



Reconfiguring Research into Historical Advertising Practice

Gavin Jack

review of: L. McFall (2004) *Advertising: A Cultural Economy*. London: Sage. (PB: pp. 224, £19.99, ISBN 0-7619-4255-6)

A constant presentism is found in the resignation of many to current conditions of production and consumption, an acquiescence based on the acceptance and normalization of the purported inevitability of the way things are. Such an ideological formation makes possible an erasure of history, a locking of our hearts and minds into the here and now, and a veiling of the view of systems of capital as historically evolving and essentially arbitrary artefacts. Paradoxically, however, capitalist ideology might also be said to be marked by a rhetoric of constant change, and a notion that the here and now is qualitatively different from the past. Declarations of constant change often transmute into imperatives driven by governments and big business for adaptation, adjustment and improvement. Perhaps this contradiction is best summed up by Marx's concept of capital's 'constant revolutionizing of production'. Within such teleological and epochalist frames of a progressive capital, history can never be taken seriously. Its study has the capacity to politicise contemporary socioeconomic ideologies, to reveal their arbitrariness and to point to their potential reversal. It must therefore become a casualty to the presenteeist clamour for both continuity, and change – a different kind of capital, but capital all the same.

In one of the most distinctive, critically engaged and empirically attentive contributions to debates on advertising in society in the last twenty years, Liz McFall's (2004) *Advertising: A Cultural Economy* takes history seriously and admirably succeeds in surfacing, dissecting and offering alternative visions of historical advertising to those contained in the teleological visions and epochalist predilections of received academic wisdom. With reference to the works of a number of leading figures ranging from Varda Leymour, Judith Williamson, and Richard Dyer, to Robert Goldman and Andrew Wernick, McFall articulates the centrality of epochalist frames in the assumed but empirically unsubstantiated claims by such authors that advertising in the current age is *different* from that of previous times.

By way of illustration, McFall explains that these authors often unthinkingly claim that: contemporary advertising makes greater use of *visual* and symbolic, rather than information-based appeals; that it is now a *pervasive* social phenomenon compared to the past; that it is also increasingly *persuasive* in its impact on consumers; and finally, that it is an increasingly *hybridised* social practice. In these accounts, such stark comparisons between the present and past are assumed to be easily readable from, and direct reflections of, wider social and economic transformations, an analytic move in which advertising is unproblematically reduced to a mirror of social change.

I read McFall's point of departure for her book as three-fold. First, she takes the view that such epochalist accounts of advertising treat the past in highly problematic ways. They are reductive and universalising, but most importantly they typically offer very little, and often no empirical detail or evidence about the past which is being counterposed with the present. Second, she is sceptical about the assumed, and rather simplistic, cumulative and linear model of socio-economic transformation, within which understandings of the novelty of present-day advertising are constructed. Third, she makes the observation that accounts of the purportedly increasing pervasiveness, persuasiveness and hybridisation of advertising are most often based on *semiotic* and *meaning-centred* analyses of advertising texts. She argues that such a focus on text, and its consumption, rather limits (or perhaps *should* limit) the wider claims that theorists might make about advertising in society, sidelining as they often do production-led questions about the practice of advertising. She folds these three concerns into a broader call not only for greater attention to *historical detail* in advertising research, but more specifically for greater attention to the *mundane and local practices* of advertising and the complex factors that, sometimes haphazardly, shaped the development of the industry.

McFall pursues these imperatives theoretically, by combining an ANT/AST¹-based view of advertising as social practice and socio-technical device, with a Foucauldian-inspired genealogical approach to historical research. Keen to point out that her use of history will not 'solve' the problems of previous accounts, nor provide a singular, and undisputed version of the past, McFall more modestly suggests that her genealogical approach can demonstrate the specific histories of advertising practices whose diversity and locality contributed to the 'patchwork of events' through which contemporary advertising emerged. Advertising, as McFall puts it, is not the "product of a steady evolution, but ... a plural and multifaceted *device* that is constantly adapting, often in contradictory ways, to changing circumstances" (p.191, emphasis in the original).

The exposition, structure, and development of McFall's genealogical thesis are exceptionally good. The first three of the seven chapters comprising the book isolate three sets of dualisms that typically frame critical theoretical works on advertising in society. She critically inspects each of these dualisms and points to the manner in which their deployment by key critics in the field, has served to limit understandings of advertising's mediating impact on the relationships between meaning and reality (Chapter One), people and objects (Chapter Two), and culture and economy (Chapter Three) respectively.

1 Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and Adaptive Structuration Theory (AST).

In Chapter One, entitled 'colonising of the real', McFall argues that the materialist underpinning of the semiotic hegemony of critical approaches to advertising serves to overlook more recent post-structuralist critiques of the stability of meaning, to skew analysis towards the consumption rather than production of advertising forms, and finally to provide the theoretical basis from which an epochalist approach to understanding advertising becomes possible. In Chapter Two she diagnoses the inconclusive and limited evidence upon which claims to the increasing pervasiveness and persuasiveness of contemporary advertising are made, and cautions that viewing such changes in advertising as an "irresistible and inevitable move to a different sort of society risks overlooking the range, variety and inventiveness of approaches to promotion at different historical moments" (p.59). In Chapter Three, McFall continues by warning of the dangers of ignoring the formation and operation of advertising practices at a *local* level. With relation to critical accounts of the disruptive effects of advertising on the spheres of culture and economy, contained for instance in mass-culture/Frankfurt School-inspired analyses, she argues that the problematic separation of culture and economy which these views presuppose could be fruitfully overcome through an examination of historically contingent modes of studying social life, and through practice-based accounts of advertising.

These three opening conceptual chapters link extremely well with each other, and demonstrate McFall's incisive analytic abilities and exceptional clarity of writing. The surfacing and critical evaluation of the three key fault lines that support epochalist views of advertising in society in these three chapters represent in themselves extremely important conceptual contributions to the literature. Although one might quibble with the, at times, repetitious signposting of arguments within and between chapters, they all succeed admirably in drawing together key issues in the literature with analytic depth and deft.

Chapter Four provides some methodological reflections germane to the remaining chapters of the book, with specific reference to the relationship between theory and history. It is here that McFall makes her case for, and simultaneously points to the limitations of, an analytic framework that combines a genealogical approach to history with an ANT/AST view of advertising as material practice. Having Foucauldian sympathies myself, I need very little persuasion of the theoretical case and importance of a genealogical approach in this field of research. I think it is timely, and combined with a certain kind of anthropological sensibility to material practice, I think McFall's call for a more serious approach to history, and its embodiment in everyday social practice, is analytically crucial for the development of the academic field.

It is not, however, at the level of theoretical argumentation that I am most convinced of McFall's thesis (take this as read). Rather, it is through her application and instantiation of the genealogical method that McFall's work takes on particular persuasive powers and renders her text so important for the field. In this regard, it is in Chapters Five and Six where *Advertising: A Cultural Economy* really distinguishes itself. In these chapters (where the vast majority of my earmarked pages are located!), we get down and dirty with the diversity, discontinuities and contingencies of historical advertising practice.

Chapter Five takes to task the idea that contemporary advertising is necessarily more pervasive and hybrid than its predecessors. McFall begins by giving some fascinating evidence of the diversity of social actors, institutional arrangements and socioeconomic conditions that shaped advertising in the nineteenth century, mainly in the UK, and to a much lesser extent, the USA. She shows how early ad agencies also participated in other forms of business (e.g. the Streets agency was also a stationer and bookseller, Deacon's was a coffee house) and how the development of an agency system was crucially fashioned from *personal* connections between agencies. These connections patterned the emergence of competing models for the provision of advertising services, as well as the nature of institutional arrangements at that time.

Second in this chapter, McFall illustrates that advertising and promotional media were a very prominent feature of life in the 19th century, thus undermining the notion of pervasiveness as a *purely* contemporary phenomenon. She points, amongst other things, to critical essays in mid-19th century editions of the magazine *Punch* complaining about the ubiquity of poster media. As a promotional tool, posters came to prominence due both to restrictions on the use of press advertising in the UK, as well as its intrinsic benefits as a far-reaching communications tool. In the context of anti-billposting legislation, and technological advances, contractors emerged and were responsible for a more regimented system for using this medium. In addition to posters, the use of gas lanterns from the 1830s on, placard bearers on streets, company buildings as a promotional canvass, and advertising on a whole host of different forms of stationery illustrated the diversity and ingenuity of early forms of advertising. Taken together, McFall's historical work in this chapter points to the manner in which local technological and institutional conditions patterned early advertising, and illustrates the existence of multiple promotional forms during the period of analysis.

In addition to the wonderful wealth of examples, and the reproduction of early adverts in the book itself, this particular chapter raises the crucial, and often overlooked issue, of the need to historicise the categories that we ourselves use as analysts in our work on advertising. In the context of this particular chapter, McFall argues that we can suggest that advertising and promotion was as pervasive then as it is considered now, *provided that* we view pervasiveness not as a timeless and universal category of analysis, but as a category which itself has historically contingent meanings. The critical essays from *Punch*, for instance, showed that the pervasiveness of promotional/commercial activity had a particular referent and a particular resonance which was specifically reflective of concerns and understandings that emerged in the social and institutional context of 19th century Britain, and which cannot easily be transposed into our context in the 21st century. This is a crucial analytic move in this book, and an exceptionally important lesson that the field might do well to remember and see substantiated in this way.

Most fascinating in Chapter Five is the evidence McFall presents regarding the aesthetic dimension of historical advertising production. She focuses on the claim in contemporary accounts of advertising that advertisers, creatives and copywriters constitute a group of *new* cultural intermediaries that possess large and very distinctive stocks of cultural capital which they bring to bear in their jobs. Whilst accepting the distinctive nature of the cultural capital offered by those employed in advertising, she challenges the view that such an occupational group is new and emerged as a response

to the supposedly more aestheticized times in which we live. Insights into the lives and social connections of those involved in early advertising reveal that they typically emanated from very particular, usually privileged, social backgrounds, and possessed large reserves of cultural and aesthetic capital.

A letter referred to by McFall comes from an 1838 edition of the *Gentlemen's Magazine* and points to a close connection between the famous writer Samuel Coleridge and the proprietor of the *Morning Post*. In this letter, Coleridge complains how his 'literary department' consisting of William Wordsworth, Charles Lamb and Robert Southey had not been properly recompensed by the paper for their writing. Those working in, or connected with early agencies, as this one example suggests, belonged to a number of cultural industries including publishing, literary work, journalism and news production, and art. With famous writers and essayists as copywriters, and connections engineered with the art world, early agencies had access to many different literary and artistic styles, and forms of cultural and aesthetic capital.

As the cultural capital of these early 'creatives' was brought together with the commercial aims of the agencies for whom they worked, early forms of what McFall calls 'constituent practices' were in evidence at this time. In this regard, she very interestingly talks of the role of women copywriters in early agencies e.g. JWT's famous copywriter Helen Lansdowne Resor who went on to become part owner of the agency. Brought in to address the need for a 'feminine point of view' on consumption and society, the employment of women at JWT, McFall argues, was aimed at using their cultural and aesthetic knowledges as/of women, to target more effectively their advertising at the 'mysterious psychology' of females across a variety of product categories. Not only was early advertising pervasive then, it also involved a multitude of different cultural workers with considerable stocks of aesthetic knowledge, who enacted the constituent practices that drew together cultural and aesthetic knowledge with commercial aims and objectives.

In Chapter Six, McFall continues her historicising work, in this case with regard to the claim that contemporary advertising is more *persuasive* than its predecessors. The idea of persuasiveness contains, she suggests, three comprising elements: the use of images; the use of persuasive rhetoric or copy appeal; the development of emotional/psychological types of appeal. She notes how in the work of many leading critics, these three elements are considered as substantiating evidence of the qualitatively different, and more symbolically-laden role played by advertising in today's consumer society. She takes each of these elements in turn, and demonstrates earlier uses and equivalences of these categories. Importantly, McFall once more emphasises the historical contingency of the notion of persuasiveness and looks at the use of persuasive elements in historical context.

To give a flavour of the examples McFall utilises to unpack her points, she shows that in pre-1900 press and poster advertising, a combination of technological factors, political and economic conditions and local institutional forces profoundly shaped how *images* were used in these media. Comparing papers in the UK and the US, for example, the 18th century saw the deployment in the US of a range of display techniques and small illustrations not available in the UK. To explain this, McFall describes how

between 1712 and 1855, stamp duty in the UK, as well as a flat tax rate, meant that papers were limited to a single folded sheet, resulting in the adoption of small typefaces, and larger numbers of columns per page. Without these restrictions, US papers had more sides in comparison to the UK until, that was, a national paper shortage combined with a shift in institutional approaches to press advertising created a typographic uniformity in US newspapers and a concomitant limitation on the use of images.

By the 1870s, however, the development of lithographic and printing techniques created low enough production costs to encourage the manufacture of full-colour posters. Such a technological advancement enabled the widespread use of this image-friendly medium, a development which was often decried in critical essays of the time. The examples of such technological, institutional and political forces meant that the unfolding use of image-based advertisements was stunted, historically and culturally specific, and led to the emergence of changing and a highly variegated set of styles of verbal appeal in its stead.

Most interestingly in this chapter is the historical evidence McFall presents on the emergent use of *emotional* appeals in advertisements, a phenomenon that goes back to at least the 17th century. She illustrates emotional appeals with the fascinating examples of early deodorant ads which threatened consumers with social embarrassment unless they bought bodily protection products. Furthermore, JWT's emotion-led campaign for Chase and Sanborn Tea promoted the invigorating and stimulating properties of tea. With sexual allusions clear in the ad, this highly successful JWT campaign saw a several 100% increase in sales of this brand. Its success, and those of other campaigns at the time suggest that early advertising was not only pervasive, but also highly persuasive at times, a fact understood by both practitioners of advertising as well as its most ardent critics. Both these chapters are outstanding, original pieces of work that contribute in important and highly fascinating ways to the advertising arena. McFall's writing in these chapters, in keeping with the rest of book, is of exemplary clarity and structure, and the evidence and illustrations she gives are extremely effective.

In the final Chapter Seven, McFall's writing changes slightly from the gentle, but rigorous argumentative style of earlier chapters to something far punchier. This is a short but sweet chapter, where McFall really packs a punch, using her carefully built-up argument in the preceding chapters to deliver a heavy intellectual body blow to extant critical wisdom on advertising, and (rather unexpectedly) to Callon's work in *ANT*. Conclusions to books are usually rather limp affairs, best ignored. This is certainly not the case here.

Advertising: A Cultural Economy is a book of great importance for anyone wishing to understand the nature and role of advertising in society. In contrast to previous commentators, McFall has taken history seriously and in the process of doing so, produced a reconfigured intellectual territory for the study of historical advertising practice. It is a book positioned at an anthropologically and historically sensitive intersection of advertising research, marketing and cultural studies, and as such, it offers differently nuanced implications for each of these broad fields of study.

Its focus on studying the material practices of production in their historical context, for instance, not only adds to the relatively small number of practice-based insights in advertising research, but also exposes gaping holes in the empirically unsubstantiated 'über-claims' of the big names in the area. She challenges these names, and the field of advertising research more generally, to think more precisely about their tableaux for staging the past, and the categories through which this is made (im)possible.

The deeper incision of McFall's analysis, however, cuts into the epochalist framing and simplistic reading of developments in advertising as a simple reflection of wider social transformation. She provides compelling evidence which, at the very least, substantially nuances the grain of many grand narratives in cultural studies, advertising and marketing research of the increasing culturalization of society and its manifestation in the advancing symbolism of advertising. The spectre of epochalism and the various teleologies of modern marketing and advertising have, of course, been ripped open and gorged in recent years by the many snouts in the trough of postmodern marketing. Now unfashionable, it would seem, as many critical (marketing) types lose themselves in literary criticism or retrench themselves in mainstream marketing's (neo-positivist) backlash against its Celtic margins, McFall's text gives epistemological, methodological and political pointers that challenge and might be used to resuscitate the (UK) marketing discipline's attempts at critique.

Her focus on the moments of, and factors influencing the development and production (rather than consumption) of advertising, also has important implications for those in advertising and cultural studies: to 'get over' the obsession with semiotic analysis and acts of consumption, and to round out analyses with greater sensitivity to the institutional base and productive apparatus for capital (and its constant presentism). Finally, in introducing a Foucauldian-inspired take on these institutional questions, this book represents one of the very few pieces of work in marketing and advertising research to make use of Foucault's work. If for no other reason, this unusual deployment of Foucault in these disciplinary terrains makes this a very important addition to the field. This book should be on the bookshelf and reading lists of all students and scholars of advertising.

the author

Gavin Jack is Reader in Culture and Consumption, and member of the Centre for Philosophy and Political Economy, at the University of Leicester Management Centre. He recently co-authored a book entitled *Tourism and Intercultural Exchange: Why Tourism Matters*, which has just been published by Channel View Publications.

Address: Management Centre, University of Leicester, University Road, Leicester, UK, LE1 7RH.
E-mail: g.jack@le.ac.uk