decision to promote a new formula for its leading beverage. Problems of image not taste dictated the change, and even the humiliating reversal of Coca Cola's decision in the face of consumer resistance was recuperated (one is tempted to see this too as planned) in the massive free publicity that re-launching the original formula instantly gained.

4: The Culture Industry

So far I have only considered the extension of promotion in relation to material goods, that is, in relation to those commodities whose use-value is not exhausted by their symbolic function. Nevertheless, the production of symbols has also been commodified leading to the growth of a vast industry for the production and dissemination of culture, consciousness, and information. The latter, moreover, has become crucial to the former since those who control the culture industry also control the major channels through which all mass-disseminated promotion must flow.

The interdependence, at once technological and financial, between advertising and popular culture has changed the character of both — most importantly, by dissolving the boundary between promotion and the wider world of expressive communication. Through this breach, which coincided with the rise of the mass media, advertising messages have swirled into every corner of commercialised culture, transforming the latter, as a more or less integrated totality of ads, entertainment, and news, into one gigantic promotional vehicle.

Before considering the wider implications of this, however, it should be noted that the media industries were themselves promotional in character before, and independently of, the way in which their programmes came to piggy back on other people's ads.

For one thing, the modern rendering of popular culture as a publicity-seeking display belongs to a tradition of ritual entertainment that reaches

back to the spectacles of the ancient world. Such "art for exhibition value"[19] advertised (at least) itself from the very start — even when "free" as a state-sponsored occasion, and well before the time when plays, competitive sport, music concerts, etc., became fully commodified. In addition to (and in the face of industrialism's own myths of which we constantly need to be reminded), the whole history of mass production, and of mass marketing itself, began three centuries before Wonderbread and the Model T with Gutenberg's printing press: that is, with the mass production of signs. From publishing to television, the culture industry has, in fact, not merely followed but pioneered the whole development that led, via industrialisation, to the greater prominence of distribution and promotion, and finally, to the conversion of the mass produced product into a promotional sign of itself.

Moreover, the tendency of mass production to issue in self-promoting products has been reinforced in the case of the culture industry by the very nature of the activity in which it is engaged: precisely because its business is communication, the mechanism for distributing the product is the same as the one for distributing promotional messages about it.

Self-advertising by and in the media has taken many forms, ranging from the direct insertion of spot ads (e.g., for "other books in the series") to the use of audience build up for the sequel (Richardson's *Pamela*, Stallone's *Rocky I-IV*). More generally, the mass cultural artifact advertises itself through the sheer visibility that the organs of mass communication automatically confer on whatever they transmit. Such visibility, indeed, can create the success it feeds on; and in just that spirit every mass medium, from music and literature to theatre, film, and broadcasting, has developed (and constantly updates) its own roster of stars, hits, and classics. Like the registered trade-mark whose prototype they are, the function of these big names and titles is at once to ratify and push to the centre of the stage the products which the industry believes can most readily be sold. The game of celebrity also provides a ready-made market for the secondary cultural products (literary gazettes, fanzines, talk shows, etc.) which help to sustain it. These products' whole lottery-like saga of instant fame, which replaces the oral mode of gradual reputation, only fans the flames of that envious identification which gives the celebrated works and stars their prodigious power in the first place to move the merchandise and to keep it moving.

The promotional activities of the culture industry fan out along all its media branches, binding them together in a spreading system of inner references that converts the whole into a single promotional intertext. Authors appear on TV, newspapers publicise movies, and radio, supplemented first by film and later by television, provides a vital advertising outlet for the recording industry. Nor is all this intermedia promotion incidental to programme content. Where the product is designed for appropriation through a set of repeated acts, the presentation of an extract, chapter, or

episode can double both as an ad and as first-order programming. Besides the pure case, exemplified by the publication of book extracts in magazines, or by the broadcast media's use of records and music video, culture industry news and gossip about itself comes to serve as a staple-of its own entertainment fare.

As a further effect of popular culture's integration with advertising, the rise of new media technologies, from the rotary press to recording and broadcasting, has combined with commercial logic to systematically subordinate some forms of media presentation to others, as their anticipatory promotion. Since a printed text, photograph, record, or broadcast has a larger audience and is easier to valorise as a commodity than the (staged) performance on which it is based, the latter tends to be transformed into an advertisement for its replica. Not only, as a result, do live events, even when commodified through a gate, come to be staged expressly for their mass-mediated reproduction (Bruce Springsteen, Live!); but also, where such fabricated reproduction has already occurred, the "live" is itself reduced to simulating the "original" transcription, and the aura of its "liveness" becomes just a promotional device for investing the studio-recorded performance with a pseudo-auratic resonance of its own.

For this reason, pop stars, poets, and publishing academics are periodically encouraged by their commercial handlers to take their product out on the road. Whether in the form of a rock concert or a public lecture the result in every case is an ambiguous performance, delivered on two levels, in which the aspect of immediacy essential to a culture's living substratum is continuously nullified by the promotional role which the live performance is contextually called upon to play.

All in all, then, the union of culture and advertising has done more than just colonise the former by extending the sway of the latter: it has brought about the interfusion of what are already two extremely dense promotional apparatus. The forms of promotion and promotional culture that have resulted from this union have tended correspondingly, therefore, to become even more convoluted and complex.

Let us first consider some of the ramifications of what Smythe, Bagdikian, and others have dubbed the "free lunch".[20] Setting aside the vexed question of the "audience commodity and its work," the economic principle denoted by this term is simple enough. In the marriage of convenience between advertising and the information/entertainment industry, the latter attracts an audience for the former in return for its subsidisation through the sale of space and time. To the extent of this subsidy, media production and delivery costs are born by the sponsor and the consumer gets a "free lunch" — in return for the latter's voluntary subjection to the ads carried along with the paper, event, or programme. Price subsidy varies from medium to medium, rarely total in the case of print and 100% in the case of radio and network TV. With broadcast media, the requisite reception equipment has to be privately paid for, with a further gain for the electronic

companies that spawned the media in the first place. Nonetheless, once you have your set, the programming comes (gratis), any amount of it, ultimately supported by a hidden charge built right into the price of all advertised consumer goods.

As concerns content, the most obvious effect of media dependency on advertising is to create a situation where not only are ads designed with available advertising opportunities in mind, but the non-advertising component itself, i.e., the space between the ads, is also fashioned to suit the ads within its space. To some degree the objectives of advertising and regular programming already coincide in the latter's pursuit of high ratings. By attracting a mass audience to itself a programme or publication also clearly attracts attention to the bill-boards in its midst. At this level, perhaps, the carrying of paid ads only serves to reinforce the inherent tendency of all commercialised culture, from news to the serious arts, to embrace the values of popularity, diversion, and fun.

The effect, however, goes deeper. What matters to advertisers is not just the scale but the composition of their audience. This is partly a question of optimising the mix in terms of the average disposable income. (A spectacular instance, in the early 1920s, was the fate of the British Daily Herald. Despite breaking all circulation records, the paper went broke because its largely working-class readership was too down-market to attract sufficient advertiser support.[21] With growing affluence, however, and the mass market's envelopment of more and more social layers, the problems of audience composition have become more complex. Advertisers, in response, have sought to target the specific markets they want, adopting campaign strategies which, with the rise of demographics and psychographics, have become ever more sophisticated and statistically precise.

A similar dynamic has led to a process of differentiation among the media channels as well, so that thematically, ideologically, — and stylistically the non-advertising contents of TV shows, magazines etc., have come to be angled and coded in terms of the same economically functional group identities (of age, sex, income, "life-style," etc.) as those underlying the ads themselves. Not all products, however, have such singular target markets. As a result, cross-cutting the tendency to audience fragmentation, a mid-market middle-of-the-roadism has also come to be suffused, whose overarching effect, beyond torpor, has been to anchor the false universal it projects everywhere: that great mass cultural mirage of the normalised "middle class."

The resemblance between ads and their media surrounds spreads also to style. Linguistic, acoustic, and pictorial compression has shaped the language of television as profoundly as it had earlier shaped the sensory and ideational texture of newspapers and radio. Hence, the prevalence within popular media of quick-fire and laconic forms of communication, their sensory play with visual and auditory puns, their inconsequential sequencing of one message after another, and their magazine-type formats which

reconfigure life and its experience into an ever-shifting mosaic of disparate shiny bits. Modernist poetics, as the literary and visual art of the early twentieth century explicitly attests, transformed the results into a now triumphant point of aesthetic principle — whose prosaic basis continues to lie in the high cost of media space and time, and the compressional effects of this on the syntax and semantics of all forms of mass-mediated talk.

At a deeper level, though, the free lunch comes to resemble its — accompanying ads not just because of the common repertoire of signifying forms and elements they both put into play, but because, precisely as a free lunch, it is equally promotional in intent. In its capacity as an audience magnet for a particular ad-carrying channel, the sports page of the newspaper, or an episode of Dallas, or rock concert simulcast effectively advertises the whole channel in which it appears. In so doing, it serves as an ad for other ads. Indeed, since mass-mediated inscription, even on a first order level, tends to double as promotion for itself, what presents itself on the surface as the literal and self-evident content of mass media programming, is actually constituted as a form of advertising raised to at least the power of three.

The requirements of modern mass marketing thus reverberate within the convoluted hype circuits of the commercialised sign to produce a mass cultural environment that is not just promotional in feel and function, but promotional in depth. At every point in its programmatic flow, layer upon inter-connected layer of advertising activity is always happening, and every layer refers us to another layer, and so on in an endless dance.

Within this self-reflecting vortex even the commodity, as advertising's real-world referent, loses its anchoring finality. Some ads are ads for other ads as well for immediately purchasable commodities, and some products (especially cultural ones) do double-duty as ads for other products as well. Thus when Michael Jackson did a video for Pepsi, Pepsi was in the same process boosting Michael Jackson; and their mutual promotion, each time the ad was broadcast, also helped boost the ratings of the network carrying it by attracting, with some predictable follow-through, a proportion of the channel-flippers who happened to be looking out for just such images at the time.

Underlying the feeling of profound, if fascinating, hollowness that the deceptively legible surfaces of mass-mediated culture tend to evoke is the curious structural development they instantiate. This is the fact that the mass production of culture via audio-visual media has brought about not just the merger of circulating signs and circulating commodities, but the merger of both with the advertising activity that was originally their mediating term. What commodity production has severed its further development has re-united, though not in the same way. For this time, not social instinct and everyday convenience, but the extruded circuit of commercial signification, with its ever-extending promotional activity, has provided the principle of unity, and only on condition that the rejoined spheres

of culture and commerce, signification and commodity production, both submit to its empty embrace. Empty, because promotion always defines itself by reference to something else, in relation to which its own perpetual presence is the perpetuation of a lack, a continual reminder of the unsatisfied desire it is designed to provoke. Promotional culture is thus inherently nihilistic because sustaining this artificial and unbridgeable gap — cultivating demand, moving the commodities, stimulating circulation — is the whole and only point of the exercise.

5: General Exchange

To complete the picture, there are two final extensions of promotional activity that I must mention. Both have already been alluded to, but their fuller significance in the unfolding dialectic of culture and economy could not be clearly stated till now. With their development, in fact, promotional activity is brought into line with yet a further stage in the evolution of commodity production: that of the commodity's universalisation as a social form, wherein the modalities of commercial circulation, having completely permeated the mass cultural field, begin to generalise beyond the boundaries of commerce in the ordinary sense.

The French sociologist Jean Baudrillard has termed this ultra-commodified order the society of "generalised exchange".[22] To which one need only add that, with the arrival of generalised exchange, the promotional activity that has always been intrinsic to commodity production, and that has become increasingly prominent as that mode has spread, has likewise begun to generalise; and that, as it has done so, the entire space of signification has begun to be reconstituted as one vast, implosive and multiply inter-connected promotional culture.

The first of these extensions concerns the way that promotionalism has come to shape, not just the commercial output of media, but public discourse as such. The new element here is not simply that public information channels have been increasingly used to transmit commercial messages, for the histories of the assembly and the market-place have long been intertwined. Nor is there any novelty to the way in which news and opinion have themselves become commodities, for in this the contemporary media have simply followed a trajectory newspapers had already set. What is new, however, is that the doubling and redoubling of promotional activity within commercial media, which qualitatively intensified as the tie-in between product advertising and the culture industry grew, has transformed the whole process of public communication to the point where the interchange of political and cultural ideas has itself come to resemble nothing so much as a permanent advertising contest between rival brands and firms.

This has involved more than a tactical shift. Mainstream electoral politics, and indeed the competitive propaganda of international relations as

well, have come to be conducted not only by means of advertising but to an increasing degree in terms of who can manage the whole business of advertising best. Nor is this criterion of suitability entirely irrational, since in a promotional culture the capacity to promote becomes an objective attribute of political leadership. The head of state is automatically a media star and, as we know, media stars who know how to manage their own image can also become heads of state.

A whole analysis would be needed to show how other institutional agencies that similarly compete for public attention, favour, or funds — churches, schools, hospitals, charities, professional groups, ideological lobbies, etc. — have similarly come to recast their propagandistic activities along quasi-commercial lines. Suffice to say that, just as the mass-mediated scene of public opinion comes to be reconstituted as a simulacrum of the mass comsumer market, so all its players, whatever their political or ideological objectives, come to modify their means and ultimately their ends in line with the public relations mode this implies. From both directions, then, politico-ideological, and commercial discourses have begun to interpenetrate. In place of their difference an inter-related complex of media circuits, public and private, for (what one might call) generalised promotional exchange has arisen.

The second way in which promotional activity has extended to signifying practices beyond the strictly commercial sphere is as an outgrowth of the process in which the human individual, as well, has been caught up in the expanding system of exchange. To this process there have been three distinct moments, each of which has generated its own forms of inter-individual competition, and its own level of related promotional practice.

Most immediately commercial in character is the competition that market-based society has set up between all "free" individuals as owners and traders of their own labour power. Of special significance, bracketing all the material dimensions of this contest, is the increasing extent to which the contest for jobs and more genteelly, for positions, has taken on increasingly other-directed forms. The job interview, the resume, deportment at work, the choice of consumption style, the projected family front, all become not just indices of success but permanent zones of competition in the struggle to get ahead. As a social psychological correlate, self-promotional careerism — Hobbes plus Narcissus — has been installed as the normalised form of adaptive behaviour and identity.

The steady intensification of status competition between individuals as consumers is closely related. Again, the contest has a material dimension (the more wealth, the more scope for competitive display) but even more clearly than in the case of positional competition, with its credentialism and lifestyle management, such competition unfolds as a game of staged appearances. Indeed, given the instability of consumption-based hierarchies in the fashion-driven centres of advanced capitalism, the apparent, here, is virtually synonymous with the real. The voguish becomes outmod-

ed, only to be resurrected as high camp — between which there may be the only difference of intention implied by other marks of sophistication (or its absence) which the possessing actor drapes around the stage. The giddier the game, the more it resolves into a mere struggle to establish the dramaturgical credentials of the consumer/actors who conduct it — a promotional parody of the romantic ideal that individuals should re-create themselves as artists, and their own lives as works of art.

The primacy of promotion, however, in inter-individual exchange asserts itself most clearly with the emergence of yet a third form of status contest in which what is at stake is the sign-exchange value of individuals, not as worker/professionals nor as accumulators of status-bearing insignia, but as exchangeable (and consumable) tokens in themselves. Here, above all, the political economist of culture encounters Goffman's impression-managing self, brought to its highest pitch of anxiety and alienation, perhaps, in the rating-dating rituals of high school and beyond wherein the familial couple at the centre of the contemporary kinship system continues to be inter-generationally reproduced.

In effect, the freer individuals have become to form liaisons and attachments, the more they have been constrained by the ensuing competition for suitable partners with whom to strategise their personal lives, careful to cultivate their own associative worth. Since at least Shakespeare's time, it is Romantic Love that has provided the main motive and alibi for this gigantic roundalay,[23] whose objective on all sides is to maximise the self's trade-in value on the marriage/friendship/personality market (via publicity-conscious alliances and self-prestations) and to get as good a bargain in return as one can. The modern de-patriarchalisation of romance and the emergence of an inter-subjective rhetoric of caring and sharing abolish neither the market character of this process nor its mystification as Love. They represent, rather, the enlightened adaptation of such romantic ideology to a more advanced, i.e., more egalitarian, secular, and psychologically self-conscious stage in the development of the exchange system in which it is socially rooted.

In this respect, as in others, the wider commodification of the individual has been reinforced by the spread of market-derived norms concerning the abstract equivalence of persons. With the ascendancy of that principle, the barriers of ascribed status (especially as they affect youth and women) have successively crumbled, leading to a marked liberalisation in terms of interpersonal trade. Singles clubs, dating services, and 'companions wanted' sections in the classified ads represent only the most visible contemporary result of such accelerated circulation, which has necessarily unfolded mainly in the private domain. Yet the fact that the inter-individual quasi-market has here folded over into the capitalist market indicates that, just as generalised exchange establishes deepening lines of continuity between public and commercial communication so, too, does it connect the

money economy and its promotional supports with even the most intimate transactions of private life as well.

Such linkages, of course, are not only economic. Beyond the direct provision of advertising services, the commercial sphere also incorporates the promotional moment of inter-indiviudal exchange ideologically, by the way in which its forms and imperatives are embedded in the human interest stories and glossily consumerised environments that comprise the figure and ground of the culture industry's regular programmatic fare. The inscription of generalised inter-individual exchange and its promotional correlate in the pivotal images and ideology of ad-carrying media serves both to naturalise the former and to make the latter seem credible by soaking them in the established forms of everyday life. The primacy of promotion in the private and public realms thus becomes mutually self-confirming, and the incommensurability of these two spheres in classic bourgeois thought ("homme et cityoen") resolves into the illusory two-sidedness of a Moebius strip, on which is inscribed one single and continuous promotional text.

At the level of private interaction, then, as well as at the level of the political process, the extensions of exchange progressively absorb all major dimensions of signifying practice into the discourse of promotion. And with this development, whose origins can be traced to the merger of advertising and entertainment in the formative phase of corporate capital, promotional culture can be said to have become not just hegemonic, but all-inclusive.

6: Beyond Promotion? Beyond Exchange

The further thought to which such reflection leads is that the complex elsewhere dubbed "post-modernism,"[24] and itself held to have become culturally dominant, is, if differently accounted for, the self-same complex, now the term "postmodernism" has its uses. The characteristics it draws together — multi-perspectivalism, de-centering, self-referentiality, etc., — do indeed combine. And the pre-fix ("post-") draws attention to a real difference between this configuration and the more utopian and contestative strains of "high" modernism that flourished earlier this century with Joyce, cubism, and jazz.

It is important, however, neither to overstress the discontinuity nor to concede too much to the culturalist notion that the symbolic somehow develops according to its own transcendant logic. To the contrary, as I have suggested, the endless intertextual contortions that constitute postmodernity are not just rooted in a larger social history: they are the effect of a structural mutation within market society which, by fusing economy and culture together and ushering in a world of generalised exchange, has deprived the cultural moment of even that degree of autonomy which gave

its former activist partisans, romantic and avant-garde, their semblance of radical practicality.

Of course, to acknowledge that all signifying activity has been absorbed into a system of expanding sign-circulation to which promotion has become central is not, in itself, to be critical. Art, for example, has long since made its peace with the corporate boardroom, and in the amoral neutrality of contemporary cool — epitomised by figures like Warhol and Bowie — the pervasiveness of the promotional is accepted as an obvious and inescapable fact. Nevertheless, realism is better than misrecognition, and to grasp the essential link between the forms and spirit of our culture and the ascendancy of promotionalism is to gain a perspective, beyond the flat, dissolvent ironies of post-modernity itself, from which a critique, grounded in the possibility of an actual supercession, becomes at least thinkable.

Thinkable? How? The category of promotion directs us to a social form, the commodity, whose dialectical capacity to engender progressive change, Marxism, and a century of upheaval, has been made into an article of faith. Yet if promotional culture is all-inclusive does it not smother its own contradictions? If it expresses a universal development, the generalisation of exchange, is there any historical warrant for positing or striving for a different cultural future? What space, in short, does the tendency to pan-promotionalism — or a critique that projects it — leave for transformative practice, particularly (since that is what concerns us here) in the cultural sphere? In response I would offer just three observations.

The first is that to seize on advertising as the essential mode in which the signifying practices of advanced capitalist society are set is not simply to return the discussion to Marx, still less to certain rote formulae about class conflict and ideology which became associated with his name. It is, rather, to find a new relevance to that broader debate about society and economy which attended the whole birth (from 1750-1850) of modern capitalism, and which centred on the problematic of exchange.[25]

Marx's own contribution to this debate was no doubt path-breaking. But even as an anatomy of economically based social relations, his work was also flawed, and flawed precisely by what made it powerful: its insistence on the social (not just economic) centrality of production.

Marx's productivism was itself in reaction to the over-emphasis in liberal economic theory on distribution and exchange. Whatever the virtues of this correction, at the level of cultural analysis it left a gap that Marx's followers could only fill by developing the domination model sketched out in the *German Ideology* and the base/superstructure notion mentioned later on.[26] The result, for radical theory, has been an anachronism: on the one hand, a map of the cultural relations of advanced capitalism that extrapolates from those of previous class societies, particularly medieval Europe; on the other, an actual form of society in which,precisely as a result of the commodification process that defines it, such a sharply stratified mode of cultural organisation has tended more and more to break down.

Within American thought, it was the non-Marxist Veblen[27] who did most to re-introduce into cultural discussion the importance of circulation and exchange. But Veblen himself was working against the background of an older tradition, and here, at least with respect to the critique of consumerism and status competition, the key voice revived was undoubtedly that of Rousseau.

Rousseau, for his part, absolutised the problem. For him, competitive display — as evidenced in the fopperies and salon culture of eighteenth century Paris — was not only historically prior to the rise of the market, but prior to the institutionalisation of social life as such. It was, indeed, the primal consequence of association itself, the Adamic fall from which all subsequent social evil flowed. Under the circumstances (went the argument in his *Essay on Inequality*) progress meant regress and the most that could be accomplished was a mitigation of the social inequality and cultural hypocrisy that, in a state of developed civilisation, were status competition's entrenched bad effects. Hence his arguments, on the one hand, for a new contract to reconstitute the collectivity as a legitimated power, and, on the other, for a naturalist reform of education/socialisation to maximise the pre-social individual's real moral capacity.

Rousseau's solution has been attacked from all sides. But beyond a sharper appreciation of the property question it cannot be said that progressive praxis has found a better way. At the most radical level, attempts have been made (most recently in China) to abolish competitive circulation as such. These, though, have invariably foundered by exacerbating the contradiction between individual and society they hoped to transcend. The pendulum, in consequence, has begun to swing the other way — with reform movements in socialist societies, like those in capitalist ones, tending to accept that the wheel of exchange cannot be stopped, or even (heresy of heresies) that a modest restoration of the market might have a liberating effect. Radical thought, it seems, is being pressed to adopt the notion of a "self-limiting revolution,"[28] a revolution in which the community gains power, but not without leaving the circulation of goods and signs some scope for play.

It would be wrong to conclude, however, that a dialectical approach must be abandoned altogether. To decouple the problematic of advancing exchange from the (still vital) issues of class, private property, and economic distribution does not at all mean that promotional culture should be regarded as homogeneous or without contradiction.

Conflicts, for one thing, are continually provoked by the unsettling impact of the ever-expanding market on existing values, particularly where these serve as moral restraints to trade.[29] The current controversy over street prostitution, which above all concerns its advertising aspect, is a clear case in point. Such issues — coded as liberal versus conservative, individual versus society, for and against "the family" etc., — create the basis for an ongoing cultural politics which, at the limit, can even combine with other

aspects of the situation (Weimar Germany, North America in the 1960s, Iran in the late 1970s, etc.) to provoke a total social crisis.

It is hard to define this dynamic in ways that do not capitulate to one or other of its poles. Suffice to say that while the contradiction is material (in the sociological sense) its expression is cultural; and that the most important zone of combat is at the interface between promotion (as propaganda for trade) and the entrenched values through which a social formation, and, indeed, the social as such, is culturally reproduced.

My final point concerns media. I have already noted that with the development of techniques for recording, simulating, and mass reproducing the live, the latter has increasingly come to be subordinated as promotion for the former; and that this development mirrors and intersects with the promotional reduction (via inter-individual status competition) of everyday life itself. As a philosophical analogue, the Grand Theorists of our culture, morbidly fascinated with the death of meaning that has accompanied the proliferation of cross-referring texts, have declared war on the traditional privileging of the spoken word as the fount of thought and speech. In *Grammatology*, Derrida has insisted that speaking is only a special case of writing and that the authenticity values which romantics, traditionalists, and mystics from Plato to Heidegger have identified with the human voice rest on a mythic view of language — one that modern linguistics has fortunately begun to correct.

Whatever the philosophical merits of this line of reasoning its political value is entirely suspect since it seems only to ratify a movement that has produced a culture based on substitutions, vacuities, and outward show. To dismiss the face-to-face, the immediate, the oral is indeed to devalue a dimension in which values arise counter to promotional culture, ones that can be appealed to, at the very least, as establishing the basis of a critique. Nor does such a critique have to confine itself to nostalgia and lament. For, as every activist knows, talk — for all its impoverishment — is still the least promotionally mediated of media. Not only does it thus remain the oxygen of traditions and institutions; it is also *par excellence* the communicative mode in which new ideas arise and populations can mobilise themselves, if only for an instant, to assert their deepest, most emancipatory desires.

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Notes

1. Note 15/24 reads in full: "Pervasive influence of advertising — writers of one media [sic] place articles in another media and secure advertising for former as well as latter — writing becomes a device for advertising." W. Christian, ed., *The Idea File of Harold Adams Innis* (1980), Toronto, University of Toronto Press,) p.125. For Innis

on the publishing industry, see H.A. Innis, *The Bias of Communication* (1952, Toronto, University of Toronto Press) pp. 142-189.

2. W. Christian (ed.) *The Idea File of Harold Adams Innis* p.72 and *passim*.

3. The phrase is Louis Althusser's. See his essay on May '68 in *Politics and History: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Hegel, and Marx*, (1978, New York, Schocken).

4. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (1977, London, British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin), especially pp. 129-155.

5. The title of a key essay in Innis's *Essays in Canadian Economic History*, (1956, Toronto, University of Toronto Press,) pp. 252-272.

6. "It was not until the advent of the telegraph that messages could travel faster than a messenger. Before this, roads and the written word were closely interrelated." M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man* (1965, New york, McGraw-Hill), p. 89.

7. The two practices were conjointed when Richard Gallup left academia to join the Young and Rubicam agency in 1932. See S. Fox *The Mirror Makers: a History of American Advertising and its Creators* (1984, New York, Vintage) p. 138.

8. J. Baudrillard, *Towards a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* translated by Charles Levin (1981, St. Louis, Telos Press) p. 169 and ff.

9. A good account of this shift is to be found in S. Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness* (1976, New York, McGraw-Hill).

10. The classic modern statement of the realisation dilemma is to be found in J. Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, (1956, Boston, Houghton-Mifflin). For a good discussion of the arguments for and against this view of advertising's larger role see W. Leiss, S. Kline and S. Jhally, *Social Communication in Advertising* (1986, Toronto and New York, Methuen) pp. 13-19 and ff.

11. See especially 'The culture industry: enlightenment as mass deception' in M. Horkheimer and T. Adorno *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972, New York, Herder and Herder).

12. *Op. cit.* pp. 23-30.

13. For the early history of advertising see F. Presbrey, *The History and Development of Advertising* (1968, New York, Greenwood Press) and R. Fox, *op. cit.*

14. The most thorough account of this mechanism is to be found in J. Williamson, *Decoding Advertising* (1978, London, Mario Boyars). See also R. Barthe's essay "The rhetoric of the image" in his *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation*, (1985, New York, Hill and Wang) pp. 21-40 and A. Wernick "Advertising and Ideology", *Theory, Culture and Society*, 1984, Vol. 2 no. 1. Leiss, Kline and Jhally suggest that imagisitic advertising becomes a dominant motif from the early 1930s on, and that so far it has gone through three psycho-semiological shifts. These they label Symbolism, Gratification and Lifestyle, arguing that each in turn corresponds to a different symbolic mode, respectively Iconology, Narcissism and Totemism. See *Social Communications in Advertising* pp. 259-298.

15. See especially "Requiem for their media" in J. Baudrillard's *Towards a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*.

16. T. Veblen, *The Instinct of Workmanship* (New York, Viking, 1914).

17. Semiological self-consciousness about design can be traced to the earliest days of mass production. See for example the discussion of Wedgwood pottery design in A. Forty *The Objects of Desire*, 1986, New York, Pantheon).

18. See R. Barthe's, *Mythologies* (1973, London, Paladin).

19. *Q.v.* W. Benjamin's celebrated essay "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", published in the collection *Illuminations*.

20. D. Smythe *Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness and Canada*, (1981, New Jersey, Ablex); B. Bagdikian *Media Monopoly*, (1984, Boston, Beacon).

21. See J. Curran "Capitalism and Control of the Press" in J. Curran, M. Gurevitch and J. Woollacott (eds.) *Mass Communication and Society* (1977, London, Edward Arnold) p. 225.

22. Especially in earlier works like *Towards a Critique of the Political Economy of Signs* and *L'Echange symbolique et la mort*. One suspects that Baudrillard's formulation was itself derived from C. Levi-Strauss's discussion of modern kinship in *Elementary Forms of Kinship* (1969, Boston, Beacon).

23. For a masterful account of the roots of this complex in the chivalric tradition see C.S. Lewis *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (1939, London, Oxford University Press).

24. J-F. Lyotard, *The Post-modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984, Minneapolis, Minnesota Unversity Press); H. Foster (ed.), *The Anti-aesthetic: Essays on Post-modern Culture* (1983, Washington, Bay Press); F. Jamieson, "Post-modernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism", *New Left Review* 1984 pp. 53-92.

25. Besides Rousseau and the French tradition of anthropology and sociology deriving from him, key figures include Ferguson, Smith, James Mill, and Manderville on the British side and Hegel, Tonnies and Weber on the German.

26. See especially *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* translated from the second German edition by N. Stone (1904, Chicago, Charles Kerr and Co.)

27. The Rousseauian influence in particularly strong in his *Theory of the Leisure Class*, (1899, New York, Viking).

28. This formula is particularly associated with the Polish Solidarity intellectual, Adam Michnik. In a curious way, the Left in the West and reform movements in the East, including Gorbachev's, have come to converge in a rediscovery of the virtues of a 'mixed economy'.

29. I have developed this argument at some length in "Sign and Commodity: Some Aspects of the Cultural Dynamic of Advanced Capitalism", *The Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, Vol. VIII, Number 2 (Winter/Spring) 1984.