

6 The Television Commercial

Most television commercials are not bashful about their economic function. They exist to sell products and services. And they do so quite effectively. Huge corporations would not be spending the largest chunk of their American media-advertising budget on linear television if their market research did not show that viewers are positively affected by this avalanche of ads.¹ Corporations still depend heavily upon conventional, linear-television networks and such networks in the U.S. rely solely upon advertising for their economic sustenance—unlike VOD portals such as Netflix that are funded through subscriptions or television in many other countries that is government supported. Just as with radio before it, U.S. television’s economic structure is undergirded by commercials, as are online video services such as YouTube that do not require users to buy subscriptions.

To us viewers, commercials are annoying, interruptive reminders of our economic bargain with corporate culture. Linear television has been “free” since the network era, if we were willing to “pay” for it with our viewing time and our buying behavior when we visit the store. And so we invite advertisers into our homes to repetitively hammer away at us about the tastiness of Pepsi over Coke or the efficacy of the latest exercise machine or the sublime pleasure of Taco Bell’s newest recombination of beef, cheese, and flour tortilla. But not all advertising is alike.

Not all television advertising seeks to persuade us through repetition and sledgehammer exhortations to buy, buy, buy! Not every ad uses the mind-numbingly blunt approach of a Shake Weight spot. Many advertisers understand what Paul Messaris calls the “value of indirectness.”² They use humor and evocative imagery to persuade without attacking or numbing the viewer’s sensibilities. And yet, they *all* still seek to persuade us in some fashion.

This chapter explores the form that that persuasion takes. It views commercials as television texts that have developed particular techniques of persuasion in order to serve the economic needs of the industry. We know that ads must sell us products in order to survive, but what the television analyst needs to understand is *how* that selling is accomplished. What ideologically loaded imagery do commercials use and how do they deploy it? How are commodities associated with particular lifestyles, values, and presumptions about the world? How are we encouraged to consume conspicuously? What visual and sound techniques are used to sell? In short, how do economics, ideology, aesthetics, and technology come together in the rhetorical form of the television commercial?

U.S. Linear-TV's Economic Structure

More than any other television texts, commercials are shaped by their economic context. Commercials are produced in a certain way due both to the current state of corporate, transnational economics and to specific aspects of the television economy. Thus, a basic understanding of television's economic structure is one key to understanding the commercial. Unfortunately, U.S. television's economic system in the 2010s is in a state of flux that is unparalleled since the rise to dominance of the major broadcast networks in the 1950s. Huge chunks of the audience that the so-called Big Three (ABC, CBS, NBC) commanded have been lost to VOD portals, the Internet, DVD/Blu-ray disc viewing, video games, cable networks, newer broadcast networks (Fox, WB, UPN, Univision), and a multitude of cable networks. The older broadcast networks have seen their advertising dollars shrink as online industries have relentlessly stolen advertising income from them. It seems clear that the economic models of the past 70 years are fast changing under the impact of the convergence of broadcast (over-the-air) television, theatrical film, cable and satellite services, and digital technologies. No one truly knows where it will all lead, although venture capitalists are betting on the outcome with enormous sums of money. The next few years are going to be very interesting ones for the television industry.

Before we begin discussing commercials we must make one additional caveat. Due to space limitations, we will focus on linear-television advertising as it has functioned in the United States since the network era and not take on the vast expanse of nonlinear, online advertising. Such digital advertising is, of course, a massive business, and it is currently dominated by industry giant Google (a.k.a. Alphabet), which inserts so-called pre-roll commercials before YouTube videos, weaves ads into web pages and Gmail, and interpolates sponsored content within results during Google searches, among other ad placements. Although much of this commercial material borrows persuasive techniques and content from the traditions of linear-TV commercials, digital advertising facilitates forms of interaction that are impossible on linear television. Simply put, the diversity of online commercial texts is too great for us to account for here. Also, we focus our attention on American TV's use of the commercial. Many countries have commercial-free television, while others blend commercially supported programs with noncommercial fare—resulting in distinctly different persuasive strategies. Still, the generalizations we make here about U.S. commercials may find application in other countries' attempts to sell products through video.

In the complicated and quickly changing economic model of advertising-supported linear television, there are five principal players:

1. production companies—who actually create TV programs;
2. wholesalers—networks and syndicators;
3. retailers—local over-the-air stations, cable systems, and DBS (direct broadcast satellite) systems;
4. advertisers—targeting national, regional, and local audiences;
5. consumers—that is, viewers.

We'll begin our consideration of commercials by outlining the basic structure of U.S. linear

broadcasting. We'll then explain how advertising fits into this structure.

Diverging Channels and Converging Corporations: Narrowcasting and Media Mergers

In the earliest years of U.S. television broadcasting, corporations produced and sponsored programs such as the enormously popular *Texaco Star Theatre* (1948–55). However, direct sponsorship of individual programs did not last long. An advertising model began to dominate in the 1950s in which production companies, advertisers, and wholesale/retail broadcasters were quite distinct and separate. Production companies were either independent producers or subsidiaries of large motion-picture companies and were not owned by advertisers or broadcast networks. In the 1950s and 1960s, independent studio Desilu Productions, for instance, produced *I Love Lucy* and *Star Trek* (1966–69), among others. It rented these programs' broadcast rights—for a specified length of time—to wholesalers such as CBS and NBC (in the cases of *I Love Lucy* and *Star Trek*, respectively), which provided them to their affiliated stations. The affiliates, most of whom were not actually owned by the networks, were the retail outlets that “sold” their wares to the consumers/viewers. (Certain key stations in large cities were owned and operated by the networks and known as O&Os.) After the initial broadcast run, the studios—not the networks—syndicated programs directly to local stations or rented broadcast rights to wholesale syndicators, which handled distribution. From the 1950s to the 1980s, U.S. governmental regulation and economic tradition separated production companies, wholesalers, and retailers.

Synergy Within Transnational Corporations

In the 1980s, the loosening of governmental regulation coincided with significant technological changes and colossal corporate mergers. At a time when the federal government was permitting large, merged, **transnational corporations (TNCs)** to stake a claim on more and more of the media terrain, there were also new technologies for delivering programming to television sets—principally, cable, DBS, and videocassette (see [Chapter 14](#) for a discussion of the political economy of TNCs). The number of television channels received in the average U.S. home increased from fewer than ten to dozens. In 2008, for instance, the average household could receive 118 diverse channels (ironically, the average viewer watched no more than 16 of those on a regular basis).³ And, to complicate matters further, we've also seen the explosion of competing types of video screens—cell phone, computer, and handheld video game screens—that are delivering images/sounds that may include conventional TV programming content but also feature applications for a vast variety of information and entertainment.

This divergence of programming and technology, however, has been matched by a convergence of media corporations. One recent significant example of such convergence is Comcast Corporation's acquisition of a majority of stock (51 percent) in NBC Universal. This deal, approved early in 2011, means that a company that is already the largest cable operator and the largest Internet service provider now controls a major broadcast network. Another massive merger is in its final stages as of this writing (summer 2017), assuming the deal between media giants AT&T and Time Warner clears antitrust hurdles. And so, fewer and

fewer corporations are responsible for more and more programming. The largest corporations have their fingers in numerous media pies.

From the industry perspective, a diversity of holdings encourages a certain synergy among them. One unit within a conglomerate should be able to help out another. For example, NBC Universal and its subsidiaries—the NBC network, individual television stations, Universal Pictures (theatrical film production), and Universal Parks & Resorts—can nurture one another (see [Table 6.1](#)). NBC-affiliated stations might run commercials and other spots to help support the release of the latest Universal movie, which may then even wind up as the basis for a ride in a theme park. In fact, one of the factors that delayed Comcast’s acquisition of NBC was that it might permit a bit too much synergy—if Comcast were to privilege NBC affiliates on its cable service and block NBC’s competitors. Consequently, government regulators looked very closely at the Comcast–NBC merger, the first of its kind between a major cable provider and a major broadcast network. And they have been similarly concerned about the AT&T–Time Warner merger.

[Table 6.1](#) Select NBC Universal and Comcast Media Assets

Television Networks	NBC, Telemundo, USA Network, Syfy, Chiller, CNBC, MSNBC, NBCSN, Bravo, Golf, The Weather Channel, NBC Universo, and Oxygen
Television Production and Distribution	NBC Entertainment, NBC Universal Sports & Olympics, Telemundo Television Studios
Television Stations	28 NBC and Telemundo O&O stations
Radio	NBC News Radio (on iHeartRadio)
Film Production and Distribution	Universal Pictures, Focus Features, Universal Pictures Home Entertainment
Online Entities	Hulu, Fandango, Seeso
Theme Parks	Universal Parks & Resorts
Notable Comcast Media Assets	E! Entertainment, Golf and G4 channels

Source: “Company Overview,” *Comcast*, tv.crit.com/find/comcast.

Synergy can be quite complicated and contradictory, however. Mike Budd, Steve Craig, and Clay Steinman discuss an example of failed synergy within the Disney corporation:

In 1997, Wind Dancer Production Group, a partner in *Home Improvement*, sued Disney, claiming that the company allowed ABC (its newly acquired network) to renew the show’s contract for a smaller licensing fee than the program was worth, effectively cutting into Wind Dancer’s profits. As the *Wall Street Journal* put it, “Call it the dark side of synergy: the not-unanticipated consequence of having both the suppliers and the distributors of TV programs and movies under one single roof. In today’s Hollywood, deal-makers are increasingly wrestling with a tricky question: ‘How hard a bargain can you drive when, in essence, you’re negotiating with yourself?’”⁴

Moreover, synergy is undercut by long-standing contracts that predate corporate mergers and

splits. Consider the example of *Frasier*. Even though Viacom owned both CBS and Paramount, which produced *Frasier* during its first run, the program was not broadcast on the CBS network. Rather, it appeared on NBC, where it began airing well before Viacom acquired CBS. (And, subsequently, Viacom and CBS have split, making the whole issue moot!)

TV Ratings: Coin of the Realm

Production companies, networks, syndicators, local stations—all of these entities rely on sponsors to make money. Some do so directly and others indirectly, but the ultimate source of most money in the linear-television economic system is advertisers. Broadcasters ostensibly sell broadcast time to advertisers, but, of course, what they are really selling is TV viewers and *their* time. Consequently, the value of broadcast time is determined by its **ratings**—by estimates of the number of viewers and, equally importantly, the types of viewers who are watching. On a regular basis, the one TV program that typically commands the highest price for its ads is the NFL Super Bowl, which is also the program that usually carries the highest ratings for the year. In fact, the 2015 Super Bowl between the New England Patriots and the Seattle Seahawks set a new record as the most watched U.S. television program of all time—bringing in some 114.4 million viewers to the NBC telecast.⁵ Presumably, this justified NBC's asking fee of approximately \$4.5 million for each 30-second spot—compared to under \$500,000 for spots on the most expensive contemporary, nonfootball show, *Empire*.⁶

Super Bowl commercials are not just the most expensive. The Super Bowl has come to attract television's most innovative and prestigious commercials as well—beginning with a strikingly Orwellian commercial that heralded Apple's introduction of the Macintosh computer in 1984 (see description on p. 152–53). The commercials have come to be as much a part of the Super Bowl spectacle as the game itself, especially considering the frequently lopsided scores. It's not surprising, therefore, that broadcast, print, and online news media give substantial coverage to the commercials themselves. Each year, for instance, *USA Today* invites its readers to view and vote for their favorites on the "Super Bowl Ad Meter" on its website.

In contemporary television, the size of the audience is not the only determining economic factor. Lower ratings do not automatically mean less revenue. Many advertisers are looking for very specific audiences, for a particular **demographic** group. The explosion in the number of linear-TV channels in the 1980s has resulted in a phenomenon known within the industry as narrowcasting. Instead of *broadcasting* to a large but mixed audience, these channels narrowly define their viewing audience and hope to find a limited, but homogenous, demographic population for advertisers. MTV made its fortune on this premise—delivering a much smaller audience than broadcast networks but filling its audience with a young crowd with disposable income. It's easy to see how advertisers for music, cosmetics, hygiene products, and the like would be attracted to MTV. Indeed, the 18-to-49-year-old demographic is the most highly prized age group for most advertisers. A similar narrowcasting strategy is customary in other specialized channels: Food Network, Court TV, Syfy, Cartoon, Golf, and so on. Moreover, the Internet is the ultimate in narrowcasting, with entire sites devoted to topics as particular as *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*, *The Gallery of Ill-Fitting Pants*, *Modern Moist Towelette Collecting*, and *The Sheep Brain Dissection Guide*.⁷

As one might imagine, these narrowly defined channels necessitate advertising techniques

that are distinctly designed for that limited slice of the audience pie. What persuades viewers of MTV is not the same as what persuades viewers of the Golf channel or of general interest networks such as ABC, CBS, and NBC. Since ratings and demographics define these narrowcasters, it is essential to understand how ratings function during this era of increasing specialization.

Nielsen Media Research has long dominated TV audience measurement in the U.S. Arthur C. Nielsen began developing methods for measuring radio listeners in 1923. These methods were modified for use on television in 1950 and have been the ratings standard ever since. Although Nielsen's supremacy has been challenged in recent years by new audience-ratings services that specialize in measuring viewers' engagement on social media, Nielsen ratings remain a powerful force in the U.S. television economy. Networks use them to determine whether programs will live or die and what their advertising rates will be.

Anyone with a casual interest in the TV industry is familiar with the term "Nielsen ratings," but it's worth noting that these "ratings" are not ratings in the sense that they evaluate or rate programs, as a TV critic might. They do not analyze the program's characteristics, but, rather, they are solely concerned with the behavior of the audience. Additionally, Nielsen ratings do not indicate how much or how little viewers enjoy a program or even whether viewers might dislike a program that they watch regularly. They also do not explain what meanings viewers construct from TV. The Nielsen ratings data are quantitative measurements, indicating how many viewers watch and who they are by aggregating them into demographic groups. Nielsen Media Research itself clarifies its perspective: "Our ratings aren't qualitative evaluations of how much a program is 'liked.' Instead, they're the simplest, most democratic measurement: how many people watched."⁸

Nielsen compiles its ratings by tracking television use in a limited sample of U.S. homes. Obviously, it doesn't ask each of the over 300 million U.S. residents what they watch on TV. Instead, Nielsen records viewing behavior through People Meters it installs in approximately 20,000 households, which is less than two-hundredths of one percent of the 118.4 million households in the U.S. that have television sets (numbers based on the 2016–17 TV season).⁹ People Meters are brick-sized devices that sit near the television set and automatically record that it is on and that it is tuned to a specific channel. The people in the vicinity of the TV are equipped with a remote control device with a button assigned to each of them. They push their assigned buttons to indicate when they start/stop watching TV.

People Meters are not the only method Nielsen uses to measure the audience. Four times a year, during periods known as **sweeps**, Nielsen selects viewers in **designated market areas (DMAs)**—cohesive metropolitan zones—to fill in diaries accounting for a week's worth of TV watching. The origin of the term "sweeps" is rather obscure, but Nielsen provides the following explanation:

These measurement periods are called "sweeps" because Nielsen Media Research ... collects and processes the diaries in a specific order. The diaries from the Northeast regions are processed first and then swept up around the country, from the South, to the Midwest and finally ending with the West.¹⁰

In addition to diaries and People Meters, Nielsen uses special types of television set meters in the largest DMAs. These meters gather information only about the set's off/on status and its

tuning, not who is in the room watching. Nielsen also monitors the use of DVRs, factoring in programs that were recorded, but only if they are watched within a short period of time.

Through these processes, Nielsen is able, in theory, to measure who is viewing what. There are significant problems with these systems. As noted above, they do not gauge viewers' feelings about programs and commercials. The Nielsen numbers tell us nothing about how viewers interpret the programs they watch. They tell us only where viewers are bobbing along in the television flow. And there is some controversy about how effectively Nielsen measures that. In order for People Meters and diaries to be accurate, viewers must be both honest and diligent in recording their viewing habits. But there's little in the TV-viewing experience that encourages diligence. How do we know that a viewer hasn't left the TV on while she takes a nap or he changes the baby's diaper? Or perhaps a viewer might listen to a soap opera playing in the living room while he is in the kitchen, washing dishes, and can't be bothered to push his button on the People Meter's remote control.

One may think of circumstances that might degrade the accuracy of the Nielsen ratings, but this has little impact on the television industry's acceptance of their validity when it comes time to determine advertising rates. As Nielsen explains, "ratings are used like currency in the marketplace of advertiser-supported TV."¹¹ Despite the Nielsen ratings' inadequacies and problems, they are still the coin of the realm. Networks sell viewers to advertisers based upon the Nielsen numbers. The Nielsen ratings thus establish the exchange rate under which advertisers purchase broadcast time. Using these numbers, broadcasters promise to deliver a certain number of viewers at a specific cost to the advertiser. Viewers are usually measured in thousands, but, oddly, this rate is not known in the business as "CPT," as in "cost per thousand." Instead, it takes the acronym **CPM** or **cost per mil**—which stems from *mille*, the Latin word for thousand.

As you can see in [Table 6.2](#), which shows the top ten programs for the week ending March 19, 2017, the Nielsen numbers actually consist of two components: the **rating** and the **share**. Both are calculated as percentages of viewers.

[Table 6.2](#) Top Ten Network Primetime Series: Total Households week ending March 19, 2017

Rank	Program Name	Households			Viewers
		Rating	Share	Audience	
1	NCIS	8.7	15	10.3	14.2
2	THIS IS US	7.9	13	9.3	12.8
3	VOICE	7.3	12	8.6	12.2
4	VOICE-TUE	7.1	12	8.4	11.7
5	60 MINUTES	6.7	12	7.9	10.9
6	NCIS: NEW ORLEANS	6.6	12	7.8	10.0
7	LITTLE BIG SHOTS	5.7	10	6.7	9.6
7	NCIS: LOS ANGELES	5.7	10	6.7	9.0
9	GREY'S ANATOMY	5.3	10	6.2	8.0
9	BACHELOR, THE	5.3	9	6.3	8.4

All numbers are based on viewing plus same-day DVR playback. Audience and Viewers numbers are in millions. Copyright 2017 Nielsen Media Research.

The rating indicates the percentage of households with TV sets that are tuned into a specific program. Or, Nielsen explains it this way:

The estimate of the size of television audience relative to the total universe [the total persons or homes in a given population], expressed as a percentage. [The rating is] the estimated percent of all TV households or persons tuned to a specific station.¹²

Since Nielsen estimates that TV households number 118.4 million in the U.S., the rating percentage shows how many households out of that 118.4 million were actually tuned in to a specific program.¹³ *NCIS* scored an 8.7 rating in our sample week, which made it the top-rated show. This rating indicates that 8.7 percent of TV households watched the program. We are then able to figure the actual number of tuned-in households by calculating 8.7 percent of 118.4 million. That result would be 10.3 million households. And, based on additional data from its People Meters and other sources, Nielsen estimated that 14.2 million individual viewers in those households were actually watching. However, as far as the key “adults 18–49” demographic is concerned, *NCIS* was rated much lower that week—coming in at number 15 for this highly prized age group. When children under 18 and adults over 49 are excluded from the numbers, the top-rated program that week was *This Is Us* (2016–).

The share is different from the rating. The share measures the percentage of households with TV sets *turned on at that particular time* that tuned into a specific program. Nielsen refers to this as the **HUT**—“**households using television.**” In our *NCIS* example, the program earned a 15 share—meaning that 15 percent of the households watching TV at 8:00 p.m. Eastern Time, March 14, 2017, tuned in to *NCIS*. Thus, while the *rating* marks the percentage of a relatively stable number (total households with TV), the *share* is the percentage of a constantly fluctuating number since the HUT varies throughout the day and the year—with summertime being the season with the least viewing.

If you find all these rating/share numbers confusing, consider this simplified example. In a ten-home universe, six households have their TVs turned on, and three are tuned into channel 5 to watch *NCIS*:

- Rating = 30
3 (sets tuned to channel 5) divided by 10 (total homes) = 30%
- Share = 50
3 (sets tuned to channel 5) divided by 6 (turned-on sets) = 50%

In light of the calculation of rating and share, it is interesting to consider how viewing of the major broadcast networks has precipitously declined. In the 1952–53 season (the first one for which Nielsen ratings are available), ABC, CBS, and NBC had a combined average rating of 74.8. In other words, three-quarters of the TV households in the U.S. watched these three networks all the time. By the 2000s, that number had fallen to less than one-quarter of the TV households. Even if we include newer broadcast networks (Fox, CW, Univision, and so on), that rating is still not even half of what the big three used to command. Additionally, the top program in that first ratings season was CBS’s *I Love Lucy*, with a hefty 67.3 rating. Two-thirds of the TV nation regularly watched it each week. In contrast, the top show from the week discussed above, *NCIS*, commanded a comparatively meager 8.7 rating—approximately one-eighth of *I Love Lucy*’s. Broadcast networks and their programs clearly no longer command the enormous audiences they once did. The dispersion of the audience is obvious. Advertisers have had to adapt their commercials to this new world of increasingly narrow, but more homogenous, audiences.

Paying for “Free” TV

Every time you visit the store and buy, say, one of Procter & Gamble's many products that you saw advertised on television, you are paying for "free" TV. Portions of those products' purchase prices were added to the products to ameliorate P&G's advertising budget, which can top \$2 billion per year for television alone.¹⁴ How do P&G and other multinational corporations pay for linear television? For the most part, there is no direct contact between TV's sponsors and the companies that actually create TV programs—although there are significant exceptions to this, such as P&G's production of soap operas. Also, many advertisers pay production companies and networks to insert their products directly into programs. This **product integration** (a.k.a. **product placement**) is an increasingly common strategy for brands to cope with the demise of the commercial break in the video-on-demand era. If a house flipper is driving a prominently displayed GMC truck to the job site on a home-improvement show, then the viewer won't be able to skip past the product as they might a 30-second commercial. Nielsen tracks the impact of product integration so that sponsors have a better sense of its value. For instance, during April 2010, Nielsen found that the top three most recalled product placements were:

1. Victoria's Secret in *The Office*: "Michael interrupts meeting to offer Donna a retail store's catalog";
2. Ford in *Cold Case*: "Cole Austin points to his Mustang and says he still owns it";
3. Skype in *Law & Order: SVU*: "Joyce tells Benson and Stabler that she talks to Andrew online."¹⁵

Product integration can be rather deviously added during post-production, too—as when digital trickery was used to place a box of Club Crackers on a coffee table in a *Yes, Dear* (2000–06) scene where it didn't physically exist.¹⁶ Product integration is thus more common than a sponsor producing a program itself, but most advertisers do neither and have little influence over programs during their actual production. Instead, they must deal with the sales departments of TV's wholesalers and retailers.

The TV and advertising industries classify advertising expenditures in five categories: network, cable, local, syndication, and national spot. "Network" refers to time bought on the major broadcast networks, which, as of 2018, are ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, CW, and Ion. The term may also include Spanish-language broadcast networks: Univision, Telemundo, UniMás (formerly Telefutera and now owned by Univision), and TV Azteca. These broadcast networks are also sometimes called "terrestrial networks" because they transmit through earthbound local stations. "Cable" designates commercials on more specialized networks such as ESPN, MTV, and CNN that are delivered through a system of satellites to cable providers or directly to viewers through services such as DirecTV. "Local" advertising is time bought on individual broadcast stations and cable services by local merchants. Network and cable purchases are not the only way advertisers reach a national audience. Advertisers may also buy time on syndicated programs that are aired nationwide on local stations and cable networks. Or they may place their ads directly on numerous local stations and cable services through "national spot" advertising. With spot commercials the advertiser may promote its products in specific regions without going to the expense of a full national or network campaign. Katz Television Group, for example, represents nearly 800 television stations in DMAs across the U.S. Using Katz or another national representative, a manufacturer of air conditioners based in Phoenix

could buy air time throughout the Southwest and South while minimizing its expenditures in New England.

Despite declining ratings, the general-interest broadcast networks still command a large portion of television advertisers' dollars. Even in 2009, during a continuing worldwide recession, U.S. advertisers still bought over \$25 billion worth of time on network television, or approximately 41 percent of all television advertising expenditures.¹⁷ However, one recent trend in TV advertising has been to seek smaller, but more cohesive, audiences. This is reflected in the amount of money spent on cable networks, which occupy specialized niches. During television's boom years, the percentage increases for cable networks have vastly outpaced those of the traditional broadcast networks, and during the current bust years, broadcast networks have lost advertising more quickly than cable has.

Which companies buy this time, buy these audiences? As you might well imagine, TV ad purchases are dominated by huge transnational corporations. In particular, the top five advertisers on network television as the 2010s began were, in order, Verizon Communications, AT&T, Ford Motor Company, Chrysler Group, and Honda Motor Company.¹⁸ More interesting, perhaps, are the types of goods that are sold on television—as shown in [Table 6.3](#), the Television Bureau of Advertising's classification of the top categories of network-TV advertising in 2009. In the U.S. at least, these are the products and services one sees most on network television. In the following section, we'll explore the meanings commonly associated with these commodities.

[Table 6.3 Top Categories of Network-TV Advertising \(2009\)](#)

	<i>Category</i>	<i>Spending (millions)</i>
1	Automotive	\$2,433,283,100
2	Communications/Telecommunications	\$2,198,044,800
3	Prescription Medication & Pharmaceutical Houses	\$1,683,099,800
4	Restaurants	\$1,421,493,800
5	Motion Pictures	\$1,283,609,800
6	Financial	\$1,079,157,400
7	Toiletries & Cosmetics	\$1,078,929,400
8	Food and Food Products	\$868,933,700
9	Medicines and Remedies (excluding Rx)	\$700,744,300
10	Insurance	\$653,697,300

Source: *TV Basics: A Report on the Growth and Scope of Television*, Television Bureau of Advertising,

www.tvb.org/media/file/TVB_FF_TV_Basics.pdf, accessed November 29, 2010.

The Polysemy of Commodities

Television advertising presents a discourse on modern life in a culture based on buying and selling. It tells us what it means to be a consumer and suggests activities we should pursue as consumers. Principally, it is telling us to buy commodities and services, but often it does so in quite an indirect manner. Many ads conceal their function as advertising and simply appear to be short stories or evocative vignettes about the human condition. All ads—regardless of their bluntness or subtlety—are inscribed with packets of meanings for viewers to decode. All ads contain the fundamental meaning “Buy this product,” but they also suggest various other meanings that range from “Buy this product *and* you will become beautiful” to “Buy this product *and* you will be well liked” to “Buy this product *and* your dog’s fur will really shine.”

In this section we consider what comes after “buy this product.” We look at the socially defined meanings, values, and illusions—the polysemy—that are commonly employed in the service of selling products. TV commercials present an ongoing discourse about objects and attempt to connect them to a range of meanings. We may identify eight broad categories of such meanings:

1. luxury, leisure, and conspicuous consumption;
2. individualism;
3. the natural;
4. folk culture and tradition;
5. novelty and progress;
6. sexuality and romance;
7. alleviation of pain, fear/anxiety, and guilt;
8. utopia and escape from dystopia.

Although this list does not exhaust all of the meanings that commercials invoke, it does contain the principal values that advertisers use to entice consumers.

Luxury, Leisure, and Conspicuous Consumption

The end graphic in an ad for the Lincoln LS sedan reads simply, “Lincoln. American luxury.” Car companies such as Lincoln, Cadillac, and Mercedes have long traded on their value as luxury goods. The same could be said of Rolex watches, De Beers diamonds, *haute couture* fashion, and high-end electronics. When ads draw upon the notion of luxury, they imply that the goods advertised go beyond filling basic human needs for food, clothing, and shelter. Luxury items, by definition, are ones that are not necessities, that one could do without and still subsist. In addition to providing material comfort and utility, luxurious cars, jewelry, clothing, and electronics serve a significant social function. Such goods offer a way for the consumer to resemble or emulate members of an elevated social class.

The emulation of higher classes was initially conceptualized by Thorstein Veblen as the nineteenth century came to a close. Veblen also coined the term “conspicuous consumption” to refer to the showy, excessive purchase of nonessential, luxury goods. In his book *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), he argues that members of the leisure class (persons who need not

work for a living) must buy expensive commodities in a conspicuous manner in order to maintain their social status. Conspicuous consumption becomes an emblem, a sign, of their wealth and power. Individuals who are not quite that wealthy, but aspire to be so, *emulate* the leisure class by consuming conspicuously.

Emulation need not just be about wealth. When consumers buy name-brand clothing in order to adopt a certain style of dress, for instance, they seek to belong to a specific social group. Balmain jackets are no better at keeping one's body warm than generic garments, but they serve an important function nonetheless. They allow the wearer to emulate members of a social group (urban, hip hop). Emulation is also the central strategy at work in all celebrity endorsements of products. Why would Nike have paid Michael Jordan huge sums of money and created a shoe line bearing his name (the Air Jordan) if it didn't think that viewers, especially young viewers, would want to emulate him and wear the same shoes as he did? As the Gatorade campaign of the late 1990s suggested, many advertisers banked on teenage boys' desire to "be like Mike."

It's easy to dismiss such emulation and conspicuous consumption of luxury goods as crass social climbing and superficial status seeking, but, as Ellen Seiter writes (paraphrasing anthropologist Mary Douglas),

any distinction between necessary and unnecessary goods fails to account for the crucial importance of consumption for ceremonial purposes, for social cohesion, and for the maintenance of networks of support.... To condemn people to a level of mere subsistence consumption is to exclude them from the basis for success and security within a social network.¹⁹

In modern societies, what we own shapes where we fit into societies' networks of work and play. Moreover, as Seiter discusses, children acquire crucial social skills through "consumption events": "birthday parties, holiday celebrations, visits at friends' houses, and so on."²⁰ TV commercials thrive upon and exploit the central function that consumption has come to have in social networking.

Individualism

One long-standing conflict in U.S. ideology is the rights of the individual versus those of the community. We enter into a social contract with the government and other citizens that holds that we will limit certain freedoms in exchange for a civil, well-ordered society. For instance, we have the capability of driving through the center of town at 80 m.p.h., but we don't. We observe traffic rules because we know that they serve the overall good of the community. Advertising, however, need not follow these rules as strictly. Many ads tacitly override the social contract in favor of individualist values—both good and bad. These individualist values are often based in the self: self-fulfillment, self-reliance, self-expression, self-absorption, even simple selfishness.

The U.S. Army entreats young men and women to "Be all you can be," to fulfill themselves and learn self-reliance through the military service—thereby repressing the discipline and obedience that attend that experience. Nike's "Just do it" campaign intimates that determination and self-expression will come to all who wear its shoes. And McDonald's has

sold billions of Big Macs by telling viewers that it's okay to be a little self-absorbed and selfish: "You deserve a break today. So get up and get away to McDonald's." Leave behind your responsibilities to others, it implies, and escape to the comfort of a fast-food restaurant.

Pitching individualism in a mass medium such as television is a tricky business. Consider the tag line of a Burger King campaign begun in 1973. "Have it your way" implies that the individual is unique and uniquely deserving of special privileges—a hamburger prepared a certain way. By boasting that "Special orders don't upset *us*," Burger King's jingle taunted McDonald's for its assembly-line approach. But there is a fundamental problem when uniqueness is marketed by mass media. Burger King cannot provide hamburgers uniquely prepared a hundred million different ways. Rather, "your way" must be restricted to a fairly limited number of options within a very controlled environment. You can get your hamburger with or without tomatoes, but you cannot get it marinated overnight in an assortment of seasonings and broiled over dampened mesquite chips. Thus, the individualism that Burger King is selling is not unique. As it turns out, "your way" is the same way as millions of others'. Similarly, Budweiser commercials may declare, "This Bud's for you," but the TV viewer knows that this is not literally true, that Anheuser-Busch didn't brew that bottle of beer to the viewer's own specifications.

"Advertising shepherds herds of individuals," notes Leslie Savan.²¹ By this she means that television addresses viewers as individuals, not as a group. It invites them to experience life as individuals, to break away from conformity and establish their own identity. This leads to what she identifies as mass media advertising's "most basic paradox": "Join us and become unique."²² Clothing and other fashion products often appeal to individualist values and suggest to viewers that they will stand out from the crowd if they purchase these products, but since commercials are simultaneously encouraging millions of other viewers to purchase those same products they are perpetually creating or reinforcing fashion-based crowds of individuals. Thus, at the same time that commercials encourage viewers to be self-reliant individuals, they also entreat them to emulate others and join certain groups, enter certain networks.

An ad campaign of Gap commercials from 1999 illustrated this paradoxical "herd of individuals" appeal. In one of these spots, a group of models in their twenties stands in front of a white background, faces the camera directly, and lip syncs to Depeche Mode's "Just Can't Get Enough" (Figure 6.1; tvcrit.com/find/cantgetenough). It concludes with the Gap's logo and the tagline, "Everybody in leather." Other commercials in the series ended with "Everybody in cords" and "Everybody in vests." By suggesting (commanding?) "Everybody in ..." the Gap uses the appeal of networking and emulation—hoping the viewer will think, "I want to *be like* these models," which included Aaron Lohr, Alex Greenwald, and Monet Mazur before they each hit peak popularity. Significantly, these models do not interact with one another—in stark contrast to a contemporary series of Gap khaki ads in which dancers gleefully perform swing dances with each other (Figure 6.2; tvcrit.com/find/gapswing). The khaki dancers function as a joyous, well-coordinated group, but the "Everybody in ..." ads present a crowd of isolated individuals. They're all wearing leather/cords/vests, but in different ways. Their dress and body language (they all strike different poses) set them up as individuals even as the framing and song pull them together as a group. Hence, they are paradoxically alone together—much like the millions of viewers simultaneously watching TV from their separate homes.



[Figure 6.1](#) Depeche Mode's "Just Can't Get Enough" accompanies a Gap commercial: "Everybody in leather."

The Natural

Commodities may be associated with nature and aspects of the natural—wholesomeness, healthfulness, purity. Medical, food, and beverage products often emphasize their natural ingredients and thereby suggest that the products are wholesome, healthy, and pure. Pertussin cough syrup was promoted in the 1960s as a “safe *natural* way to relieve night cough.” Its ads resemble those of homeopathic medicine, claiming it is “made from nature’s healing medicinals.” The ads don’t specify which medicinals, but they do stress that Pertussin does not contain “codeine, antihistamines, and nerve-dulling drugs.” Post Grape-Nuts cereal was similarly advertised as the “Back-to-nature cereal” in TV commercials from the early 1970s featuring naturalist Euell Gibbons (tvcrit.com/find/grapenuts). He claims, “Its *natural*, sweet taste reminds me of *wild* hickory nuts” (emphasis added). Gibbons’s comment is a bit disingenuous because Grape-Nuts contains no nuts—hickory or otherwise—but rather is manufactured from wheat and barley (which, granted, are natural ingredients).

In similar fashion, commercials for Coors Light beer make obvious connections between the natural qualities of the Rocky Mountains and Coors beer by suggesting that you “Tap the Rockies” (tvcrit.com/find/coorslight). Coors emphasizes its beer contains “Rocky Mountain water” and no additives or preservatives—alluding to nature’s purity and repressing the company’s exploitation of natural resources in order to make beverages. There have, however, been attacks on its use of the majestic images of the Rockies. In 1997, “Tap the Rockies” billboards in upstate New York were vandalized with the accusation, “Rape the Rockies, racist scum, toxic polluters.”²³

Another sense of naturalness is that which is opposed to the technological or artificial. Makeup products commonly present this illusion of the natural. An ad for CoverGirl Clean Sheer Stick, for example, promises, “It doesn’t look like makeup—just great skin.” As with many “beauty” products, the appeal of Clean Sheer Stick is its ability to conceal its artifice and

appear natural. Makeup such as this promises to transform a person's natural face (just as certain bras and other undergarments promise to transform the body) while hiding the artificiality of that transformation.



[Figure 6.2 Dancers dressed in khaki pants gleefully connect with one another in a Gap commercial.](#)

It should be noted that the natural is not always viewed in a positive light. Advertising often qualifies its use of the natural world. Post's Grape-Nuts commercial extolled its "back-to-nature" virtues at a time (1960s to 1970s) when this phrase signified a new environmental consciousness, but in the early part of the twentieth century Post seemed just as proud of the scientific processing of the natural world as it was of its naturalness. Text on Grape-Nuts boxes from that time proclaims that Grape-Nuts is "a food containing the natural nutritive elements of these field grains *thoroughly and scientifically baked*" (emphasis added).²⁴ Nature is all well and good, apparently, but only if science is baked into it. Even natural beauty, as alluded to in the CoverGirl commercial, has not always been universally admired. In some circles, it is associated with coarseness and vulgarity or seen as a trait of the presumably inferior working class. The royal French court during Louis XVI's and Marie Antoinette's reign (1774–93), for instance, preferred ostentatious powdered wigs and a blatantly artificial style of makeup and clothing. A more recent example is Goth fashion—including dyed hair, extremely pale complexions (often achieved through makeup), black lipstick, and nail polish colors that are "not-seen-in-nature."²⁵ The Goths and the Louis XVI court have little interest in looking "natural." Instead of valuing the natural, cultures such as these emphasize otherworldliness, a certain sense of sophistication, refinement, and connoisseurship.

Folk Culture and Tradition

Closely allied to the imagery of naturalness is folk culture. Advertising calls upon folk culture to represent traditional principles such as trustworthiness, simplicity, authenticity, and raw patriotism. "We make money the old-fashioned way," intones John Houseman in the Smith-Barney ad, "We earn it." Chevrolet's television commercials have long rested on folk associations—especially in its truck ads. From 1986 to 1993, the "Heartbeat of America" campaign presented numerous images of folk life in the rural United States and thereby evoked the virtues of small-town life. Earlier, during the contentious 1970s, its ads sang the

virtues of “baseball, hot dogs, apple pie, and Chevrolet” (tvcrit.com/find/chevbaseball). In this instance, small-town, folk values are blended with patriotism and nostalgia for a bygone era. Baseball (“America’s pastime”) and hot dogs connote the positive values of team sport (athletic prowess, cooperation, loyalty, courage in the face of adversity), while apple pie carries implications of motherly nurturing and down-home nutrition.

The Chevrolet truck ad goes like this:

In the years that I been livin’ lots of things have surely changed. Lots of things have come and gone, some even came back again. But through all the many changes, some things are for sure. And you know that’s a mighty fine feelin’, kinda makes you feel secure. ’Cause I love baseball, hot dogs, apple pie, and Chevrolet.²⁶

Irony is not normally associated with folk discourse, but Gallo Winery’s Bartles & Jaymes wine cooler ads playfully parody folk narratives. They present the ostensible owners of the company as a couple of genial old codgers—Frank Bartles and Ed Jaymes. Actually, it is pure fiction, invented by Gallo’s advertising agency, Ogilvy & Mather, in order to sell a new alcoholic beverage to young professionals. Over the course of seven years (1985–92) and some 230 commercials, Bartles (played by David Rufkaur) chronicled their marketing endeavors ([Figure 6.3](#)).



[Figure 6.3](#) David Rufkaur (right) and Dick Maugg perform as Frank Bartles and Ed Jaymes, respectively, the fictional creators of Bartles & Jaymes wine coolers.

The first Bartles & Jaymes wine cooler ad’s text is as follows (tvcrit.com/find/bartles):

Hello there. My name is Fred Bartles and this is Ed Jaymes. You know, it occurred to Ed the other day that between his fruit orchard and my premium grade wine vineyard, we could make a truly superior premium-grade wine cooler. It sounded good to me. So Ed took out a second on his house, and wrote to Harvard for an MBA, and now we’re preparing to enter the wine cooler business. We will try to keep you posted on how it’s going. And thank you very much for your support.

The folk values incarnated in the Bartles character included guilelessness, simplicity, and honest directness. Much like the Chevrolet spots that revel in the past as a gentler, “simpler” time, Bartles appears to be from another era where selling products is a direct, honorable process. Sitting on his front porch with a wooden screen door behind him, he seems out of touch with the principles of slick contemporary marketing campaigns. There is considerable irony here, of course, since all of Bartles’s guilelessness is a sham, and the ad’s honest directness was fabricated by a high-powered advertising agency.

Unlike many commercials that rely upon folk culture, however, the Bartles & Jaymes series presumes that viewers are themselves wary of appeals based on baseball, hot dogs, and apple pie. The wine cooler was designed for sophisticated young professionals who might be skeptical of small-town values and bald-faced sentiment. The ads subtly play to that urban audience by softly parodying small-town perspectives—as when the first ad suggests Jaymes would write to Harvard for a Master’s in business. The humor of many of the spots relies upon the viewer’s awareness of marketing jargon and strategies. “Thank you for your support” is a hollow phrase commonly used in marketing, advertising, and PR. When we hear it coming sincerely from the mouth of a country bumpkin, we laugh at the incongruity.

In a sense, the Bartles & Jaymes ads have it both ways: they appeal to viewers’ desires for a simpler era at the same time they chide the simplicity of that era—inviting the viewers in on the joke by alluding to the complicated machinations of modern marketing.

Novelty and Progress

The flip side of advertising’s appeal to folk culture and tradition is its incessant hawking of the new and the merits of progress. Long-standing marketing research shows that consumers are drawn to packaging with the words “new” and “improved” prominent on it. To capitalize on this tendency, advertisers subject us consumers to product improvements which are dubious at best. One commercial for “new mild, new formula” Zest soap promises “new lather,” but it’s hard to imagine what could be strikingly new about bubbles of soap. And the 2001 model of the Dodge Caravan closely resembled other minivans, but nonetheless a spot for it starts with a shot of tulips blooming, the title “Different,” and the claim “We began anew.” It then lists several minor changes. “New, new, new! Dodge Grand Caravan, the best minivan ever.” It concludes with the self-mocking question and a graphic: “And did we mention it’s new? [pause] The All-new Dodge Caravan. Different.” There is nothing that is literally “all-new” or completely different in the world of merchandise. If you changed everything in the design of a minivan, it would no longer be a “minivan.” It’d be something completely new and different. Manufacturers and advertising agencies are not prepared to risk all-out newness.

Part of the appeal of newness and novelty stems from a positive attitude toward progress. Americans are accustomed to regular reports of scientific advances in medicine, physics, and other technological fields where the work of researchers builds upon previous efforts and moves toward particular goals: a cure for cancer, sending a human to the moon, a car that will get 1,000 miles per gallon. Applying the notion of scientific progress to soap, automobiles, or fashion is usually just hyperbole. Zest’s new lather might well be different from its old lather (although even that is debatable), but that doesn’t necessarily mean that it is an advance over the older lather. The new lather is different from—rather than an advance over—the old.

Coca-Cola’s executives learned this lesson the hard way. New Coke received an enormous

publicity campaign in 1985, but it turned into one of the biggest marketing fiascos of the century. Most Coke drinkers found the new, sweeter taste (designed to be closer to Pepsi's formula) was not to their liking. This led Coca-Cola executives to hurriedly reissue Coke's old formula under the name "Coke Classic"—a name that evokes images of a traditional soda fountain and all its folk associations. It's interesting to note that Coca-Cola's marketers changed the position of the word "Coke" in the name when they released Coke Classic. That is, with "New Coke" they emphasized the newness of the product, but with "Coke Classic"—and not "Classic Coke"—they stressed its Coke-ness. There are no casual decisions in the naming of products. Deciding to put the word "Coke" first probably arose from hours of brainstorming and focus groups. Later, in 1992, "New Coke" became "Coke II." After seven years on the market it was presumably no longer new, although it was still being presented as a successor ("II") to standard Coca-Cola. Subsequently, Coke Classic has returned to being the one "true" Coca-Cola and New Coke/Coke II has been phased out altogether.

Sexuality and Romance

It's no secret that sexuality and romance have been associated with thousands of products over the decades of TV's short history. "Sex sells," it has often been said in the advertising industry. One need not look far to find overt references to sex and sexual allure in television commercials—although, of course, U.S. network standards still prohibit nudity (which is quite common in European commercials) or graphic representation of sexual intercourse. Indeed, most of the broadcast networks continue to reject condom commercials. Still, ads for perfume or cologne, lingerie, bathing suits, shampoos, and cosmetics—which often feature women and men in revealing, tight-fitting clothing—are clearly banking on associating sex with their products.

The two most obvious ways that sexual imagery sells are (1) implying that the product will make the viewer more sexually appealing, and (2) associating the product itself with sexuality and thereby stimulating a hormonal rush in order to draw the viewer's attention to it. The first type of appeal is evident in products such as perfumes and shampoos. The second comes into play in ads for beer and cars that have been designed for heterosexual men and have attractive women posing by the products.

Victoria's Secret manages to incorporate *both* of these appeals in its commercials. During the 1999 Super Bowl between the Denver Broncos and the Atlanta Falcons, it advertised a Web-based fashion show by addressing itself principally to male viewers: "The Broncos won't be there. The Falcons won't be there. You won't care." The bulk of the ad consists of images of its minimally dressed models (tv.crit.com/find/vssuperbowl). The "you" in this instance is the male viewer who might be sexually attracted to the women of Victoria's Secret. *Entertainment Weekly* attacked the ad as the "Worst Blatant Exploitation of T&A ['tits-and-ass']" of the Super Bowl ads: "The plot: Jiggle, jiggle, jiggle, Web address. This embarrassingly unsubtle spot announces an upcoming Internet fashion show for the lingerie catalog—because God knows we need more soft-core cyberporn."²⁷

Evidently, the Super Bowl spot hopes to entice men to purchase lingerie for the women in their lives, but, in a commercial for its "Body by Victoria" collection, Victoria's Secret mainly speaks to female viewers. It posted a video to its official YouTube channel with the caption, "Got Spring Fever? Check out the new Body by Victoria collection ... bras you'll want to live

in every day, all season long” ([Figure 6.4](#); tvcrit.com/find/vsbody). The target viewers and the implicit “you” of this ad’s text are certainly not men. This bra is plainly marketed to women themselves and, perhaps secondarily, to men who might buy lingerie for them. The heterosexual male viewer is not excluded from the appeal of this ad, however, as it features conventionally attractive women wearing lingerie and posing provocatively, presumably inciting his libido. In true polysemic fashion, this commercial has room for several sexual interpretations: both, “buy this product and you will become sexier” for women viewers and “this product is itself sexually enticing” for heterosexual male viewers.



[Figure 6.4](#) Victoria’s Secret addresses its female viewers, claiming this is a bra “you’ll want to live in every day, all season long.”

Paul Messaris contends that not all appeals to sexual themes are blatant. Subtle, even covert or hidden, presentations of sexuality occur in “at least three types of situations”:

[F]irst, when sex is being used metaphorically and what the ad is really promising is something else; second, when the link between the product and sex is frowned upon; and, third, when the type of sex is socially unacceptable.²⁸

One famous instance of metaphoric sex is a 1960s commercial for Noxzema shaving cream. In tight close-up, Gunilla Knutson, a former Miss Sweden, suggestively runs her lips across a string of pearls ([Figure 6.5](#); tvcrit.com/find/noxzema). With her distinctly Swedish accent, she breathlessly intones, “Men, nothing takes it off like Noxzema Medicated Shave.” A brass band then begins to blare “The Stripper,” which accompanies close-ups of a man shaving his face ([Figure 6.6](#)). “Take it off,” Knutson commands, “Take it *all* off.”

What is the source of the enduring appeal of this ad? Much like Victoria Secret’s bra ad, this product ostensibly improves the sexual desirability of its user, but the strategy used in its pitch is a metaphoric one. The act of a man removing shaving cream is metaphorically linked to the act of a woman removing clothing: shaving = stripping. The phrase “Take it off” contains the literal meaning of shaving cream removal and the metaphoric meaning of clothing removal. In the 1960s, this was seen to be quite risqué. Messaris argues that metaphoric sex and double entendres continue to be widely used in contemporary advertising as well—especially in commercials associating sex and food. One unlikely example of a recent sex–food association

may be found in a Carl's Jr. commercial promoting its premium salads and featuring Kim Kardashian (tvcrit.com/find/carls). One typically doesn't think of a salad as sexy, but that's exactly the metaphoric point of this commercial. As the narrator asks, "Who says salads can't be hot?" we get a variety of shots of Kardashian sensually eating salad—shot in the manner of a soft-core porn film (Figure 6.7). The meaning is far from subtle.

Messaris's second category of covert sexuality in commercials contains ads in which "the link between the product and sex is disparaged or condemned by public opinion. Cars, liquor, and cigarettes are among the most prominent examples of products in this category."²⁹ If advertisers were to state seriously that their cars, liquor, or tobacco products (which have been banned from U.S. TV ads since 1971) will enable men to attract women for the purpose of sexual activity, viewers would scoff or laugh at the ads. And yet that is exactly the implicit message of many commercials—especially local car commercials—in which conventionally attractive women pose beside various products. Messaris's point is that sexual associations with cars, beer, and other products have not disappeared from U.S. television. Rather, they have just been displaced from unabashed verbal statements to the more subtle language of the visuals.



[*Figure 6.5*](#) *Noxzema Medicated Shave* relies on metaphoric sex for its impact.



[*Figure 6.6*](#) "Take it off. Take it all off."



[Figure 6.7 Kim Kardashian sensually eats a Carl's Jr. salad.](#)

Messaris's third category of implicit sexuality contains forbidden sexual themes. What qualifies as a sexual taboo on broadcast television advertising is, of course, quite tame and circumscribed when compared to online videos, premium channels (e.g., HBO or Showtime), or theatrical films. For instance, bondage and homosexuality are never unabashedly represented in U.S. commercials. They find their way into television commercials mostly through covert allusion—often cloaked in comedy or self-parody. In a Heineken Light commercial from 2016 (tvcrit.com/find/heineken), Neil Patrick Harris, who identifies as gay, extols the virtues of the beer to the “Grill Master,” as he's named on Heineken's YouTube channel—a bearded man tending burgers on a grill ([Figure 6.8](#)). Harris's dialogue alludes to gay sex in heavily coded terms.

Neil Patrick Harris:	“Heineken Light makes it okay to flip another man's meat.”
Grill Master:	“No, no, no. You never flip another man's meat.”
NPH:	“Award-winning Heineken Light is the best light beer you've ever tasted.”
GM:	“That's true. Can I have one?”
NPH:	“Can I flip your meat?” (beat)
GM:	“No.”
NPH:	“Suit yourself.”



[Figure 6.8. Neil Patrick Harris offers to “flip the meat” of the Grill Master, toying with a gay subtext without making it explicit.](#)

The innuendo of this spot could easily be missed or ignored, but it did stir some controversy. *LGBTQ Nation* reported that “Homophobes freak out over new Neil Patrick Harris Heineken Light ad” and an *AdLand* author was perplexed: “I have no idea what the innuendo is because I am not a gay man but I am pretty sure there’s some innuendo here. I feel like a kid watching my parents verbally flirt, I know something is going on but I’m not getting it.”³⁰ From Messaris’s perspective, this commercial has skillfully employed a taboo (in terms of broadcast TV) sexual activity to heighten viewers’ interest in a product. And it has done so without explicitly mentioned gay sex.

Child and teenage sexuality is similarly avoided in the manifest content of TV commercials. Messaris discusses what happened when an advertiser violated this particular taboo in the 1995 Calvin Klein jeans campaign.³¹ The print and TV ads from that campaign feature very young, barely pubescent, models in revealing poses. Many critics of the ads argued that they appealed to the prurient interest of adult male viewers and thus qualified as child pornography. After considerable public protest, Calvin Klein withdrew the ads. Evidently, the commercials were not covert enough for the U.S. media audience.

Alleviation of Pain, Fear/Anxiety, and Guilt

Numerous commercials use a simple narrative formula: Someone is in pain or feeling anxious and the ad’s product alleviates that pain or anxiety. Case closed. All medicinal ads are based on this premise, as are those for many hygiene (e.g., deodorants, mouth washes, feminine douches) and food products. The Alka-Seltzer jingle “Plop, plop, fizz, fizz. Oh, what a relief it is!” unmistakably exemplifies this approach.

Soap operas, several of which used to be produced by hygiene and food giant Procter & Gamble, and other serial narratives are awash with this sort of commercial. It’s interesting to consider how the serial narrative structure is the exact opposite of the narrative in its commercials. Serial stories never reach a definitive ending. Each small conclusion is the basis for a new enigma and further questions. But in commercials presented during serial programs, crises are quickly solved in 30 seconds. A child’s cough is soothed. A woman’s dandruff is controlled. A “tension headache” is eased. Hunger is satisfied. Commercials are small bits of

closure inserted into the serial's vast sea of open-ended narrative.

Guilt is often attached to issues of pain and suffering. Mike Budd, et al. explain how advertisers mount a "guilt campaign":

This involves airing commercials that imply that the viewer is not really a loving mother and homemaker unless she uses Downey to make her towels soft, Pampers to keep her baby dry, and Duncan Hines to bake cakes for her husband and children.³²

Often the guilt is heaped upon the woman by someone observing her not using the sponsor's product. A classic in this vein is the Wisk detergent commercials produced by the BBDO agency and begun in 1968. In this series, a wife and mother is repeatedly shamed for being unable to deal with the "ring around the collar" problem—until, that is, she learns to apply Wisk directly to the offending stains (tvcrit.com/find/wisk). Such ads encourage the viewer to seek alleviation of guilt through the purchase of commodities.

Utopia and Escape From Dystopia

In her consideration of children's advertising and consumer culture, Seiter argues, "Like most popular entertainments, commercials are utopian in many respects—portraying a childhood world more exciting, intense, and exhilarating than everyday life."³³ In Seiter's study, she found that child-centered commercials often counterpose this utopian childhood world to the adult world of restraint and boring responsibilities. Of course, utopianism is not limited to children's commercials. Numerous commercials invite the adult viewer into a utopia of intensity of experience, exhilaration of emotion, and unbridled hedonism (a total lack of responsibility).

Seiter draws upon Richard Dyer's more general discussion of utopianism in film, television, and other mass entertainments. Dyer characterizes utopia as "the image of 'something better' to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide."³⁴ In contrast to the tensions and inadequacies of contemporary life, Dyer argues, utopia offers:

- abundance (elimination of poverty for self and others; equal distribution of wealth);
- energy (work and play synonymous);
- intensity (excitement, drama, affectivity of living);
- transparency (open, spontaneous, honest communications and relationships);
- community (all together in one place, communal interests, collective activity).³⁵

Each of these traits can be found in television commercials.

An ad for the MCI Network explicitly alludes to utopia (tvcrit.com/find/mci). It begins by explaining, "People here communicate mind to mind." Then it continues:

Not black to white. There are no genders. Not man to woman. There is no age. Not young to old. There are no infirmities. Not short to tall. Or handsome to homely. Just thought to thought. Idea to idea. Uninfluenced by the rest of it. There are only minds. Only minds. What is this place? This place? Utopia? No. No. The Internet. The Internet. The Internet.³⁶

MCI represents utopia as a community fostering the unfettered interchange of ideas; a place

where nothing will constrict its citizens. Its ad insinuates that the Internet might be mistaken for utopia and that its networking can thus convey the customer to a utopian realm.

A commercial for a Mercedes-Benz roadster is less high-minded in its presentation of a utopian experience. In the ad, Peter Pan and Tinkerbell float into the bedroom of Michael, a middle-aged man. Michael is sleeping in respectable-looking pajamas next to a woman who is presumably his respectable spouse. Peter entices him, “Do you remember when we were eight and we went flying?” When he protests that he can’t fly any more, Peter corrects him, “It’s never too late to fly!” We then cut to Michael, still in his pajamas, driving a roadster and shouting, “Woooohooo!” Notably, Peter and Tinkerbell are beside him, but his spouse is not. The spot fades to black as Michael shifts into high gear. Then the only text in the ad fades in: “Exhilaration” (followed by the Mercedes-Benz logo). With its allusions to Neverland and the boy who won’t grow up, this commercial associates its product with a utopian view of childhood pleasures and passions.

A dystopia is the exact opposite of a utopia. It’s a land where freedoms are restricted and life is oppressive and colorless. Advertisers’ products frequently promise to liberate consumers from such oppression. McDonald’s modest suggestion that “You deserve a break today” could be viewed as an inducement to flee the dystopian home—soiled laundry, dirty bathrooms, and unfed children—and enter a world of culinary surplus and happy circus characters (Ronald McDonald).

The most unequivocal TV-commercial attack on dystopia is the Apple Computer spot which announced the release of the Macintosh computer in 1984. Apple drew heavily upon George Orwell’s *1984* (originally published in 1949), which contains the best-known dystopia in twentieth-century fiction. In it, Big Brother rules a harshly repressive totalitarian state where the Ministry of Truth rewrites history and the Thought Police arrest anyone who dares resist. The Apple “1984” commercial shrewdly transforms its archrival, IBM, into Orwell’s Big Brother—without ever mentioning IBM by name. IBM tyrannized the computer world at that time and its corporate culture was a very conservative, contained one. Chiat/Day, Apple’s advertising agency, chose to present the Mac as a liberating force, hoping to challenge IBM’s monopolistic control of the computer industry. They hired feature film director Ridley Scott, who’d recently shot the dystopian *Blade Runner* (1982), to direct it. And they paid \$500,000 for a one-time broadcast during the 1984 Super Bowl. (No other national broadcast time was purchased, although the ad was screened repeatedly on news programs.)

In the ad, an audience of ashen-faced, shaved-head drones watch a large screen where their ruler harangues them about the “Information Purification Directives” and “Unification of Thought” ([Figures 6.9–6.11](#); tvcrit.com/find/1984):

For today, we celebrate the first glorious anniversary of the Information Purification Directives. We have created, for the first time in all history, a garden of pure ideology. Where each worker may bloom secure from the pests of contradictory and confusing truths. Our Unification of Thought is more powerful a weapon than any fleet or army on earth. We are one people. With one will. One resolve. One cause. Our enemies shall talk themselves to death. And we will bury them with their own confusion. We shall prevail!

A young woman wearing a runner’s outfit and wielding a sledgehammer sprints into the room, pursued by armed soldiers ([Figure 6.11](#)). Her red shorts and vigorous skin tone contrast

sharply with the colorless minions. She flings the sledgehammer at the screen, which causes it to explode. Text scrolls over the image as the voiceover begins: “On January 24th, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you’ll see why 1984 won’t be like ‘1984.’”



[Figure 6.9 Apple Computer’s introduction of the Mac in 1984 relied on imagery drawn from the novel *1984*: enslaved workers](#)

...



[Figure 6.10 ... and a Big Brother figure on a video screen \(meant to represent Apple’s rival, IBM\) ...](#)



[Figure 6.11 ... which is smashed by a young woman wielding a sledgehammer.](#)

When this ad ran, viewers had never seen Macintosh computers. The Mac is not shown in the commercial and no features of it are described. Viewers could have had no tangible sense of how Macs might differ from other manufacturers' computers. Instead, Apple relied entirely on the theme of liberation from dystopia to sell its new machine.

The Persuasive Style of Commercials

As we have seen above, commercials rely on a fairly predictable polysemy to persuade consumers to buy products. One clear persuasive strategy, then, is to build an argument that a particular product is associated with positive meanings and images or eliminates negative ones. But so far we have not concentrated on *how* that argument is built. What sound/image techniques and rhetorical strategies do commercials use to make products seem desirable? What, one might say, is the persuasive style of the TV commercial?

Some commercials persuade with a jackhammer-blunt style, while others so carefully hide their persuasion that viewers are left wondering just what was being advertised. As we examine the techniques used to persuade us, we'll find that they can be grouped into the following general categories. The list is not an exhaustive one and new persuasive styles will doubtlessly evolve in the future, but the majority of TV commercials rely on one or more of these persuasive devices:

1. metaphor;
2. utopian style;
3. product differentiation and superiority;
4. repetition and redundancy;
5. extraordinary and excessive style: "televisuality" and counter television;
6. graphics and animation;
7. violating reality (visual effects);
8. reflexivity and intertextuality.

Let's examine how these tactics are employed in specific commercials.

Metaphor

Perhaps the most common way that advertisers assert the desirability of their products is to associate them with activities, objects, or people that are themselves desirable. Essentially, such association constructs a metaphor between the product and that desirable activity, object, or person. These metaphors often link products with unexpected or incongruous things or activities. For example, Noxzema implies that shaving is metaphorically equivalent to stripping in the ad discussed on p. 148, in which "The Stripper" plays and a seductive woman urges men to "take it all off." The metaphor in this case is created through the commercial's sound mix (the woman's dialogue and the music). By bringing together sound and image that are normally not connected, Noxzema creates the metaphoric meaning. That is, the commercial's meaning is not a literal one ("The man is stripping") but rather a metaphorical one ("Shaving is like stripping in that something is removed in both cases"). It sounds bland and boring when summarized so simply, but to suggest that removing shaving cream is similar to removing clothing fastens a sexually provocative connotation to a normally routine activity.

Another method for generating metaphors is through a sequence of images—much as Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein theorized 90 years ago. By bringing two or more images

together in sequence, a filmmaker can imply that one image should be compared with the other and that there are similarities between them. A staunch socialist and revolutionary, Eisenstein advocated the use of visual metaphor or, as he called it, intellectual montage, for political causes. In the instance of his film *Strike*, he intercut shots of heroic striking workers being beaten by police with shots of a bull being slaughtered (Figures 6.12 and 6.13; tvcrit.com/find/strike). The metaphoric meaning is clear: strikers are cattle. And, further, it graphically argues that a gross injustice is being done.

Advertisers have usurped Eisenstein's principle to sell commodities. For instance, a commercial for the Audi 55 Sportback car constructs a metaphor that associates the car with the famous racehorse Secretariat (tvcrit.com/find/audi). It begins with shots of a horse and jockey making their way onto a racetrack and into a starting gate. When the gate opens, however, the Audi accelerates down the track (Figure 6.14). With a quick cut to the horse, the narrator intones, "What made Secretariat the greatest racehorse who ever lived? Of course he was strong. Intelligent. Explosive" (Figure 6.15). The editor cuts back and forth between the car and the horse—suggesting, obviously, that the car is strong, intelligent, explosive, but never saying that plainly. Viewers must draw that conclusion on their own.



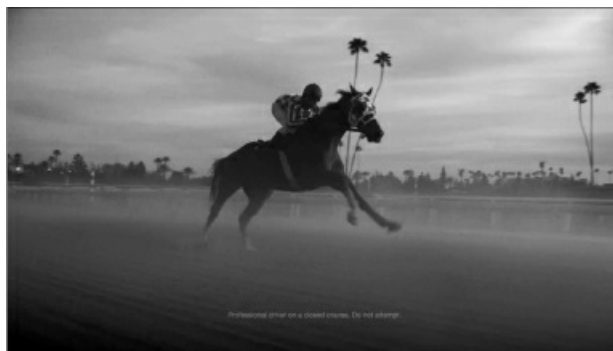
[Figure 6.12](#) *Strike*: Sergei Eisenstein intercuts a bull being slaughtered with ...



[Figure 6.13](#) ... workers being attacked by police—generating a visual metaphor of workers = cattle.



[Figure 6.14](#) An Audi S5 Sportback accelerates down a horse racetrack, intercut with shots of...

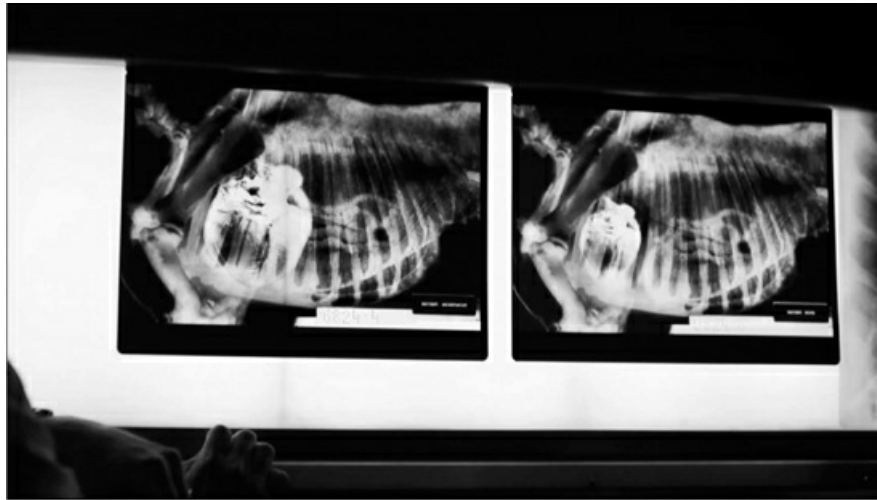


[Figure 6.15](#) ... a horse on the same track as the narrator talks about the strengths of the famous racehorse Secretariat.

Then the narrator answers his rhetorical question about what made Secretariat the greatest: “The true secret in his perfection was a heart twice the size of an average horse.” This is reinforced with shots of veterinarians looking at an x-ray of some random horse with a large heart ([Figure 6.16](#))! Are we to think that this Audi automobile has a large “heart” in some sense? The intended meaning is not nailed down and the narrator provides no further clues, but an evocative graphic of a black frame with white text follows the x-ray shots: “The all-new, 354 hp Audi S5 Sportback is here.” Then, “Progress is powered from within.” Thus, Audi is emphasizing the 354 horsepower of this machine by metaphorically linking it to the literal power of a horse, Secretariat. Just as an oversized heart powered Secretariat, the ad implies, so does an oversized engine power the S5 Sportback. But, again, this is never clearly stated by the narrator or the text.³⁷

The sequentiality of the images, aided by the narration and the music, carries the commercial’s meaning *indirectly*. As Messaris argues, indirectness is commonly used in advertising. He maintains that it has two advantages over direct approaches. First, an indirect, visual argument such as the Audi ad elicits a “greater degree of mental participation” from viewers.³⁸ It requires viewers themselves to make the semantic connection between the product and the other objects (e.g., between the Audi S5 Sportback and Secretariat). Messaris contends that viewers are more likely to retain the commercial’s message because they themselves have helped to generate it. Second, Messaris contends, “the [explicit] verbal claims made in advertisements tend to be held to much stricter standards of accountability than whatever claims are implicit in the ads’ pictures.”³⁹ His illustration of this is ads for cigarettes, which show happy, healthy-looking people smoking—thus making the indirect, implicit claim that smoking is a healthy activity when, of course, we know it is not. Commercials can

metaphorically suggest many things in the visuals that they would be prohibited from stating explicitly in the dialogue.



[Figure 6.16](#) X-ray technicians examine film of a horse with a large heart, illustrating what Secretariat's might have looked like.

Utopian Style

We discussed above how commercials promise admission to utopia through the purchase of commodities—as when Michael escapes with Peter Pan to the utopia of a Mercedes-Benz roadster. Dyer contends that utopianism in mass entertainment is not just evident in the worlds it portrays. He takes the principle of utopianism a step further and finds it in the *style* of presentation, in aspects of mise-en-scene, cinematography, and, crucially, music.⁴⁰ That is, he argues that qualities of utopia (abundance, energy, intensity, transparency, and community) may be found in a medium's style. For Dyer, this is most evident in the film musical. Since music is fundamental to most, if not all, commercials, it seems reasonable that we might look for this utopian style in the television commercial.

Many commercials that emphasize music and dance offer clear examples of utopianism's embodiment in style. Consider a Carvana spot from 2017 (tv.crit.com/find/carvana). It begins with two short shots of people leaving car dealerships and declaring, “That sucked!” Then we cut to the commercial's protagonist as he buys a car online via Carvana and says, in disbelief, “That didn't suck!” He launches into a victory song and dance, the chorus of which is “That didn't suck!” He's suddenly joined by a troupe of dancers in his living room and on the street who share his celebration, as the camera tracks in and out ([Figure 6.17](#)). From Dyer's position, the commercial quickly establishes the dystopia that is car purchasing and then offers us the utopia of obtaining a car from Carvana—which, coincidentally (?), rhymes with “nirvana,” the Buddhist state of ultimate peace and happiness. As Dyer might point out, the protagonist's experience of utopia/nirvana is expressed less through words than through movement and music. The lyrics of his victory song are bland and repetitive, but its lively, percussive beat and the gyrations of the dancers convey exuberance through style of sound and image. Energy and intensity—in Dyer's sense of these terms—are embodied in the commercial's style by *how* the movement and sound are presented rather than *what* the actors are saying.

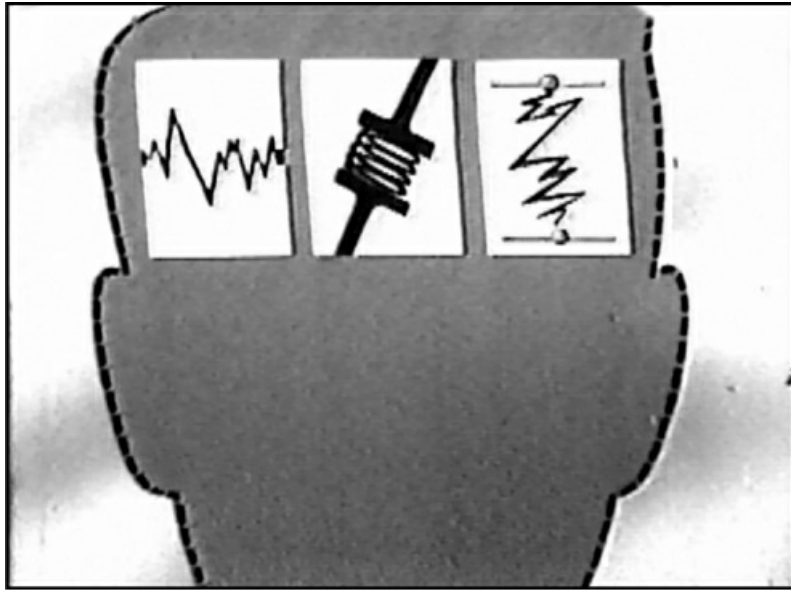


[Figure 6.17](#) A Carvana customer enters a utopia of song and dance.

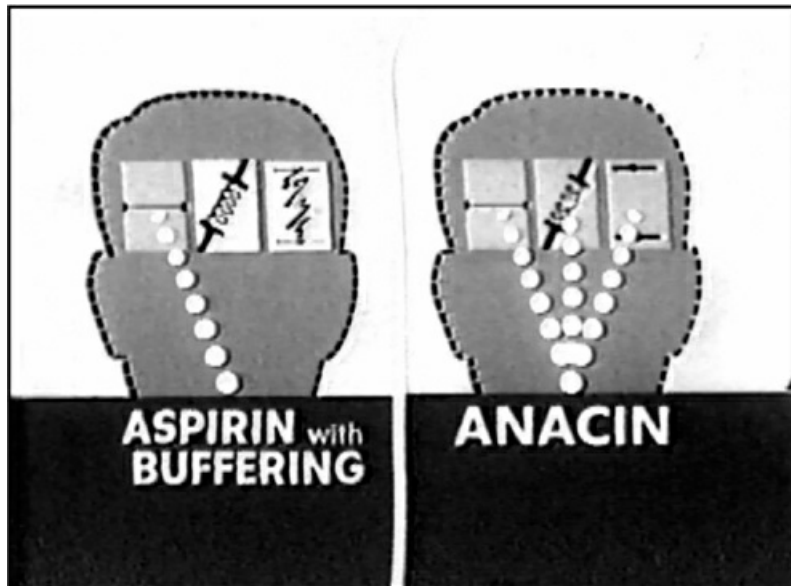
Product Differentiation and Superiority

To survive in the marketplace, every product must distinguish itself from others in the same category. Coke must be perceived as different from Pepsi, Tide from Cheer, Ford from Toyota, Levi from Wrangler, Apple from Microsoft, and on and on. At the core of all advertising is the establishment and maintenance of a product's identity, its brand. The key to brand identity is a product's **unique selling proposition (USP)**, as advertising standard-bearer Rosser Reeves termed that certain something that separates a product from the rest of the field.⁴¹ Even when there is very little actual difference between commodities, the USP principle holds that the advertiser must find or even fabricate one. Reeves is often quoted as explaining the USP this way: "Our problem is—a client comes into my office and throws down two newly minted half-dollars onto my desk and says, 'Mine is the one on the left. You prove it's better.'"⁴² This lack of difference between products is called **brand parity**.

Reeves faced the challenge of brand parity in 1952 while developing an advertising campaign for Anacin, a pain reliever whose active ingredients consisted solely of aspirin and caffeine. How was he to differentiate Anacin from regular aspirin? His solution was a series of cleverly worded commercials that feature a fanciful animated representation of an ailment he dubbed the "tension headache" ([Figure 6.18](http://tv.crit.com/find/anacin); tv.crit.com/find/anacin). A compressed spring and a jagged electrical spark metaphorically represent the overwrought human nervous system (several ads in the series include a small hammer pounding away, too). The ads' catchphrase of "fast, fast, fast relief" became part of the 1950s popular culture lexicon. But it wasn't enough for Reeves to explain how Anacin relieved pain. He also needed to "prove" that it lessened discomfort in a *different* manner from aspirin—even though aspirin was its main pain-relieving agent. He needed to find Anacin's USP.



[Figure 6.18](#) Ad man Rosser Reeves invented the “tension headache” ...



[Figure 6.19](#) ... which his client Anacin—and only Anacin—could remedy.

In one commercial from this long-running campaign, the announcer explains, “Aspirin has just one pain reliever. Add buffering, you still get just one. Only Anacin of the four leading headache remedies has special ingredients to relieve pain *fast*, help overcome depression *fast*, relax tension *fast*.” Anacin’s combination of ingredients comprises its unique selling proposition, according to Reeves, because only Anacin has that particular recipe. To emphasize this point, side-by-side animation shows Anacin relieving headache pain that aspirin cannot alleviate ([Figure 6.19](#)). Nowhere in this ad does the announcer reveal that the principal “special ingredient” in Anacin is aspirin itself. Instead, we’re allowed to imagine that its ingredients are wholly different from aspirin. If we examine the text of the ad carefully, we find that the announcer does not deny that Anacin contains aspirin. He is just, let us say, less than forthcoming about the nature of its ingredients. In fact, one premise of the commercial is

that “Three out of four doctors recommend the ingredients in Anacin.” He doesn’t specify what those ingredients are, but we may well suppose that the primary one is aspirin. Note also that the copy does not say that the doctors specifically recommend Anacin but just that they recommend the ingredients Anacin contains.

If we were to rewrite this commercial without the need to create a unique selling proposition and in a more forthcoming, purely informational manner, it might go something like this: “Three out of four doctors recommend aspirin for headache pain. Anacin contains 325 mg of aspirin and is also laced with 32 mg of caffeine, which may speed the alleviation of your pain or may just give you the jitters.” To be fair to Reeves, we should note that in his book *Reality in Advertising* he contests the suggestion that Anacin’s USP is a made-up one. He argues that the difference between Anacin and aspirin is not “minuscule.” He claims that distinguishing Anacin from aspirin is not based on a “deceptive differential” but rather is “the stuff and substance of good advertising.”⁴³

Advertisers currently express disdain for Reeves’s hard-sell approach. It’s said to be too simplistic for today’s “sophisticated” consumers, and yet television commercials continue to wage battles against brand parity. From the Apple commercials entreating computer users to “Think different” to the taste tests of the “Pepsi Challenge” to the Dodge ads beginning and ending with the word “Different” to Aleve claiming just two of its pills are superior to six Tylenol tablets (discussed below, p. 172), we see the persistent influence of Reeves’s unique selling proposition and the need for advertisers to differentiate their products from those of their competitors.

Repetition and Redundancy

In addition to the USP, Reeves was also known as an advocate of blunt-force repetition in television commercials. The Anacin spot above exemplifies this in its use of the word “fast.” It appears eight times in the 30-second spot and three times in the tagline alone: “Anacin—for fast, fast, incredibly fast relief.” Not only did Anacin’s slogan contain repetition, but it was itself reiterated thousands of times in repeated airings of this commercial and in numerous different Anacin ads, which were themselves also frequently aired. All successful advertising campaigns use repetition within ads, in repeated airings of ads, and across numerous other ads in the same campaign.

Repetition in advertising serves one major, obvious function: reinforcement. The first time you hear a word or see an image, you may not remember it. Each repetition of it makes recall more likely. But what, in general terms, are TV commercials reinforcing? They’re doubtlessly reinforcing particular qualities of particular commodities, but in a more general sense they’re reinforcing brand identity. If advertisers can get you to remember the names of their products when you visit a store, they feel they’ve achieved 75 percent of their goal. If they can get you to remember the superiority of their brands and subsequently purchase their products, they’ve achieved the remaining 25 percent.

Sidebar 6.1 Ten Slogans of Modern Brands

How many can you match with their products? (Answers below.)

1. American by birth. Rebel by choice.
2. Think small.
3. There is no substitute.
4. Power, beauty and soul.
5. Save money. Live better.
6. I am what I am.
7. Just do it.
8. Impossible is nothing.
9. Between love and madness lies obsession.
10. Quality never goes out of style.

Answers: 1. Harley Davidson, 2. Volkswagen, 3. Porsche, 4. Aston Martin, 5. Walmart, 6. Reebok, 7. Nike, 8. Adidas, 9. Calvin Klein, 10. Levis. Excerpted from Sarosh Waiz, “40+ Best Advertising Slogans of Modern Brands,” *Advergize*, tvcrit.com/find/slogans.

Another technique that is closely related to repetition is redundancy. Most of the information that we hear and see repeated in TV commercials is redundant information. It exceeds what is necessary to make the point. Sound and image often redundantly convey identical information in commercials. For instance, in Apple’s groundbreaking “1984” commercial (discussed on p. 152–53) the narrator speaks the same words that we see crawl up the screen at the end. This is quite typical of the ends of commercials, where ads make their final bids to remain in the viewer’s consciousness. Redundancy is common in much television, but it exists at a much higher level and is absolutely crucial to the commercial.

Extraordinary and Excessive Style: “Televisuality” and Counter Television

Generally speaking, viewers do not seek commercials. They do not tune into television for the commercials themselves (with the significant exception of shopping channels). Indeed, they commonly use remote controls, DVRs, and channel browsing or direct their attention to their cell phones to avoid watching commercial breaks. Or they avoid commercials altogether by obtaining TV through subscription-based video-on-demand portals. And so, advertisers are continuously challenged to develop mechanisms for snaring viewers’ attention, for hailing them, one might say, as one hails a cab. In other words, commercials must use techniques that say, “Hey, *you!* Watch me! Watch me *now!*” One way that hailing is achieved is through what John Caldwell terms “televisuality”—“defined by excessive stylization and visual exhibitionism.”⁴⁴ He believes that much of 1980s television, and not just commercials, is marked by televisuality, but we will limit our application of it to TV ads.

In order to understand excessive or exhibitionistic television, we must recall its stylistic

norm. By the 1970s, television had found its own “classical” style, much like the cinema developed its classical style in the 1930s. [Part II](#) describes this conventional television style in terms of mise-en-scene, videography, editing, and sound as they may be observed in sitcoms, soap operas, prime-time dramas, and other narrative and non-narrative programs. Central to this approach is that style should not draw attention to itself, that it should in a sense be invisible. What’s meant by this is that style should support the narrative so effectively that the viewer may submerge into the story without being distracted by the style.

One of the quintessential principles of television commercials is that television classicism may be exceeded—and even violated—in order to attract the viewer’s attention. Stylistic excesses and violations are used by commercials to snap viewers out of their dreamlike connection with television narrative, to shock them out of their television lethargy and make them sit up and take notice of the advertised products. Following Bertolt Brecht’s “epic theater” and Peter Wollen’s claims for a Brechtian “counter cinema” in radical films of the 1960s and 1970s, we might think of this disruptive stylistic approach as “counter television.”⁴⁵ Although epic theater and counter cinema were both Marxist attempts to combat capitalism and consumerism and although the notion of Brechtian commercials may make Brecht spin like a top in his grave, it is impossible to deny that techniques once associated with experimental theater and film are now routinely used in television commercials.

Since we divide our consideration below of television’s classical style into chapters on mise-en-scene, videography, editing, and sound, let us illustrate the commercial’s use of counter television with examples from each of these areas.

Mise-en-Scene

We will explain in more detail in [Chapter 8](#) that mise-en-scene is made up of set and costume design, lighting, and the performance of actors. Here, we’ll look primarily at the impact of performance in the commercial and how it may be used to capture the viewer’s attention. First and most significantly, actors in commercials hail viewers by directly addressing the camera. As discussed in [Chapter 5](#), news anchors and game show hosts typically address viewers directly by looking straight into the camera lens, but actors in fictional, narrative programs do not. Instead, actors in narrative programs look only at one another and *indirectly* address the viewer. Interestingly, commercials incorporate direct address in *both* non-narrative and narrative instances. In a non-narrative commercial for Rogaine, a client looks straight at the camera and details the benefits of the product ([Figure 6.20](#)). It’s evident that he’s addressing viewers directly—specifically hailing men who feel anxious about hair loss. We find a more unconventional use of direct address in the narrative commercials for Bartles & Jaymes wine coolers. In this case we have fictional characters looking into the camera and speaking their lines ([Figure 6.3](#), above). These actors thus violate the taboo against direct-camera gazes, and they do so in a fashion that implores the viewer’s return gaze.

Commercials’ performance style is commonly pitched a notch or two higher than the acting in narrative programs and the behavior of individuals in non-narrative programs. The goal of performers in many commercials is not so much plausibility or realism as it is noticeability. An excessive performance style can get commercials noticed during their 15- or 30-second bid for our attention. In the 1980s, Federal Express featured fast-talker John Moschitta, Jr., in a series of successful ads (tv.crit.com/find/fedex). Moschitta’s ability to speak at the rate of 530

words per minute served a dual purpose for FedEx: to capture viewers' attention and to make a metaphoric connection between their delivery service's rapidity and Moschitta's speech. Excessive speed is also used in the selling of automobiles—where vehicles frequently careen recklessly around race tracks (even horse race tracks!), desert trails, and mountain passes. A notice on ads such as the Audi one discussed above tells us that these are “professional drivers on a closed course” and that we shouldn't attempt such stunts ourselves, but if risky driving draws viewers' attention then its persuasive function has been served.



[Figure 6.20. A Rogaine user looks directly at the camera as he presents his testimonial.](#)

Nonhuman figures also perform in unconventional ways in commercials. Animals frequently talk, sing, and dance. And objects that usually cannot move on their own commonly violate the laws of physics in commercial performances. We've seen singing raisins and talkative M&M candies, and we've been introduced to the Pillsbury Doughboy and Speedy Alka-Seltzer ([Figures 6.21](#) and [6.22](#)). By giving animals the human property of speech and by animating normally inanimate objects, commercials violate the behavioral rules of the real world.

Direct gazes at the camera, the excessive performance of actors, and the unconventional behavior of nonhuman “actors” all hail viewers—entreating them to pay attention and to be persuaded by commercials.

Videography and Cinematography

Despite the televisual exhibitionism Caldwell has found in several 1980s and 1990s programs, most television since the 1970s has adhered to television's classical conventions in terms of videography or cinematography. Music television, however, is a significant exception. When it arrived in the early 1980s, its stylistic flourishes and visualization of music had a major impact upon the videography/cinematography of programs such as *Miami Vice* (1984–89) and the short-lived *Cop Rock* (1990). More importantly, it inspired a small revolution in the videography of commercials, which use music-video style to distinguish themselves from the program material they are interrupting. For commercial directors, counter-television videography is yet another way to draw the viewer's attention.

[Table 6.4](#) counterposes the principal videographic elements of TV classicism with counter-

television techniques commercials use to catch our eye. Let us consider examples of each of these elements.



[Figure 6.21](#) Nonhuman figures such as the Pillsbury Doughboy...



[Figure 6.22](#) ... and Speedy Alka-Seltzer often pitch products.

First, multiple, vertical frames-within-the-frame are used to maximum effect in an Acura TLX car ad ([Figure 6.23](#); tvcrit.com/find/acura). The spot combines live-action shots of the car with animation and a variety of visual effects. At one point, two frames are divided by a jagged, lightning-like line and the car pushes beyond one frame into the second. The overall effect is to reshape the size of the images within the frame—forcing one’s eye to adjust to the odd shape of the frame and the multiplicity of images. The commercial constantly reshapes the frames-within-the-frames and makes the image size unpredictable.

A second manipulation of the image within the frame occurs when the composition is imbalanced. Classical television favors compositions that are balanced—that is, where the main point of interest is right in the middle of the frame, as can be seen in many of the previous examples in this chapter (e.g., [Figures 6.1](#), [6.3](#), [6.5](#), [6.6](#), [6.11](#)). If more than one point of interest exists within the frame, then they are placed in such a way as to balance one another visually. For instance, the dancing customer of Carvana ([Figure 6.17](#)) has dancers equally spaced around him in a visually balanced fashion. A counter-television commercial breaks this convention by locating points of interest near the edge of the frame—as in a Marshall’s/T.J.

Maxx commercial where a woman is placed on the left of the frame, looking to the left (Figure 6.24; tvcrit.com/find/imbanced). This image would be more conventional if she were looking to the right, into the center of the frame, but she is not. Instead, she's looking to the left and out of the frame. The result is a strikingly imbalanced composition. Also notable is the fact that two-thirds of this shot is markedly out-of-focus and remains that way for the duration of the shot. That is, we do not shift focus to the background. Similarly, a Lyrica drug ad superimposes its logo and a side-effect warning over an out-of-focus image of women in a garden (Figure 6.25; tvcrit.com/find/outoffocus). With virtually the entire image out of focus, we can do nothing but read the warning, but the lack of focus also catches our eye as we try to make sense of the blurry image.

Table 6.4 Commercial Videography: Classicism vs. Counter Television

<i>Classical Videography</i>	<i>Counter-Television Videography</i>
Image fills the frame	Black areas or multiple images within the frame
Balanced composition (Objects centered)	Imbalanced composition (Objects at the frame's edges)
In-focus main figure	Out-of-focus main figure
Regular speed action	Variable speed action (slow motion and fast motion)
Color	Black-and-white
Limited camera movement	Extremely active camera movement
Eye-level camera angle	Extreme low and high angles
"Normal" focal length	Extreme wide angle and telephoto



Figure 6.23 An Acura commercial breaks up the composition with frames within the television frame.



[Figure 6.24 A Marshall's/T.J. Maxx commercial uses imbalanced composition to snare the viewer.](#)



[Figure 6.25 Lyrica's logo and warning statement are the only parts of the image in focus.](#)

Although the next counter-television technique, variable speed action, was partially inspired by music videos, television sports was more significant to its popularization. Ever since the 1960s—when advances in videotape technology enabled TV to replay action at variable speeds—slow motion has been an integral part of televised sports. As we have seen with excesses in mise-en-scene and videography, variable speed action is an attention grabber. Because narrative programs don't normally use variable speeds, slow motion and fast action make us attentive. They may also be used, as they are in sports programs, to emphasize strength and majesty and to show viewers actions that normally occur too quickly for the human eye to comprehend.

Consider the Mountain Dew commercial in which a cyclist chases a cheetah and pulls a can of soda from its throat (tv.crit.com/find/slomo). Both fast and slow motion are used in this spot. The cyclist's pedaling as he gains on the cheetah is shown in speeded-up action—making it seem faster than is humanly possible. Slow motion is used in several shots: the cheetah running, the bicyclist leaping on it, and the bicyclist's friends pouring Mountain Dew down their throats. By using slow motion, we are able to see details in the cheetah's running and the bicyclist's leap that we wouldn't discern at regular speed. And the slow-motion pouring enhances the appearance of the Mountain Dew—in theory making it more appealing.

Color came to television through a complicated and circuitous route. Once it was established in the 1960s, however, narrative programs discontinued use of black-and-white—with only very rare exceptions. Color was the last major technological component of TV classicism to evolve. Its arrival signaled the beginning of black-and-white as a counter-television component. Before color became the norm, it itself was capable of hailing viewers. Imagine how striking a color commercial must have seemed to viewers who were accustomed

to black-and-white imagery.

Most frequently, commercials have used black-and-white or sepia-toned images to allude to the past—as can be seen in a Winn Dixie grocery store commercial that starts with black-and-white shots of a mother and daughter in 1960s attire and then transforms them into color consumers when they enter the store (tvcrit.com/find/winn Dixie). However, the significance of black-and-white imagery is not always so clear. Take, for example, a spot about estrogen loss during menopause that was sponsored by the pharmaceutical company American Home Products and broadcast, among other places, during the sitcom *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996–2005), which, not surprisingly, is in color (tvcrit.com/find/bw). Actress Lauren Hutton is shown cooking vegetables, running along the beach, and talking about menopause. Half of the shots are in color and half are in black-and-white. The black-and-white images are not supposed to be from the past and, indeed, there is no obvious meaning one can glean from the black-and-white cinematography—aside from the counter-television function of differentiating this commercial from the color programs during which it appears. Further, the Victoria’s Secret spot discussed above ([Figure 6.4; tv crit.com/find/vsbody](http://tvcrit.com/find/vsbody)) is entirely in black-and-white. Obviously that choice does not signify “the past,” but what purpose does it serve? One possible answer would be to link the imagery with the aesthetics of black-and-white erotic photography.

A Reebok ad for EasyTone shoes is also in black-and-white, until it actually presents the shoes to the viewer (tvcrit.com/find/easytone). It begins with black-and-white imagery of a nearly nude woman on a bed, viewed from behind. The narrator addresses the viewer directly, claiming that EasyTone shoes will improve the shape of her body. The camera moves suggestively down the woman’s body, and when it reaches her shoes they are presented in color, within a mostly black-and-white image ([Figure 6.26](http://tvcrit.com/find/easytone)). This precisely lit, black-and-white imagery emphasizes the tone and shape of the woman’s body and also differentiates the commercial from the color imagery in the television texts that precede and follow it. The subtle touch of color (the silver shoes with blue stripes) mildly startles the viewer and draws her attention from the sensual legs to the product she must buy to acquire those legs herself.

Extreme camera movement, angle, and focal length—the final three videographic elements in [Table 6.4](#)—are not as distinct as the other videographic techniques. Instead of being unambiguous violations of classical TV style, they are more exaggerations of techniques ordinarily used in conventional narrative programs. Where classical programs often include some camera movement (to follow action), slightly low/high angles, and various focal lengths (wide angle to telephoto), commercials incorporate camera gyrations, odd low/high angles, and focal lengths that are so extreme the optical distortion is evident. Strange angles and focal lengths may be observed in an extreme low-angle shot of a guitar player in a Smirnoff vodka commercial ([Figure 6.27; tv crit.com/find/smirnoff](http://tvcrit.com/find/smirnoff)) and the exceptionally wide-angle shot of a Chevrolet car commercial ([Figure 6.28](http://tvcrit.com/find/chevrolet)). When distortion is this exaggerated it draws attention to itself and violates the principal classical tenet of invisible, unobtrusive style. This, then, is the definition of Caldwell’s televisual exhibitionism.



[*Figure 6.26*](#) A predominantly black-and-white Reebok commercial presents the shoes in color



[*Figure 6.27*](#) Smirnoff vodka: An excessively low-angle shot of a guitar player.




[*Figure 6.28*](#) A wide-angle lens distorts the hood of a Chevrolet car, making it appear wider than in reality.

Editing

The first thing one notices about the editing of many commercials is its speed. The editing in commercials is typically paced faster than that in soap operas, sitcoms, and prime-time dramas. Rapid editing serves as a hailing device because each shot quickly presents new information for viewers to absorb. Additionally, viewers are constantly adjusting to different framing, composition, and camera angles. Each cut is a potential disruption as we instantaneously move from one camera position to another and new visuals are thrown before our eyes. This visual disorientation is used by commercials to jolt us into gazing at the advertised product.

Commercials, even narrative-based ones, are also not bound by the rules of classical film editing and its pursuit of an invisible, seamless style (discussed at length in [Chapter 10](#)). Breaches of that style’s conventions abound in TV ads. A 2008 commercial for Taco Bell illustrates the commercial’s flexible use of classical editing (tvcrit.com/find/tacobellad). Without any dialogue, it tells the story of a group of individuals buying inexpensive food and ecstatically consuming it. In 15 seconds, the commercial presents 24 shots—most less than one second long and three only 10 frames long (one-third of a second). Its first five shots and two later shots are shown in [Table 6.5](#). It begins with a fairly conventional establishing long shot of a Taco Bell restaurant taken from a moving car, a portion of which is barely visible in the frame ([Figure 6.29](#)). The camera cuts to a close-up of the driver of a convertible—a conventional cut from long shot to close-up to show us a detail of the scene ([Figure 6.30](#)). But then the classical editing goes haywire.

[Table 6.5 Taco Bell Commercial](#)

<i>Shot Number, Scale, & Length</i>	<i>Figure</i>
1 long shot 11 frames	
2 close-up 20 frames	

[Figure 6.29](#)



[Figure 6.30](#)

3
close-up
33 frames



[Figure 6.31](#)

Pull focus to ...



[Figure 6.32](#)

4
medium close-up
19 frames



[Figure 6.33](#)

5
medium shot
24 frames



[Figure 6.34](#)

15
close-up
13 frames



[Figure 6.35](#)

20
long shot
29 frames



Figure 6.36

The driver begins to point with her left hand, but we cut to another passenger, from an indeterminate position, pointing with her (presumably a woman's) right hand in shot 3 ([Figure 6.31](#)). This violates classical stylistic conventions because it does not match the action of the first shot and does not clearly establish the space of the scene; in fact, it confounds it. This third shot rapidly pulls focus to an illuminated menu ([Figure 6.32](#)), showcasing Taco Bell's inexpensive offerings. "Why pay more!"—which is the main point of the commercial—is visible at the top of the menu. A grammatically correct question mark has been replaced by the more emphatic exclamation point. The commercial's on-screen text later reinforces this thrifty message (again without a question mark): "More stuff. Less cash. Why pay more."

The fourth, following shot is an overhead medium close-up of the driver picking through change ([Figure 6.33](#))—an acceptable classical cut showing us a detail from the scene. Close examination of [Figure 6.34](#) reveals that the driver's seat is mostly empty, as if the driver is now out of the car; but this would probably not be perceived by the television viewer since the shot is only 19 frames long (about two-thirds of a second). The next cut, however, violates classical principles as we jerkily cut from the driver's hands to a man who has not previously appeared, giving the change to a mostly offscreen Taco Bell employee ([Figure 6.34](#)). The rest of the commercial contains seemingly random images of people eating—including the driver ([Figure 6.35](#))—interspersed with shots of menu prices. One individual is so overcome with Taco Bell joy that he leaps on to the top of a car and throws his arms in the air ([Figure 6.36](#)). The camera hops from one person to the next, with little regard for classical-film conventions.

If this editing were used in a conventional segment from a narrative program, it would break numerous "rules" of contemporary TV production, but it works effectively in this commercial because (1) it uses utopian style to strongly convey the celebratory response provoked by Taco Bell's menu choices (as imagined by Taco Bell's advertising team), and (2) its editing style differentiates it from the narrative program it interrupted. Jerky, discontinuous editing is not unheard of in narrative programs, but a series of shots such as those in [Table 6.5](#) would commonly be relegated to Eisensteinian montage sequences, where time and information are compressed. Such montages are relatively rare in narrative programs and so their frequent use in commercials helps distinguish them from the program they're interrupting.

Sound

As with *mise-en-scene* and videography, the sound of commercials is quite different from the sound of the programs surrounding them—especially when contrasted with the sound of scripted, storytelling programs. We can observe this in terms of both the speech of commercials and the music of commercials. The speech/music of television programs is extensively considered in [Chapter 11](#).

The style of speech in commercials has been discussed at numerous points above—including its importance to hailing and direct address. Unlike dialogue in scripted, narrative programs, commercial speech must be persuasive in some fashion and it must be succinct because it doesn't have much time to persuade us. Also, the presence of an announcer's voice distinguishes commercial speech from narrative programs and aligns it with news and sports programs. As in news and sports, a voice that is not part of the commercial's diegetic world talks over it. It's a voice of authority—speaking directly to viewers and urging them to be convinced by the commercial's rhetoric.

The music of commercials is yet another rhetorical device that has less in common with narrative programs than with another television genre—specifically, the music video. This is not surprising since music videos are essentially commercials for music and musicians. The principal similarity between commercial music and music videos and the crucial difference between it and nondiegetic music in narrative programs is a seemingly simple one: both commercials and music videos use songs with lyrics, while nondiegetic music normally does not (excepting nondiegetic music where it is clearly commenting on the action—as when a popular love song plays while lovers walk beside a river).

Why is this apparently modest distinction so important? Because the use of lyrics—jingles in the case of commercials—draws one's attention to the music itself and classical, nondiegetic music isn't devised for that. Nondiegetic music strives for invisibility, hoping to shape the emotions of viewers without being noticed. Jingles, in contrast, are designed to be noticed and, of course, to be remembered. Many viewers recall commercial jingles decades later, but how many of them can say they remember the nondiegetic music of old programs? The jingle has faded in prominence in the twenty-first century partially because conventional broadcast radio, for which many jingles were originally created, is in decline. The jingle has not been entirely replaced by pop songs and other nondiegetic music, of course. For an overview of the top jingles from the twentieth century, see Sidebar 6.2, where advertising-industry magazine *Advertising Age* counts down its ten favorites.

Sidebar 6.2 Top Ten Jingles of the Twentieth Century

How many can you match with their products? (Answers below.)

1. You deserve a break today.
2. Be all that you can be.
3. _____ hits the spot.
4. M'm, m'm good.
5. See the USA in your _____.
6. I wish I was an _____ wiener.
7. Double your pleasure, double your fun.
8. _____ tastes good like a cigarette should.
9. It's the real thing.
10. A little dab'll do ya.

1. McDonald's, 2. U.S. Army, 3. Pepsi Cola, 4. Campbell's, 5. Chevrolet (GM), 6. Oscar Meyer, 7. Wrigley's Doublemint gum, 8. Winston, 9. Coca-Cola, 10. Brylcreem hair cream. AdAge.com, 2000, November 7, 2000, tv.crit.com/find/jingles.

Graphics and Animation

Almost every commercial on television contains some graphics (letters, numbers, cartoon characters, and corporate logos) on the screen. As we have seen exemplified in Apple's "1984" spot, the most common use of text is a redundant reinforcement of speech. Announcers speak their scripts and the same or similar words crawl up the screen—frequently at the conclusion of the spot and usually accompanied by the product's visual emblem, its brand identity further reinforced by its logo. In the case of "1984," the distinctive Apple logo (a rainbow-colored apple with a bite taken out) follows the concluding text.

Text is not limited to this redundant function, however. It may also supplement, clarify, and disclaim the explicit meanings of the dialogue and the implicit meanings of the images. The supplementing role of text is best exemplified in the nearly illegible legal qualifications included at the end of commercials for contests, car dealerships, pharmaceuticals, and the like. Tiny on-screen text provides warnings, disclaimers, and clarifications that the advertisers wish to downplay—as in the Lyrica ad discussed on p. 164 ([Figure 6.25](#)) that warns of "swelling of the face, mouth, lips, gums, tongue, throat or neck." Since the 1960s, the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has cracked down on misleading claims in medicinal and food advertising—leading to more and more disclaimers. Consequently, many ads now contain seemingly unnecessary warnings, such as "Use only as directed," in order to avoid legal liability. A Crest toothpaste commercial's spoken dialogue entreats us to "Get ready for a whole new level of clean. Introducing advanced cleaning from Crest Multi-Care." The dialogue implies that Multi-Care is measurably superior to other brands. However, in small text the ad clarifies that Multi-Care is only advanced "VS. CREST CAVITY PROTECTION"—that is, in comparison to

other Crest products. It might well lag behind other brands in terms of toothpaste technology. The ad only certifies that it's advanced beyond Crest's previous level of cavity protection, just in case the FTC or the lawyers for Colgate may be watching.

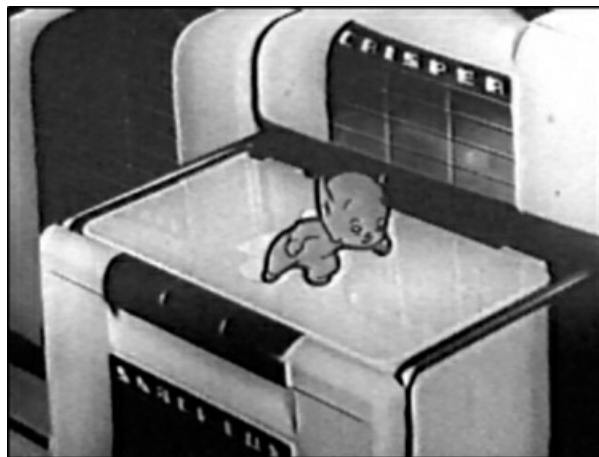
One final example of textual disclaimers is found in the case of dramatizations, where actors portray real people. For instance, an Aleve ad visually presents what appears to be a documentary—an unmanipulated record—of an interview with a woman about her use of the drug. “This is Joanne,” the narrator begins, “Her long day as a hair stylist starts with shoulder pain. Hey, Joanne, want to trade the all-day relief with two Aleve for six Tylenol?” A hand offers an out-of-focus bottle of Tylenol to her. “Give up my two Aleve for six Tylenol? No, thanks!” Then she looks directly at the camera and testifies, “For me, it's Aleve!” But it's actually all a fiction, a dramatization. We must read the “fine print” to realize this. Only there does text stating “actor portrayal” disclaim what the images proclaim—that, despite appearances, this is an actor pretending to be devoted to Aleve ([Figure 6.37; tvcrit.com/find/aleve](https://www.tvcrit.com/find/aleve)).

Redundant, reinforcing text and small-print disclaimers are important functions of TV graphics, but equally significant is the ability of graphics to catch viewers' eyes, to hail or entreat them to look at the screen. The most important device for graphical hailing is the ability of text and cartoon elements to be animated, for moving graphics are enormously more attention-grabbing than static ones. Animation in commercials arrived with television's growth in the 1940s and early 1950s, but it was initially limited to techniques borrowed from the cinema. For example, a 1950s commercial for Philco refrigerators has a cartoon pixie flitting about the crisper and ends with text fading in over a seal of quality: “Philco famous for quality the world over” ([Figures 6.38, 6.39; tvcrit.com/find/philco](https://www.tvcrit.com/find/philco)). The animated pixie and the simple fading in of the characters were created on film, using an analog process called optical printing. On most commercials, the graphical elements are sliding or floating or otherwise moving. Further, commercial graphics use an illusion of three-dimensionality to make letters and numbers appear to rise toward the viewer. Even in this 60-year-old spot, the 3-D shading on the “Philco quality” letters gives them a more dynamic aspect.

As Margaret Morse explains in her overview of the history of TV graphics, the movement and three-dimensionality of graphic elements accelerated phenomenally with the development of digital technology in the late 1970s and 1980s. Hyperactive letters and logos could then seem to be flying past us or us toward them. Examine the opening credits for *As the World Turns*—a program not known for its visual flourishes (August 15, 2000; [tvcrit.com/find/atwt](https://www.tvcrit.com/find/atwt)). The title comes from a virtual space *behind* us ([Figure 6.40](https://www.tvcrit.com/find/atwt)), rotating and swooping toward a globe constructed out of images from the program ([Figure 6.41](https://www.tvcrit.com/find/atwt)). The title then comes back toward us and we ostensibly pass *through* the “o” of “World” ([Figure 6.42](https://www.tvcrit.com/find/atwt)). “The viewer ... seems to be freed from gravity in a virtual experience of giddy speed through a symbolic universe of abc's,”⁴⁶ notes Morse regarding similar sequences. In such a universe, the letters are far from flat or two-dimensional. The movement of the *As the World Turns* letters and their design make them look like thick pieces of glass, with a sense of density and smooth texture.



[*Figure 6.37*](#) Aleve: The fine print disclaims what the image proclaims. What appears to be the testimonial of a real person is actually an “actor portrayal.”



[*Figure 6.38*](#) An animated pixie appears on top of a photograph of a Philco refrigerator.



[*Figure 6.39*](#) Shading creates a primitive three-dimensional effect ...



[*Figure 6.40 ... which became much more elaborate in the era of computer-generated graphics. Even soap operas such as *As the World Turns* feature text virtually flying through space ...*](#)



[*Figure 6.41 ... nearly colliding with this world of images ...*](#)

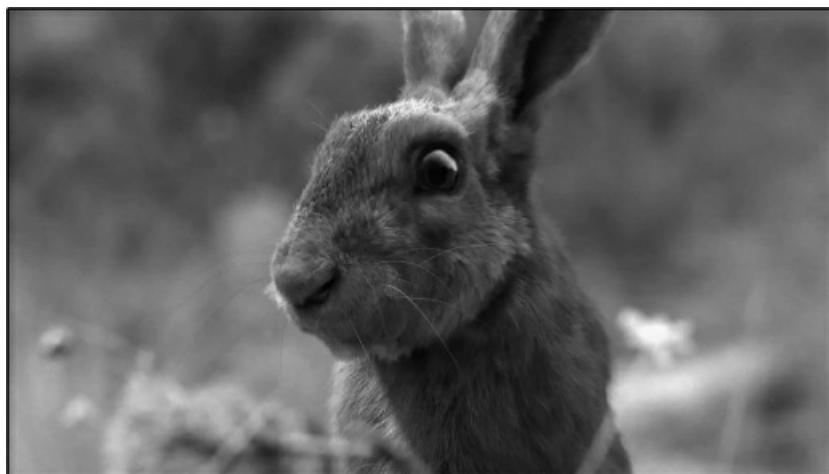


[*Figure 6.42 ... and seeming to careen toward the viewer, as if the camera could move into the letters.*](#)

Graphics flying toward the viewer are the visual equivalent of verbal direct address. Remember that in narrative programs the visuals are designed much like the theater—as if a fourth wall has been removed and you are peering into a room. This is particularly true in sitcoms and soap operas because their sets are constructed with a missing fourth wall, but it

also holds true for prime-time dramas shot on location. Consequently, there is limited actor movement in depth—toward or away from the camera. The action mostly occurs on a plane perpendicular to the camera’s; thus there is more left-and-right movement and less back-and-forth. Actors do not enter sitcom/soap-opera sets from behind the camera the way the letters in the *As the World Turns* title sequence do. And actors do not exit by walking toward and past the camera the way the *As the World Turns* title does. When graphic elements behave this way, they, in a sense, say to viewers, “Pay attention! Here we come—right towards you. Duck!” As you can see, in commercials animated graphics serve a similar purpose to announcers speaking directly to the viewers. Both hail viewers—one through visually moving words and the other through verbally spoken ones. As Morse argues, these graphics are predecessors of increasingly interactive computer environments, from first-person games (e.g., *Call of Duty* and *Overwatch*) to virtual reality worlds.

A final and obvious form of animation in TV commercials is the use of cartoon characters. The Pillsbury Doughboy and Speedy Alka-Seltzer, discussed on p. 162, are just two of the nonhuman entities called upon to pitch products on television. The function of these characters (differentiating products) has not changed much over the past 70-odd years of television commercials. However, it should be mentioned that computer animation has had a major impact upon the technology used to create these characters. Up until the 1990s, animated characters were either drawn or were created through stop-action animation (the frame-by-frame movement of dolls), as in the case of Speedy Alka-Seltzer. Now, however, animated characters are usually computer generated—as in the current incarnation of the Pillsbury Doughboy, the Coca-Cola polar bears, or the very photo-realistic rattlesnake and rabbits in a Travelers Insurance spot ([Figure 6.43](#); tv.crit.com/find/travelers).



[Figure 6.43](#) A CGI rabbit is almost indistinguishable from a photograph of one in this Travelers commercial.

Violating Reality (Visual Effects)

“In a medium whose very essence is the ability to reproduce the look of everyday reality, one of the surest ways of attracting the viewer’s attention is to violate that reality,”⁴⁷ contends Paul Messaris. What intrigues him is advertising’s use of distorted imagery to make a viewer notice a product. Studies in cognitive psychology show that this distortion is most effective when it varies only slightly from a familiar object. As Messaris explains, “if the discrepancy

between the unfamiliar shape and some preexisting one is only partial, the mental task of fitting in the new shape becomes more complicated. As a result, such partially strange shapes can cause us to pay closer attention.”⁴⁸ If an object is wholly different from what you are familiar with, you may ignore it completely or place it in a new visual category; but if it is partially similar, then your cognitive processes work overtime trying to figure out whether or not it is a familiar object.

Messaris cites digital morphing as a prime example of this principle. A morph takes two dissimilar objects and creates a seamless transition from one to the other. In so doing, it creates a strange, reality-violating hybrid of two familiar objects. Morphing first came to viewers’ attention in the films *Willow* (1988) and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), where humans morph into various shapes (tvcrit.com/find/willow, tvcrit.com/find/terminator), but it found its widest exposure in Michael Jackson’s *Black or White* music video and television commercials in the 1990s (tvcrit.com/find/blackorwhite).⁴⁹ Notably, a Schick Tracer razor commercial morphs between a variety of faces—effectively communicating the idea that the Tracer will fit any shaped face and simultaneously getting viewers to concentrate on the ad by violating the reality of human physiognomy—as when a white man transforms into a black one (Figures 6.44 and 6.45; tvcrit.com/find/schick). Morphing remains a common part of the CGI toolbox. There’s even a quick morph in the Winn-Dixie commercial (2010) discussed on p. 164, when the mother and daughter transition from black-and-white to color (tvcrit.com/find/winndixie).

Morphing is just one example of violating reality through visual effects. By the 2000s morphing was already being surpassed by new advances in digital graphics—leading to widespread incorporation of visual effects in commercials. What makes digital visual effects particularly successful is their uncanny resemblance to historical reality. Consider a DirecTV ad where a man uses a TV remote control to pause and restart futuristic robots battling in his house—moving from the kitchen to the dining room to the bedroom (tvcrit.com/find/vfx). The setting is a familiar home scene, but an incongruous and fantastic element intrudes into that reality. A similar approach is taken in an Ikea spot where a “flock” of T-shirts migrates across great distances before flying into a boy’s room and neatly folding themselves inside Ikea furniture (Figure 6.46; tvcrit.com/find/ikea). The incongruity of T-shirts behaving like birds “gives us a jolt, and it gets us to look,” as Messaris says about similar commercials.⁵⁰



Figure 6.44 Schick Tracer razor: A man shaving his face morphs into ...



Figure 6.45 ... a man of a different race shaving his face.

Reflexivity and Intertextuality

In [Chapter 5](#) we introduced the notion of reflexivity in non-narrative television. Commercials thrive on the television cannibalism that is reflexivity. TV commercials frequently parody films, television programs, other commercials, and even themselves in their efforts to market a product. Energizer batteries were featured in a series of advertisements where a plausible but sham commercial (usually a sly spoof of a familiar one) is interrupted by a battery-powered toy rabbit intruding into the frame. In one, Ted Nugent is singing the praises of “Mi Cucaracha” (“my cockroach”) restaurant when a drum-beating bunny interrupts him (tvcrit.com/find/energizer2). In another, a commercial for the nonexistent Nasatine sinus medicine is suspended when the Energizer rabbit appears ([Figure 6.47](#); tvcrit.com/find/energizer). In essence, these spots are commercials consuming other commercials. The Energizer ad campaign is particularly remarkable for the accuracy of its parodies. The Nasatine spot includes Anacin-style animation and a copyright notice for a fake pharmaceutical company, Clow Laboratories! Reflexive commercials refer first of all to other television material, rather than referring directly to historical reality, where their products actually reside. In essence, an extra layer of television has been added.

A close relation to parody is pastiche, the use of fragments of previous texts. Popular songs, for example, are regularly put to new uses by advertisers. The Knack’s “My Sharona” was turned into “My Chalupa” by Taco Bell, and Nick Drake’s “Pink Moon” sells Volkswagen cars. Even the Beatles’ “Revolution” has been used in a Nike shoe commercial (though it did result in a lawsuit against Nike). Pastiche in television commercials has reached new heights of technological sophistication since the advent of digital visual effects. One Diet Coke ad, for instance, has Paula Abdul dancing with and talking to long-dead film actors: Gene Kelly, Cary Grant, and Groucho Marx (tvcrit.com/find/reflexivity). And a spot for Dior’s J’adore perfume features Charlize Theron backstage at a fashion show (tvcrit.com/find/dior), where she encounters digitally re-animated versions of iconic movie stars Grace Kelly and Marilyn Monroe ([Figure 6.48](#)). Monroe lovingly caresses a bottle of the Dior fragrance even though she was famously associated with rival perfume Chanel No. 5 during her lifetime.



Figure 6.46 Ikea: Digitally generated T-shirts behave like birds and fly home to a boy's bedroom.



Figure 6.47 In reflexive fashion, the Energizer Bunny spoofs a commercial for a nonexistent nose-spray product.



Figure 6.48 A Dior J'adore perfume commercial features a digitally re-animated celebrity, Marilyn Monroe, who died over 50 years ago.

Parody and pastiche are two examples of TV's high degree of intertextuality, drawing it away from historical reality and reflecting it back on itself (see the discussion of intertextuality in the context of TV stars in [Chapter 4](#)). One television text (a commercial)

refers to another (a program or previous commercial), which may well refer to another and another. Commercials are an integral part of this network of meanings and allusions. Familiar songs and images provide a shorthand for developing the persuasive argument for a product. Why write a new jingle when an old tune is already inscribed on our minds? Why refer to historical reality when we are more comfortable with television reality? Commercials are nourished by intertextuality and reflexivity.

Summary: “Capitalism in Action”

At the start of a commercial break on ABC one evening in fall 2000, a self-mocking title came up: “And now capitalism in action.” On U.S. linear television, commercials are the most visible effect of the medium’s underlying economic system. Multinational corporations strike deals with wholesalers (networks, syndicators, and national spot representatives) when they wish to buy TV time for national exposure. And local merchants buy TV time from individual stations and cable systems when they are shopping for exposure in a specific DMA. These purchases of time are essentially purchases of viewers’ attention as it has been calculated by Nielsen Media Research and other audience-measurement services. TV’s wholesalers and retailers use the money they have exchanged for their viewers’ time to rent programming materials from production companies, with the goal of attracting more viewers and/or viewers of a more desirable demographic (specifically, adults 18 to 49). And that is capitalism in action on American TV of the network era and in linear television today. Online portals such as Netflix engage capitalism in different ways, relying on subscriptions instead of selling advertising time. However, video advertisements still thrive on other online services such as YouTube and the bulk of commercial websites. There are some differences between network-era TV commercials and those we see online, but they share many of the same meanings and persuasive strategies we have detailed in this chapter.

Although it is evident that commercials signify the positive side of consuming, it would be wrong to say that that is their only meaning. Despite their often naked intent to sell, commercials also play host to a diverse polysemy. We have here outlined eight components of commercial discourse and examined how they are used to persuade us to purchase products. These include luxury, leisure, and conspicuous consumption; individualism; the natural; folk culture and tradition; novelty and progress; sexuality and romance; the alleviation of various forms of distress; and utopianism. Commercials endeavor to figuratively and literally associate their products with these values and/or they make claims that their products will transform consumers if they buy them.

Commercials’ styles may be rude and obvious or entertaining and obscure, but in some fashion they must always attempt to convince the viewer. We have identified eight persuasive strategies employed by commercials: metaphor, utopian style, product differentiation and superiority, repetition and redundancy, extraordinary and excessive style, graphics and animation, violating reality (visual effects), and reflexivity and intertextuality. In many instances, we have seen that the style of commercials is excessive and exhibitionistic and that it falls within John Caldwell’s notion of televisuality. Commercial style, unlike classical narrative television and film, doesn’t need to be invisible. Indeed, its forthright visibility may well help draw viewers’ interest to the product.

Notes

- 1 In 2015, advertising spending in the U.S. was largely split between television (37.7%) and digital media (32.6%), with radio, print publications, and directories accounting for the rest. Industry analysts expect television's share to decrease in the next five years as digital media command more ad dollars. eMarketer, "Distribution of Advertising Spending in the United States From 2010 to 2020, by Media," *Statista—the Statistics Portal*, Statista, tvcrit.com/find/tvads, accessed June 13, 2017.
- 2 Paul Messaris, *Visual Persuasion: The Role of Images in Advertising* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997), 164.
- 3 Nielsen Media Research, "Average U.S. Home Now Receives a Record 118.6 TV Channels, According to Nielsen," *Nielsen.com*, June 6, 2008, tvcrit.com/find/nielsenchannels, accessed November 29, 2010.
- 4 Mike Budd, Steve Craig, and Clay Steinman, *Consuming Environments: Television and Consumer Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers, 1999), 30.
- 5 John Breech, "Super Bowl 49 Watched by 114.4M, Sets U.S. TV Viewership Record," *CBS Sports*, February 2, 2015, tvcrit.com/find/superbowl49, accessed June 13, 2017.
- 6 Lindsay Kramer, "Super Bowl 2015: How Much Does a 30-Second Television Commercial Cost?," *Syracuse*, tvcrit.com/find/syracuse, accessed June 13, 2017. Jeanine Poggi, "TV Ad Pricing Chart: A Show in Its 13th Season Returns to the Top 10 Most Expensive Buys," *Advertising Age*, June 13, 2017, tvcrit.com/find/tvadprices.
- 7 John Koenig, *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*, tvcrit.com/find/sorrow, accessed July 14, 2017; Laurie Ann Franks, *The Gallery of Ill-Fitting Pants*, 1999, accessed November 7, 2000, tvcrit.com/find/pants; Michael Lewis, *Modern Moist Towelette Collecting*, accessed December 1, 2005, tvcrit.com/find/moist; and *The Sheep Brain Dissection Guide*, December 1, 2005, University of Scranton, accessed November 7, 2005, tvcrit.com/find/sheep.
- 8 "Inside TV Ratings," *Nielsen Media Research*, December 5, 2005, tvcrit.com/find/nielsonratings.
- 9 Twenty thousand is an approximate number that Nielsen released in 2012. See "Celebrating 25 Years of the Nielsen People Meter," *Nielsen*, August 30, 2012, tvcrit.com/find/peoplemeters, accessed June 14, 2017. Nielsen announced its estimate of American TV households in "Nielsen Estimates 118.4 Million TV Homes in The U.S. for the 2016–17 TV Season," *Nielsen*, August 26, 2016, tvcrit.com/find/nielsen2016, accessed June 14, 2017.
- 10 "The Sweeps"—Local Market Measurement," 2000, *Nielsen Media Research*, November 7, 2000, tvcrit.com/find/sweeps.
- 11 "What TV Ratings Really Mean ... and Other Frequently-Asked Questions," 2000, *Nielsen Media Research*, December 20, 2005, tvcrit.com/find/mean.
- 12 "Television Audience Measurement Terms," *Nielsen Media Research*, December 1, 2005, tvcrit.com/find/nielseneterms.
- 13 This number of households (118.4 million) represents 96 percent of all households in the U.S.
- 14 For instance, in 2007 P&G spent \$2.4 billion on television. "National Advertisers Ranked 1 to 50," *Advertising Age* 79, no. 25 (2008), S-6. However, P&G, like many advertisers after the 2008 recession, reduced that spending to \$1.6 billion in 2009. Bradley Johnson, "Top Outlays Plunge 10% but Defying Spend Trend Can Pay Off," *Advertising Age* 81, no. 25 (2010), 1, 10–11.
- 15 "Nielsen IAG Top Ten Most-Recalled In-Program Placements: Dramas/Comedies," *Advertising Age*, May 12, 2010, tvcrit.com/find/product, accessed December 6, 2010.
- 16 The Club Crackers incident is an example of "digital brand integration," where products are inserted during post-production. See Sam Lubell, "Advertising's Twilight Zone: That Signpost Up Ahead May Be a Virtual Product," *The New York Times*, January 2, 2006, tvcrit.com/find/twilight. As viewers' ability to skip commercials increases through on-demand portals, TiVo, and other devices, so does the pressure to use skip-proof product placements. This trend has reached the point where marketing research firms have had to develop methods to measure viewers' recall of "in-program placements."

- [17](#) *TV Basics*.
- [18](#) Ibid.
- [19](#) Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately: Children and Parents in Consumer Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 43–44.
- [20](#) Ibid., 44.
- [21](#) Leslie Savan, *The Sponsored Life: Ads, TV, and American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 8.
- [22](#) Ibid., 9.
- [23](#) “World Wide Diary of Actions: United States 1997,” *Animal Liberation Frontline*, 1997, November 7, 2000, tvcrit.com/find/actions.
- [24](#) “Post Grape-Nuts and Grape-Nuts Flakes,” *Kraft Foods*, 2000, November 7, 2000, tvcrit.com/find/grape.
- [25](#) Elisabeth Van Every, “Goth Style,” *Academia Gothica*, 2000, November 7, 2000, tvcrit.com/find/goth.
- [26](#) Quoted in Bernice Kanner, *The 100 Best TV Commercials—and Why They Worked* (New York: Random House, 1999), 17.
- [27](#) A. J. Jacobs, “Remote Patrol,” *Entertainment Weekly*, February 7, 1999, 66.
- [28](#) Messaris, 246.
- [29](#) Ibid., 249.
- [30](#) Bil Browning, “Homophobes Freak Out Over New Neil Patrick Harris Heineken Light ad,” *LGBTQ Nation*, September 6, 2016, tvcrit.com/find/lgbtqnation; Dabitch, “Heineken Light—Neil Patrick Harris & the Grill Master ‘Flip Your Meat,’” *Adland*, September 1, 2016, tvcrit.com/find/adland, accessed June 16, 2017.
- [31](#) Messaris, 255–57.
- [32](#) Budd, 79–80.
- [33](#) Seiter, 115. Furthermore, she discusses the racism inherent in advertising’s utopia: “access to this child-centered utopia is restricted; full citizenship is denied to girls of all races and to boys of color” (Seiter, 115–16).
- [34](#) Richard Dyer, “Entertainment and Utopia,” in *Movies and Methods*, vol. 2, Bill Nichols, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 222.
- [35](#) Ibid., 228.
- [36](#) As quoted in Bob Garfield, “Is Internet Utopia? Good Heavens, No,” *AdAge.com*, January 20, 1997, tvcrit.com/find/utopia, accessed August 17, 2011.
- [37](#) See Messaris, 196–203, for further discussion of generalization in ads.
- [38](#) Messaris, xviii.
- [39](#) Ibid., xix.
- [40](#) Dyer in Nichols, 222–26.
- [41](#) Rosser Reeves, *Reality in Advertising* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), 46–49. Moreover, he defined advertising as “the art of getting a unique selling proposition into the heads of the most people at the lowest possible cost” (121).
- [42](#) Sut Jhally, *The Codes of Advertising: Fetishism and the Political Economy of Meaning in the Consumer Society* (New York: Routledge, 1987), 127; quoting D. Pope, *The Making of Modern Advertising* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 287.
- [43](#) Reeves, 62.
- [44](#) John Thornton Caldwell, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 352.
- [45](#) Bertolt Brecht, “The Modern Theatre Is the Epic Theatre,” in *Brecht on Theatre*, John Willett, ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 33–42; Peter Wollen, “Godard and Counter Cinema: *Vent d’Est*,” in *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982), 79–91.
- [46](#) Margaret Morse, *Virtualities: Television, Media Art, and Cyberculture* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 72.
- [47](#) Messaris, 5.

[48](#) Ibid., 7.

[49](#) An ABC News story in 1991 revealed the behind-the-scenes work that went into morphing at that time (tvcrit.com/find/morphing).

[50](#) Messaris, 7.

Further Readings

There are many books analyzing advertising and its discourse, but only a few target television commercials specifically. The most comprehensive of such TV-commercial books is Mike Budd, Steve Craig, and Clay Steinman, *Consuming Environments: Television and Commercial Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), which details the structure of the network-era TV industry and investigates the style and structure of commercials. Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately: Children and Parents in Consumer Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), is more narrowly defined, but in its analysis of the discourses of commercials for children she provides many insights that may be applied to all commercials. The history and significance of the Super Bowl to advertising is chronicled in Bernice Kanner, *The Super Bowl of Advertising: How the Commercials Won the Game* (Princeton, NJ: Bloomberg Press, 2004). The ideological analysis of commercials is undertaken in Sut Jhally, *The Codes of Advertising: Fetishism and the Political Economy of Meaning in the Consumer Society* (New York: Routledge, 1987), which views television through the lens of political economy. And the cultural impact of popular music upon commercials is examined in Bethany Klein, *As Heard on TV: Popular Music in Advertising* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009); Nicolai Graakjær and Christian Jantzen, eds., *Music in Advertising: Commercial Sounds in Media Communication and Other Settings* (Aalborg, Denmark: Aalborg University Press, 2009); and Nicolai Graakjær, *Analyzing Music in Advertising: Television Commercials and Consumer Choice* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

Of the general books on advertising, the most useful to television students are Paul Messaris, *Visual Persuasion: The Role of Images in Advertising* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997); and Arthur Asa Berger, *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture: Advertising's Impact on American Character*, 5th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015). Messaris considers the impact of images in both print and television advertising and has useful insights into the function of visual style in the advertising process. Berger has an extended analysis of Apple's "1984" commercial. The specific significance of words in advertising is assayed by Michael L. Geis, *The Language of Television Advertising* (New York: Academic Press, 1982) and Greg Myers, *Words in Ads* (London: Edward Arnold, 1994). The semiotic perspective of Robert Goldman and Stephen Papon, *Sign Wars: The Cluttered Landscape of Advertising* (New York: Guilford Press, 1996), applies to both images and words as signs. Their analysis includes discussions of intertextuality, reflexivity, and the process of hailing. Mary Cross, ed., *Advertising and Culture: Theoretical Perspectives* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996), brings together a myriad of viewpoints—with writers from literary criticism, communication, and the social sciences.

Another general book on advertising is Jean Kilbourne, *Deadly Persuasion: Why Women and Girls Must Fight the Addictive Power of Advertising* (New York: The Free Press, 1999). As is evident from the title, Kilbourne's book is a strong polemic against the influence of advertising and its discursive world. The analyses of Leslie Savan, the advertising columnist for the *Village Voice*, are often perceptive and entertaining although seldom fortified by academic research. They have been collected in *The Sponsored Life: Ads, TV, and American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

Access to commercials for research purposes can readily be found on [YouTube.com](https://www.youtube.com), where many advertisers maintain their own channels (e.g., Old Spice and DirecTV); [Archive.org](https://www.archive.org) (tvcrit.com/find/archive); and Duke University's AdViews: A Digital Archive of Vintage Television Commercials (tvcrit.com/find/adviews). Commercials are also regularly reviewed by *Advertising Age* ([adage.com](https://www.adage.com)), [ispot.tv](https://www.ispot.tv), and [Shots.net](https://www.shots.net).